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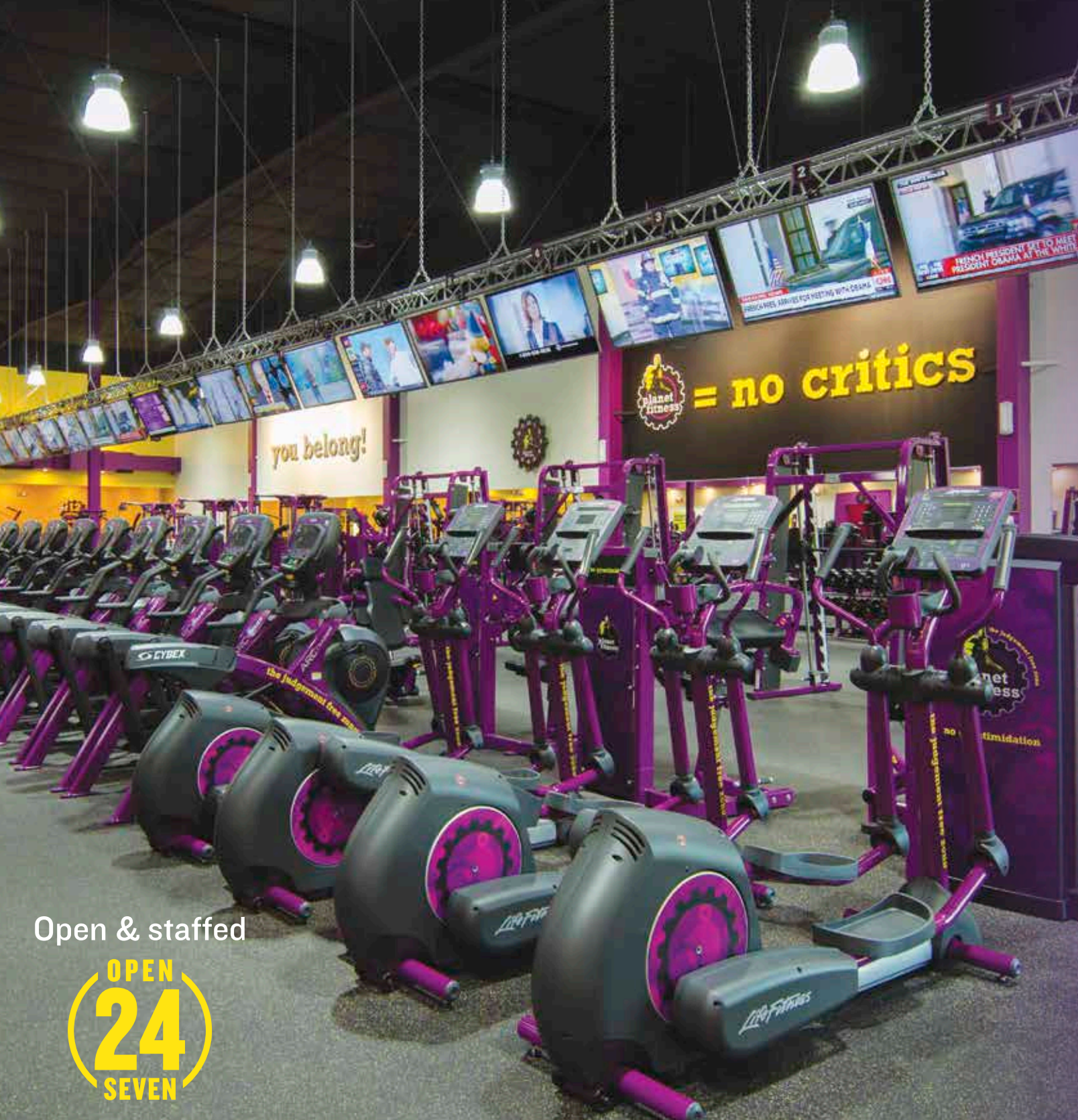
VOLUME 12 ISSUE 1 • NOVEMBER-DECEMBER, 2017
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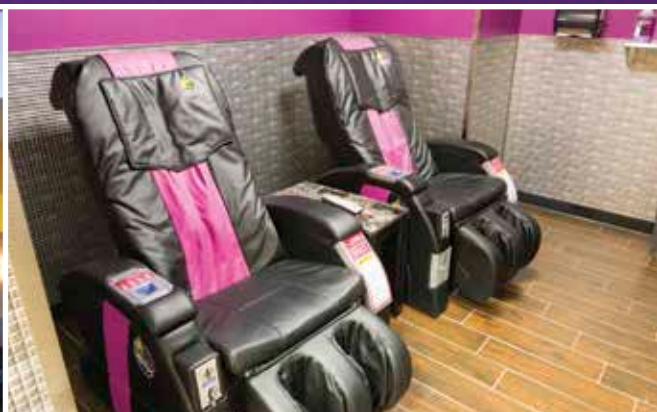


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From the Publisher

Celebrating 12 years of being Lake City's lifestyle magazine!

It's fitting that during this season of Thanksgiving and Christmas celebration we also mark our 12th anniversary issue of Currents magazine. We're thankful to our readers and advertisers who have made this journey possible. Through your feedback and your continued support, we have been able to see our magazine grow into the lifestyle magazine you have requested.

When we launched Lake City's first full-sized glossy magazine 12 years ago, our community had not seen anything like it. A magazine dedicated to Lake City and the country region nearby? The magazine of "Life in Natural Florida?" We certainly captured intrigue and we had our skeptics who didn't think we would make it, simply because they could not envision that our little town was ready for such a publication.

We have grown with our community during the past 12 years. Currents magazine has doubled in size from that inaugural issue all those Novembers ago. We've introduced our readers to some of their neighbors and helped tell their amazing stories. We also profiled some very interesting places and points of interest within an easy day's drive of Lake City — those "tank of gas" trips that everyone loves as a quick getaway.

We want Currents magazine to be a reflection of our region, a nice-reading piece that showcases the people and places around us that make Life in Natural Florida the quality experience it is.

More community growth and expansion always means more unique angles for better stories. By now, nearly everyone has heard about Halpatter Brewing Company opening Lake City's first micro-brewery in downtown Lake City. The brewery is planning a Dec. 1, 2017, opening. But, what may not be common knowledge is one of the experts helping put the finishing touches on the brewery's facade is world-renowned designer-carpenter-fabricator John Best, the subject of this issue's cover story.

Best is ... well ... pretty doggone good at his craft. His ability to see old items, scrap metal, tin, wood, and repurpose them in a vintage setting, is uncanny. He's passionate and he's a perfectionist. He's friends with the Halpatter founders and Lake City will be blessed long into the future to have his work on display inside this business. Enjoy his story and realize what a world-class gem he is.

This is just one of many stories that we hope will appeal to our wide-reading audience. Features on people, places, events, organizations and of course, a couple of tasty holiday recipes. Like every issue, it's yours to enjoy! Cheers to another year of Currents!

Todd Wilson

Todd Wilson | PUBLISHER

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ON THE COVER



Celebrity craftsman John Best stands high above the upstairs bar at Halpatter Brewery in downtown Lake City. Best has worked on countless television shows and is the primary designer for Halpatter Brewery.

PHOTO BY BRENT KUYKENDALL

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CREATING SOMETHING Sweet

Holly Garner whips up both classic and creative treats at Sugar Cakery.

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Baking is all about trial and error. Testing recipes, making tweaks and trying to find the right combination of ingredients to make the fluffiest cupcake or smoothest buttercream is all part of the job. Holly Garner, the owner of Sugar Cakery in Lake City, spends countless hours researching and experimenting to get her recipes just right.

“It’s a lot of work,” Garner said. “In theory, it’s great. I sit around and make cupcakes all day. But it’s a lot more than that.”

She is constantly trying to come up with new creations in the kitchen. Her desire to create deli-

cious and one-of-a-kind treats has led to her business becoming a local favorite and a destination for all things sweet.

Self-Taught Talent

Garner has been baking for the past 15 years, but started out only baking for her friends and family while spending her days working as the office manager at a doctor’s office. On the weekends and after work she would spend her time creating cupcakes and other treats.

“It was my way of relaxing,” Garner said.

She eventually heard that the previous owner of



Cupcakes, cake pops and cookie dough on display at Sugar Bakery.

Sugar Cakery, Amy Strickland, was selling the business, and Garner and her husband, Chip, spent several months trying to decide whether or not to take it over.

"We came to the conclusion that if it makes me happy I should do it," Garner said.

Garner took over Sugar Cakery in June 2016. When Strickland sold the store, she also sold her cupcake recipes with it, many of which Garner still uses. However, she has since added her own creations to the mix, combining the classic cupcakes that regular customers loved with new, exciting flavors and different desserts.

"I'm always trying to come up with new stuff," Garner said. "I've always loved doing different things, and I love now having the chance to try new things."

While coming up with new items for the store is fun, it's also very challenging. Getting a new recipe just right requires time, patience and a lot of

taste testing.

"I've spent lots of hours watching YouTube, failing and trying again," Garner said.

Sweet Creations

From the moment Garner opens the store to about an hour before it closes, she's baking, frosting, sprinkling and creating sweet works of art. The display case is always full of everything from classic cupcakes to unique treats.

"I bake all day long," Garner said. "I like to keep everything as fresh as possible and keep the display stocked."

While she tries to change out her cupcake flavors each week, the most popular flavors, including Birthday Cake, Triple Chocolate and Inside-

Out Peanut Butter Cup, stay on the menu all year long. Inside Out Peanut Butter Cup, a peanut butter cupcake filled with chocolate ganache and topped with peanut butter frosting, is just one of several unique cupcake creations that Garner has added to the menu. Others including her Banana Pudding cupcake, which is filled with good old fashioned Southern banana pudding, and her Maple Bacon cupcake.

"It's tastes just like a pancake," Garner said while describing her Maple Bacon cupcake. "How can you go wrong with a pancake?"

If you want a specific cupcake flavor but aren't sure if it's on the menu, don't worry. Garner is always happy to make any cupcake the customer requests as long as she has the ingredients.

"People can call up and tell me what they want and I'll make it for them if I have the stuff," Garner said.

Recently Garner has added a new



Sugar Bakery owner Holly Garner holds sprinkled cupcakes at her Lake City store.



Garner frosts chocolate cupcakes at Sugar Cakery.

“ I absolutely want everything to taste
delicious.

Of course it has to be pretty but if it's not delicious I'm not going to serve it.

item to her menu: edible cookie dough. This edible cookie dough has no eggs and the flour is heat treated, making it perfectly safe to eat raw. So far she has introduced several cookie dough flavors to her customers, including chocolate chip, brownie batter and sugar.

“I researched a lot of recipes and tried them, then made modifications based on what I thought tasted good,” Garner said.

Although she gets to taste test many of her own creations, she also tries out recipes the people close to her, including Chip and her children.

“My friends and family are absolutely my taste testers. It's a hard job I think,” Garner said with a laugh.

Whether she's baking a batch of chocolate cupcakes or experimenting with a new flavor of cookie dough, she only has one requirement for her recipes: that they taste incredible.

“I absolutely want everything to taste delicious,” Garner said. “Of course it has to be pretty but if it's not delicious I'm not going to serve it.”



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Local resident Pierce Kelley walked 500 miles on one of the most famous spiritual pilgrimages in the world.

When Pierce Kelley finished the 500-mile journey to the center of his soul, he still had questions as big as the holes in his walking boots.

“I honestly have to say, I am still — just like the character — I am left with questions,” Kelley said.

In September Kelley completed one of the most famous spiritual pilgrimages in the world, El Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James). The 500-mile, 31-day journey took him all the way from Saint-Jean, France to Santiago, Spain.

And Kelley did it all for his character, a 16-year-old boy named Mekhaeil Zacharias.

Zacharias is the central protagonist of Kelley’s five-book series about a Coptic Christian on the run from ISIS. The series tells the story of his spiritual and religious journey after seeing 21 other Coptic Christians killed by the terrorist group.

In the series’ upcoming fourth book, “Pilgrimage,” the character decides to walk El Camino de Santiago to discover what he truly believes. The book is scheduled to be released in July 2018.

Kelley, a 70-year-old novelist and lawyer in Lake City, said walking the path for his character gave him a unique perspective on his journey.

“I told people, ‘You’ve been talking to a 16-year-old Egyptian boy,’” Kelley said.

El Camino is mod-

eled after the mission of St. James, who walked a similar path as he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was popularized in the 2010 film “The Way.”

Kelley, who is Catholic, said he is always exploring his spiritual self and got a lot of valuable insight for his book out of the pilgrimage.

“I’m not a preacher,” he said. “I’m not an ardent religious person. I am a Christian, but really I think the thrust of my books is to try to say that people shouldn’t be killing each other in the name of religion.”

Kelley said he met people from 35-45 different countries during his month-long journey on El Camino. He



WALKING EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

By TAYLOR GAINES | Photos courtesy of Pierce Kelley



The El Camino de Santiago begins at Saint Jean Pied de Port, France, and travels 500 miles through four of Spain’s 15 regions, ending at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia.

Pierce Kelley smiles in front of a mountain with metal silhouettes of pilgrims in the background while on his pilgrimage, El Camino de Santiago. The monument is called Alto de Padron and the saying is that it is “where the way of the wind crosses the way of the stars.”



plans to use them all as inspiration. “It was the people I met and the stories that they told me that are gonna be this book,” Kelley said.

For instance, Kelley said he had a lengthy conversation during his walk with an agnostic man that he said could fill a whole chapter in his book.

“He said, ‘I wanna believe. I wanna find a reason to believe all this is true, but I doubt it,’” Kelley said.

Kelley said he ran into all different kinds of people on El Camino. Some were doing it for religious reasons, some were doing it to reevaluate their lives, and some just wanted the challenge.

With all the people he met and all the miles he walked — more than

“I couldn’t have imagined it, and it would have been unreal. To talk the talk, you have to walk the walk.”

Pierce Kelley | Author and Lawyer

15 miles a day during eight to ten hour days by his count — Kelley feels he has plenty of material for his book.

“I could never, never, never have written the book that I’m planning to write without having walked that path,” Kelley said. “I couldn’t have imagined it, and it would have been unreal. To talk the talk, you have to walk the walk.”

- 1) The El Camino path is shown on a standing map.
- 2-3) Kelley passed through over a 100 small villages while on his pilgrimage on Camino de Santiago, including Santibáñez and Larrasoña.
- 4) This church pictured next to a Knights Templar castle was in Leon, one of the five large cities Kelley went through while on his pilgrimage from St. John Pied de Port in Southern France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.
- 5) A statue of the Virgin Mary that Kelley found along El Camino. There were dozens of statues of Mary along the path in Spain.
- 6-7) Signs are erected along the way to guide the travelers.

Still, Kelley, who was a professional tennis player in the 1960s and 1970s, said that even despite being in relatively good physical shape, the journey was a grueling one.

"It was very, very, very difficult," he said. "I'm still recovering."

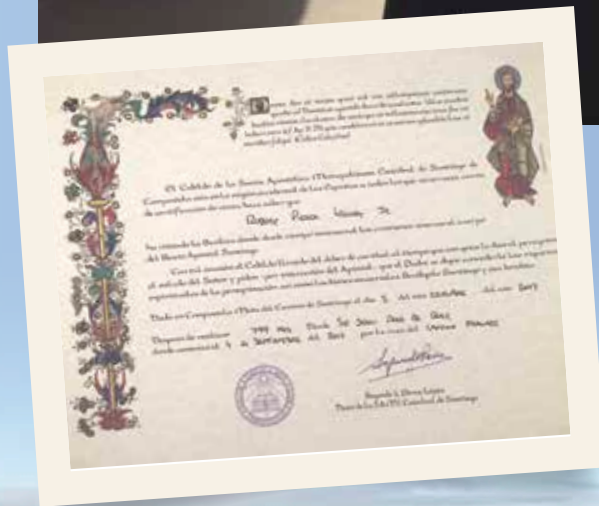
Kelley did the whole thing on a budget of about \$50 a day and always slept in a private room with a bathroom. Those looking for cheaper could opt to stay in bunk-bed style albergues, which can hold dozens of people at once.

Isolation also helped. Kelley did the journey by himself, and he said he never spent more than a few hours with any one person. He wanted the full experience, with lots of variety, to ensure his book could cover the range of human experience.

"People wanted to come with me, but I didn't want that," he said.

Although El Camino gave him plenty to write about, Kelley said it is important to note that he still doesn't have the solutions to all of life's spiritual and existential problems.

"The character doesn't have answers, and neither do I," he said. "I mean that sincerely."



This document, called a *compostela*, is the certificate Kelley received proving that he completed the 500-mile journey of the El Camino de Santiago.



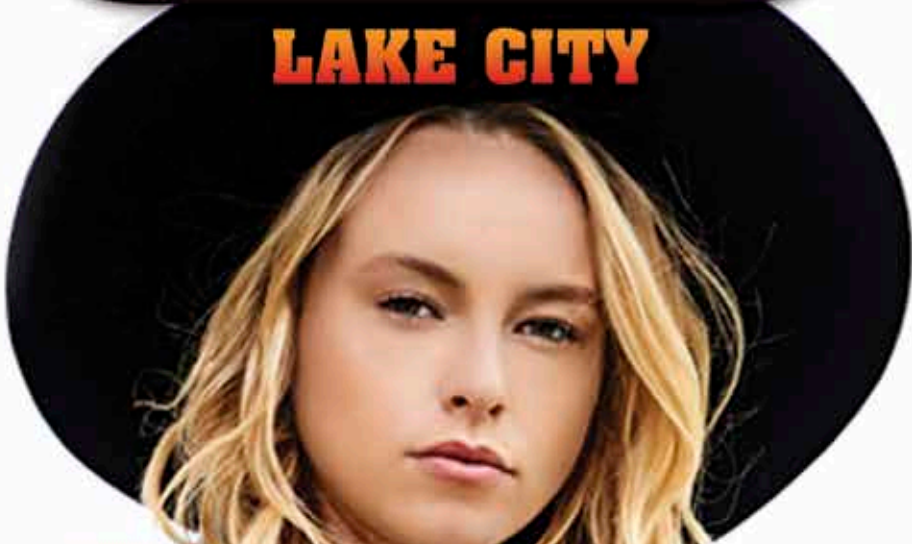
Right: This monument called Mount of Joy was created in honor of Pope John Paul II.

Far right: The Cruz de Fierro, or Cross of Iron, is a spot where for hundreds of years pilgrims have put rocks and stones. Kelley placed two Timucan Indian arrowheads from his property in Fort White.



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encouraging inclusion



Top: Kelsey Harrison gets a hug from Union County High School alum Sammie Bustricki. Left: Harrison helps UCHS student Madison Suggs glue together a paper witch during a class Halloween party. Right: Kelsey Harrison (far right) is pictured with her mom Tammy Harrison (far left) and her class at UCHS. Pictured in no particular order are: students Alyssa Mann, Hunter Lee, Megan Owen, Madison Suggs, Jada Burton, Matthew Phillips and Maddie Cruz, UCHS alum Sammie Bustricki and para-professionals Cathy Griffis, Karen Williams and Yate Roberts.

Kelsey Harrison unites the community with her Celebration of Abilities campaign.

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Even after graduating high school several years ago, Kelsey Harrison is constantly thinking about the most sacred right of passage for high school students: prom.

For the past eight years, Kelsey has organized a prom for the exceptional needs students at Union County High School. Now, as the reigning Miss Florida Azalea, she is using her platform to promote the inclusion of exceptional needs individuals into the community through her Celebration of Abilities campaign.

Her Inspiration

Growing up, Kelsey, 22, was always close with her younger brother, Carson. Things weren't always easy for Carson, 17, who was diagnosed with OHI, Other Health Impairments, when he was born, and last year he was diagnosed with autism.

"Watching him grow up I saw the struggle he had with his peers and interacting with them," Kelsey said.

Things that most people don't give a second thought to, like getting your learner's permit, something that Carson was able to achieve this year, mean everything to him and his family.

"I'm overly excited for him," Kelsey said while beaming with pride. "It's something most people take for granted but to him it's independence."

While watching her brother and the students in her mother's classroom throughout the years, she developed a deep passion for wanting to get exceptional needs students more involved in the school community. So, she planned the first prom for students with exceptional needs at UCHS, and over the past eight years it has blossomed into an event that gets the entire Lake Butler community involved.

"It's one of the most amazing things I've ever been a part of," Kelsey said.

Local businesses sponsor the event while others donate items from prom dresses to free hair and makeup. Many of the UCHS students go to the prom with exceptional needs students as dates or buddies. It's a dance that means so much more.

"It creates inclusion between regular-needs and exceptional-needs students," Kelsey said.

The event, which will be held again this February, is truly a celebration of abilities.

"It's really a night to highlight their abilities and not their disabilities," Kelsey said.

Kelsey's mother, Tammy, sees first-hand just how much this event impacts the exceptional needs students as their teacher at UCHS. Tammy says she is so proud of how her daughter has created an event and a platform for all students to come together.

"For so many years these students were never really included," Tammy said. "It's amazing to see how much its grown and how many people have gotten involved."

More Than A Crown

Kelsey, who was born and raised in Union County, began competing in beauty pageants when she was in high school. She loves being on stage and she's been able to put herself through school with the scholarship money she's earned, but for her pageants mean so much more. They give her a place to share her platform, Celebration of Abilities, with the community.

As the reigning Miss Florida Azalea, she has been able to share her platform with people all throughout her community and the surrounding counties.

"To me a local title is very important because I'm so passionate about my platform and this gives me something to stand on," Kelsey said.

When she went to compete at the 2017 Miss Florida pageant, Kelsey won one of the pageant's most prestigious scholarships, the Quality of Life Scholarship. The first community-service related award presented to Miss America contestants, all Miss Florida contestants are eligible for the award but only the top six are invited to speak about it in front of the judges. Applicants must excel in their commitment to enhancing the quality of life for others through volunteerism and service, and Kelsey's Celebration of Abilities platform earned her the coveted honor.

She also received the Community Service Award Scholarship and the Miss America Scholastic Achievement Scholarship, as well as placed in the Top 11 at Miss Florida. This scholarships have helped fund her education at the University of Florida. In 2018 she will graduate from UF with a degree in communications and minors in non-profit organization and family relations.

When she isn't studying or at school she is volunteering with the exceptional needs students at UCHS and Lake Butler Elementary School. She also visits with student organizations and classrooms throughout UCHS, telling them about Celebration of Abilities and how they can get involved. The highlight of her week is getting to spend time with the students who have become like family to her.

"I don't make their day, they make mine," Kelsey said. "I can never have a bad day when I come here."

One of the former UCHS students she has become very close with is Sammie Bustricki. Together they run errands, visit each others families and spend time at UCHS helping out in Tammy's classroom.

"He's my buddy," Kelsey said. "We spend a lot of time together."

Sammie is also helping Kelsey with her Hero Next Door campaign. She has asked people in the surrounding area to nominate a student with exceptional needs who deserves recognition. When a student is chosen they will get to be interviewed and have their story and picture in Currents as part of an advertisement from Royals Mobile Homes. The main purpose of the campaign is not only to recognize exceptional needs students in the community but also give them an opportunity to speak for themselves.

"I wanted their voices to be heard," Kelsey said.

Kelsey and Celebration of Abilities have also partnered with the Florida Crown Workforce, a program that helps students with disabilities get connected with jobs.

Kelsey hopes to eventually create an inclusion-type curriculum with the Florida Department of Education. Until then, she will continue to encourage people to "see the able, not the label."

"I feel like that's something we always try to say," Kelsey said. "Your disability and your label don't define you. It's a part of you and it's what helps make you who you are."



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BUILDING WITH THE BEST

JOHN BEST BRINGS HIS EXPERT DESIGN EYE TO LAKE CITY AND HALPATTER BREWING CO.

By TAYLOR GAINES | Photos by BRENT KUYKENDALL

When John Best was 15, he told his dad he didn't want to be a carpenter. He wanted to work in television.

"I always knew since like fourth grade that I wanted to work in television," Best said. "That's all I knew."

Little did he know, his career would lead him into a world where he did both.

Best, 36, is now one of the most sought-after carpenters/fabricators/designers in Hollywood. He's doing carpentry, and he's working in TV.

"I did not expect what I do," Best said. "I did not expect to be an art department person."

Best has worked on more than 30 television shows, including "Tree House Masters," "Bar Rescue" and "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," and has done work on many commercials, pilots and films.

Best said he has carved a niche out for himself in the industry as a designer who can truly do it all.

"There is a short list," he said. "Especially if you want a guy that can design it fully and build it out fully and run that build."

Best is now working on carving out another niche, this time in Columbia County.

He is the primary designer and fabricator for Halpatter Brewing Company in downtown Lake City.

"The thing that's blowing me away about him is that he has a vision," said Halpatter co-owner and founder Chris Candler. "It's been really enlightening to watch him work because he has a vision for a space that isn't realized until the absolute very end. Then when you see it, you're like, 'Oh, okay. I get it.'"

Vision Meets Work Ethic

Best knew it wouldn't be easy to break into television, but he felt he had the work ethic to make it happen.

He had perfect attendance at Full Sail University's film school, where he said he was one of only two students to do so.

"I pounded that out," he said. "There were 50 graduates in my class. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one that's still in television."

After that, Best spent two summers in Alaska sharpening his work ethic. He worked on fishing boats each summer, May to September each time.



"I just needed something different," he said.

No matter where he is, Best has made a habit of working his way up the ladder quickly during his career.

For instance, he was hired on "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" as an art department assistant. Within eight months, he was the head of the whole department.

"I just jumped in full throttle," he said. "I probably didn't know as much as I thought I knew. I know I didn't. But within eight months, I was running the department."

Best said working hard for something you love and want to do is essential to standing out in the entertainment industry.

"I didn't mind putting in hours," he said. "You can't complain about the hours. You are gonna do long hours. You are gonna bust butt at the beginning. You're gonna do stuff that you don't want to do at the beginning, and you just gotta work hard."

Then, you wait for your break.

Breaking Into The Business

The way Best puts it, his buddy's family owned

a liquor store.

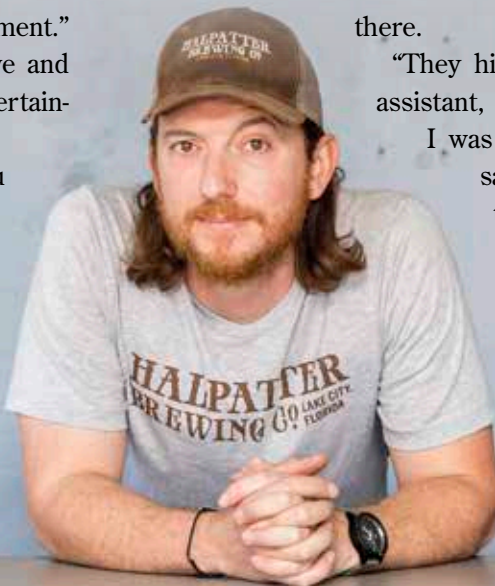
"He had a producer for infomercials always coming in, and he told him 'Hey, I have a friend who went to film school who's looking for work in the industry. Do you have anything for him?'"

It wasn't TV, but it was infomercials. And it was a start. Best was in.

He let his work ethic take it from there.

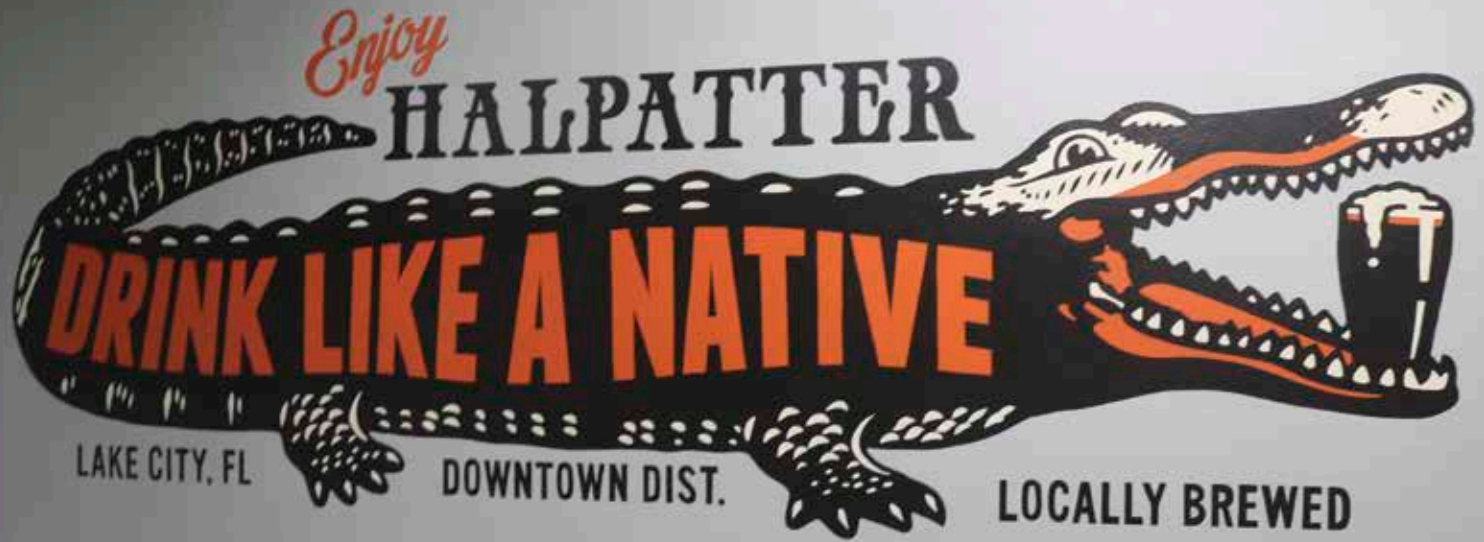
"They hired me as a production assistant, and within two weeks I was an assistant editor," he said. "Within a month of that, I was a full-time editor for them."

Best's big break came when an infomercial producer he worked with got a call from "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" to be a production assistant.



Below: John Best consults with Matt Callahan of Man Made Murals on a wooden sign for Halpatter Brewing Co.
Right: John Best grinds down a piece of metal in his workshop at Halpatter Brewery in Lake City.





The producer didn't want to do it.

Best saw an opening. He asked if he could do it for a week. They said yes.

The rest is history. He worked on the show for four years.

"'Extreme Makeover' was like my second college," Best said. "People wanted to help you. They wanted to teach you. They wanted to give you things to make these homes the best you could do."

After that, Best hit the ground running.

"Food Network Star." "Master Chef." "Kitchen Nightmares." "Mobile Home Disaster." "Louisiana Flip N Move."

The resume goes on and on.

His turn toward Halpatter began in 2013. A friend from childhood was starting a brewery in St. Petersburg, Fla., and he wanted Best to design and build it.

"I needed to do something off TV for a minute and get de-stressed and do something fun for myself," Best said.

That gave Best his first look into the relatively more laid-back real world and his first taste of brewery design.

Let's Do It

Halpatter co-owner Chris Candler is married to Jenny Gable Candler. Her brother is co-owner and founder Jeremy Gable, and her other brother is Jeff Gable.

Best went to middle school with Jeff.

As Halpatter began to come together, the guys realized they needed a designer. Jeff reached out to Best. They checked out his work in St. Pete, and they knew they had their guy.

"They just were like, 'We only want you,'" Best said. "And I was like, 'Let's freaking do it.'"

They started talking in the summer of 2016 and Best, who lives in Los Angeles, has been in Lake City since April working on Halpatter. As the brewery plans to open before the end of the year, the project is finally wrapping up. Best's



Best was able to infuse history into the new Halpatter brewery by using items from all over downtown Lake City to create the new brewery, including fire escapes from the Blanche Hotel that he fashioned into table bases.

THE LAST DAY I'M HERE, BEFORE I DRIVE AWAY, I WILL WALK THROUGH THIS BUILDING, AND I WILL FREAKING BE LIKE PRACTICALLY IN TEARS.

vision is coming together.

"We had to just trust in his talent, and it's worked out," Candler said. "We've really just let him have free reign. This is his project and his vision."

Best described the design concept as "kind of North Florida." He set out to represent the people of Lake City and to give them a place unlike anything else in town.

"I know that's kind of cliché, but it's kind of old world meets new world," he said. "My favorite thing is when people come in here and say, 'Lake City doesn't have a place like this.' And we're happy that we do now."

Best was able to infuse history into the new Halpatter brewery by using items from all over downtown Lake City, including fire escapes from the Blanche Hotel that he fashioned into table bases, original Marion Street bricks from an old church parking lot and other knick-knacks from the old courthouse as well as a farm near Country Club Road.

Best said he's excited for people to finally see everything. He's also excited about the role the brewery could play in revitalizing downtown Lake City.

"This town — it's ready," he said. "It's like, gearing up to just be a downtown. It can be a center of people."

With the project wrapping up, Best is looking forward to doing more off-TV projects in the future. He said he loves doing television but also loves the relative relaxation of being able to take his time with a job.

Wherever he goes in the future, television or not, Best said Lake City has definitely made an impression on him.

"The last day I'm here, before I drive away, I will walk through this building, and I will freaking be like practically in tears," he said. "And I'll be like, 'Damn, you self-doubter, you freaking did it again.' You know? And I'll be proud, hopefully."

for **LIVING UNITED**



years

**United Way of Suwannee Valley
celebrates 50 years of serving the people
of North-Central Florida.**

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY | Photos courtesy of Rita Dopp

FOR THE PAST 50 YEARS

United Way of Suwannee Valley has impacted countless lives in the North-Central Florida region. From its humble beginning it has grown into a highly-valued community organization that has given millions of dollars and thousands of man hours to ensure the well being of the Suwannee River Valley.

2018 will mark the 50th anniversary for United Way of Suwannee Valley. Originally founded by prominent Columbia County residents as a way to help raise money for community organizations, its reach now extends to include Suwannee, Lafayette and Hamilton counties and has helped more than 37,500 residents in need in the past year alone.

Getting Started

United Way of Suwannee Valley was incorporated on Oct. 10, 1968 and was originally named Lake City-Columbia County United Fund, Inc. The founding members included 21 Columbia County community leaders, including Thomas Brown, a Lake City native and lawyer who moved back to his hometown after graduating from University of Florida Law School in 1965.

When Brown moved back to town he was approached by several agencies about getting involved. As a former Boy Scout and Eagle Scout himself, he worked with the Boy Scouts of America as well as the American Red Cross before getting together with several colleagues to figure out a way to help all the agencies in need more efficiently.

“I talked with some other lawyers and we got together and agreed that there should be some way to get all these agencies together and have



Children at Happy House, a nationally-accredited, year-round preschool offering state subsidies, free VPK and free after school programs in Lake City, sport Live United T-shirts from United Way. Below: Columbia County Senior Services is just one of the many organizations that United Way of Suwannee Valley works to support.



United Way of Suwannee Valley Affiliated Agencies

American Red Cross of Northeast Florida

Annie Mattox Recreation Center, Inc.

Boys & Girls Club of Columbia County

Boy Scouts of America: North Florida Council

CARC - Advocates for Citizens with Disabilities

CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services, Interface N.W.

Catholic Charities Bureau & Florida Gateway Food Bank

Children's Home Society of Florida - Mid-Florida Division

Columbia County Senior Services

Early Learning Coalition of Florida's Gateway

Girl Scouts of Gateway Council

Happy House

Love INC of Suwannee County

Meridian Behavioral Healthcare

Suwannee County Police Athletic League

Suwannee River Area Health Education Center

Suwannee River Economic Council

Suwannee Valley 4Cs Head Start/Early Head Start

The Arc North Florida

Three Rivers Legal Services

Vivid Visions

Voices for Children/Guardian Ad Litem

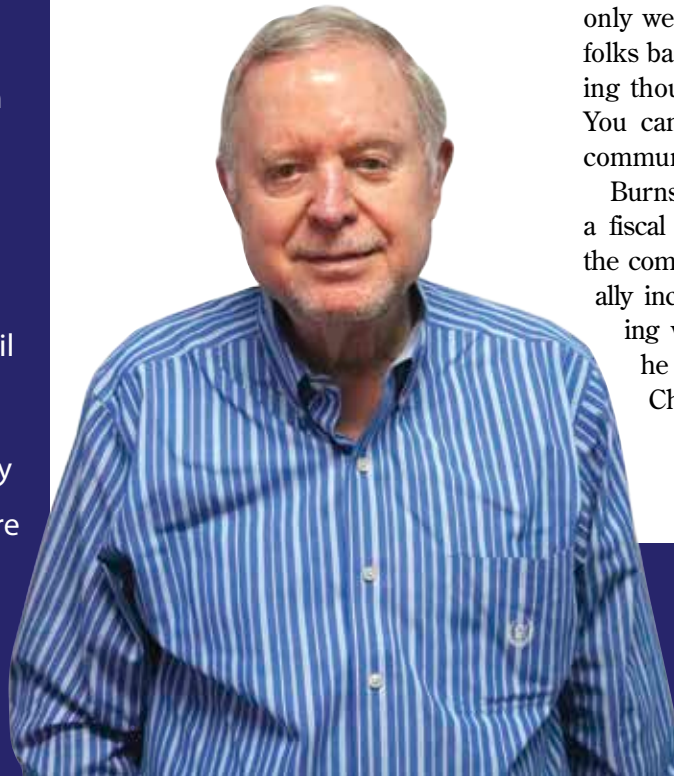
WellFlorida Council

one fundraiser to help all of them," Brown said. "As we went along we built up the United Way concept."

United Way's first fundraising campaign began in October 1968 with a goal of \$39,742.45. Although the first campaign fell short of its goal by raising \$29,261, it succeeded in instituting a coordinated effort of fundraising in support of local agencies into the community.

"We've come a long way since we got started," Brown said.

Brown, now semi-retired from law, is still actively involved with United Way. After being involved with the organization for 50 years, he knows exactly what it takes to have a successful fundraising campaign.



"You've got to think of how you can raise money not just from one person or a few people but from the entire community," Brown said. "See what you can do in a whole community and see how you can implement that to increase the giving. We've been very fortunate to be able to do that here."

United Way has been able to bring the entire Suwannee Valley community together to raise funds for its 23 affiliated agencies. In 2015-2016 United Way agencies provided more than \$27 million in services in the Suwannee Valley.

"The fiscal impact has been tremendous," said John Burns, who has been involved with United Way of Suwannee Valley since 1989. "We only were able to help a handful of folks back then and now we're helping thousands of people every day. You can see it everywhere in the community."

Burns has seen just how much of a fiscal impact United Way has on the community after seeing it gradually increase since he began working with the organization. When he was serving as the Division Chair in 1989, United Way was

Tom Brown was one of the original founding members of United Way of Suwannee Valley. He has been actively involved with the organization for the last 50 years.



barely able to raise \$100,000. When he became the Campaign Chair two years later, it raised \$200,000 for the first time.

“It’s amazing what we’ve accomplished,” Burns said.

Burns was recognized individually for his work with United Way at the organization’s annual meeting in March 2017. He was awarded the Presidential Volunteer Service Award, a prestigious honor after being nominated by the United Way of Suwannee Valley board.

“It was quite an honor,” Burns said. “I was very humbled by it and

very happy to receive it,” Burns said.

Fighting for the Community

United Way Worldwide’s credo says, “United Way fights for the health, education and financial stability of every person in every community.”

Utilizing volunteers on all levels, United Way of Suwannee Valley works tirelessly to uphold this creed. The organization is a community impact and fundraising organization which advances the common good by identifying unmet commu-

nity needs and seeking to alleviate those needs through United Way of Suwannee Valley initiatives and the funding of affiliated health and human service agencies.

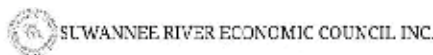
“It’s an unbelievable thing, what it does for the community,” said Chris Dampier, the current president of the United Way of Suwannee Valley Board of Directors.

Dampier got involved with United Way back in 1991 when a former employer asked him to help out with the organization. He’s been actively involved ever since.

“It’s the right thing to do, helping



United Way of Suwannee Valley celebrated the opening of its new office with a building open house and ribbon cutting on July 12, 2016. Holding the ribbon-cutting scissors are Gary Godwin, 2016-2017 president, board of directors; Rita Dopp, executive director; and Jim Moses, chair, Capital Campaign Committee.





A highlight of the annual community fundraising campaign kick-off event is the announcement of the funds already pledged through employee giving campaigns which conduct Pacesetter campaigns, completing their employee giving campaign prior to the general campaign kick off. PotashCorp-White Springs, the number one workplace campaign, annually announces its Pacesetter campaign figure at the kick off to get the campaign off to a strong start.

**LEARN
MORE**

For more information on United Way of Suwannee Valley, call (386) 752-5604 or visit www.unitedway-suwanneevalley.org.

the community,” Dampier said.

He encourages everyone in the community to come together and help out United Way of Suwannee Valley’s deserving agencies.

“Get involved,” Dampier said. “Come see what these agencies do. Once you get out and see what these agencies are all about you’d have to have a hard heart to not want to help out.”

United Way of Suwannee Valley has 23 partner agencies, including the Boys & Girls Club of Columbia County, American Red Cross of Northeast Florida and Columbia County Senior Services, just to name a few.

United Way has undertaken numerous projects to benefit the community over recent years. Since 1968 the local United Way has conducted fundraising campaigns in support of agencies providing an

array of safety net services to maintain community support systems.

In 2004 United Way of Suwannee Valley was recognized as the homeless coalition, which enables it to receive funds for projects serving homeless populations. Some other specific community projects undertaken addressed disaster preparation and weekend hunger backpack expansion. United Way also works to help children throughout the community with their reading skills through the ReadingPals initiative, a volunteer program where participants serve as ReadingPals for one hour a week to students.

Most recently, the Planning Committee elected to tackle three projects in support of the County Health Improvement Plan utilizing grant funds received by United Way. The projects are directed at impacting the infant mortality rate by pro-

moting infant safe sleep, expanding knowledge of infant and adult CPR and improving children’s oral health. These projects will be implemented in partnership with the Florida Departments of Health for Columbia, Suwannee, Lafayette and Hamilton Counties.

“Collectively, all of the agency funding and community impact projects undertaken by United Way serve to strengthen the community by providing supports and services addressing health, education and financial stability through United Way and the affiliated agencies, which also offer a variety of programs available to all residents,” United Way of Suwannee Valley Executive Director Rita Dopp said.

For more information on United Way of Suwannee Valley, call (386) 752-5604 or visit www.unitedway-suwanneevalley.org.

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SPREADING

INNER PEACE

Virginia “Ginger” Hill brings the healing art of yoga to Lake City.

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY | Photos courtesy of Virginia Hill

For years Virginia “Ginger” Hill was a workaholic. Putting in 18-hour days as an academic at the University of California, she gave it all up to return to her roots in Lake City. Now, she has channeled her passion for teaching and learning into yoga, traveling the world to learn the healing art, then bringing it home to share it with the people of Columbia County.

“If you told me what I’d be doing five years ago I probably would have laughed at you and then punched you in the face,” Hill said.

What started out as a way to de-stress and clear her mind has turned into a deep passion and desire to share the healing art of yoga with the world.

Returning to Her Roots

For years yoga was part of Hill’s daily routine. She began doing yoga 18 years ago while in California as a way to relax her mind and have more energy to get her through her long work days. Then in 2012 Hill, 41, moved back to Lake City to be with family.

“Lake City is a really special place,” Hill said. “I came here for healing.”

Hill’s family has lived in Columbia County for seven generations, and she knew that the best place for her to heal was in the place she grew up.

“When stuff hits the fan you go for family,” Hill said. “You go for deep roots.”

It’s her roots in Lake City that inspired the name for her yoga practice, Alligator Healing Arts Yoga. Hill lives on Alligator Lake, and her family used to own the land that currently makes up Alligator Lake Park.

“It’s about my deep roots,” Hill said. “It has to do with my personal roots and the town’s roots.”

When Hill returned to Lake City, she wanted a place where she could practice yoga every day, but she never thought she would be teaching yoga. However, four years after moving back to Columbia County Hill went in for her first teacher

training, and was certified after completing a 200-hour teacher training course at Discovery Yoga in St. Augustine.

Hill, who had spent years teaching in California, didn’t realize how much she missed it until she started pursuing her yoga teaching certification.

“I burst into tears during my first teacher training practice,” Hill said. “I forgot how much I missed teaching.”

In addition to getting back into teaching, yoga has also helped quench Hill’s thirst for learning. A philosopher by trade, yoga has taught her just as much as she’s taught others.

“Yoga opens up so much study,” Hill said. “It allowed me to heal and bring philosophy into practical practice.”

While studying many yoga techniques, including asana (posing), meditation and pranayama (breathing techniques), she also studies theories of self and theories of progress. To her, philosophy and yoga go hand-in-hand.

“I’m a scholar first and a yogini second,” Hill said. “I’m still a philosopher.”

Yoga Around the World

After Hill earned her yoga teaching certification, her gut instinct told her to go to Scotland.

While most people would opt to go to a country in Asia where yoga is more widely practiced, Hill has always loved the natural beauty and rich educational opportunities in

Scotland, so she followed her instincts and traveled to Trossachs, Scotland to attend a teaching at the Lendrick Lodge, a holistic retreat and spiritual center.

"I went to where the teachers were," Hill said.

Since then Hill has found her home base with the Himalayan Institute, a retreat center for yoga, meditation and wellness located in Pennsylvania. Hill has returned to both Pennsylvania and Scotland since to study under her teachers. She became a part of an international community of colleagues, thanks in part to a yoga for business course she participated in. It was through that course that Hill decided to venture to Thailand, where she took meditation and gong meditation classes. She also spent time in temples and studying with Buddhists

"I don't travel to get away," Hill said. "I'm always traveling to something."

She encourages those who also have a desire to see the world to think about what they love, and go to wherever in the world has that.

"Think of it as a time of cultivation," Hill said. "Don't run away from something. Run to something, and then bring

something back."

In order to help fund her yoga travels, Hill has been able to take her training and combine it with her editing and teaching experience to find a steady source of income: editing yoga teaching manuals.

"That's what's paying the bills and allowing this to happen and to grow," Hill said.

The next stops on Hill's yoga travels will be Fort Myers, Florida where she will be studying Mantra and Boulder, Colorado where she will attend a conference on meditation and mindfulness for end-of-life care.

Hill hopes to eventually host international retreats so she can bring others around the world to learn yoga.

Yoga at Home

Hill has spent countless hours working towards getting certified in different areas of yoga. She has taken two, 200-hour teacher training courses and is currently working on a 500-hour teaching training, which is basically like a master's degree in yoga. In addition to being a Kripalu Certified Instructor through Discovery Yoga, she is also Hatha and Vinyasa Flow Certified through Yogacara Global in Vancouver, Canada and is a Yoga Alliance, 200-hour registered yoga teacher.

Through her Lake City-based yoga practice, Alligator Healing Arts Yoga, Hill offers workshops and private yoga sessions. She will start offering weekly classes in January once she finds a bigger studio space.

"It's grown a little bit too big for this space," Hill said.

Hill currently teaches private yoga clients out of her studio in Lake City, which is also her grandparent's former home. Through her private lessons she is able to personalize the class based on the client's desired goals.

"I make it really specific," Hill said.

Hill considers herself a Jnana Yogi. Jnana Yoga is "the yoga of knowledge or wisdom," and according to ancient philosophy a Jnana Yogi uses his mind to inquire into its own nature.

"It's ultimately about peace of mind," Hill said.

Because of this Hill specializes in yoga and meditation, and has helped many clients and workshop participants through introducing them to the art of meditation.

"My goal is to get people doing seated meditation for five minutes per day," Hill said.

There aren't any studios in Lake City that are solely dedicated to yoga, and Hill is happy that she can help introduce so many local people to the healing art of yoga.

"I love that we have a small town and I can bring something global to it," Hill said.

Yoga changed Hill's life, and she is introducing it to others to help them change their lives for the better.

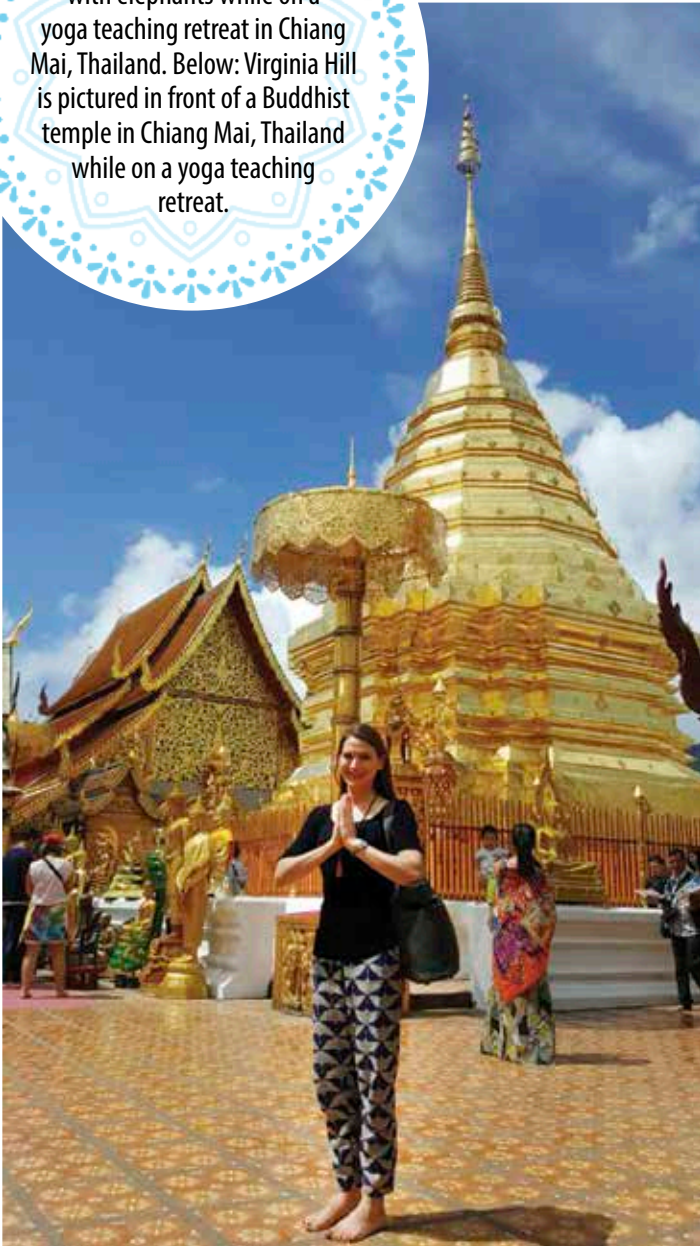
"It's why I can get up every day and be happy," Hill said.



Lake City Yoga Instructor Virginia Hill practices yoga in the Royal Gardens in Edinburgh, Scotland. Hill has traveled all over the world for yoga teaching retreats, including to Scotland, Thailand and parts of the United States.



Above: Virginia Hill poses with elephants while on a yoga teaching retreat in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Below: Virginia Hill is pictured in front of a Buddhist temple in Chiang Mai, Thailand while on a yoga teaching retreat.



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The River Run Olive Oil Company hopes to bring locally-made olive oil to North Florida. | Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Mike and Connie Casey spent months traveling the country studying olives. The couple was about to embark on a new agricultural adventure: olive production. After researching how farmers around the country grew olives, Connie asked a question no one else had thought to ask.

“Connie said, ‘If you guys go this way and you’re successful, what are you going to do with the oil?’” Mike said.

So the couple started looking into olive oil stores. After entering into a partnership with local friends Ron and Marcia St. John, they opened River Run Olive Oil Company in March 2016. Located in downtown High Springs, the shop specializes in premium olive oil and balsamic vinegars. Two months later in Trenton, River Run Growers planted their first olive trees. The eventual product of the two businesses and the overall goal for the owners is simple: Florida-grown olive oil.

“We hope someday, if we’re successful, that one of these olive oils will say ‘From Florida,’” Connie said.

Planting Trees

River Run Growers is responsible for 100 acres of olive trees. Since planting the trees in May 2016, they have thrived in the Florida soil. Brooke Williams, who splits her time working at the farm and managing the store, says the farm is about two years out from full olive production.

“People kind of look at us like we’re crazy because it’s very new around here, Brooke said. “I think people are really anxious for Florida-grown olive oil and so far we’re off to a great start.”

Brooke’s mother and step dad are Ron and Marcia, and the family has a deep agricultural background. Brooke, 27, grew up on a dairy farm right down the road from River Run Growers, and has a business management degree from Florida State University. Her experience in both agriculture and business makes her the perfect person to manage the olive oil store and oversee daily operations on the farm.

“I work right alongside the crew out here, pruning trees and pulling weeds, Brooke said. “But I also get to manage the store. It’s the best of both worlds.”



River Run Olive Oil owners Connie and Mike Casey stand in their store in downtown High Springs. River Run Olive Oil opened in March 2016 and specializes in quality olive oils and balsamic vinegars as well as locally-made food products, crafts, home decor and cooking demonstrations.



The variety of trees that the farm produces is strictly for olive oil production. They have there varieties of arbequina trees, which are only used to make olive oil. Although she and her family have plenty of agriculture experience, the olive tree farm is a learning experience for Brooke.

“We’re by no means professional olive growers,” Brooke said. “Although we have an agricultural background, we don’t have an olive background.”

The St. John and Casey families decided that if they were going to have the land and grow the trees and grow the olives, they were going to have a store to sell the oil in. They want to eventually have their own, locally-grown olive oil to sell in the store, and hope to eventually get a mill to make the oil on site.

“I work right alongside the crew out here, pruning trees and pulling weeds. But I also get to mange the store. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Brooke Williams | Manager at River Run Olive Oil

“We want to make sure we can get to that point,” Brooke said. “That’s our long-term goal.”

Oils and Balsamics

The River Run Olive Oil Company store in downtown High Springs is filled to the brim with olive oils and balsamics. Connie and Mike also keep the shelves stocked with local products including everything from honey to home decor.

The walls of the store are lined with fistis containing all of its olive oils and balsamics. They stay in the fistis until someone requests to have a bottle field. In the center of the store are tasting tables, one for olive oils and one for balsamics. Visitors are invited to test the products by dipping small pieces of bread into their sample cups, ensuring they leave the store with a product they love. Once they find one they like, the customer can fill one of four bottle sizes ranging from sample size to a half gallon.

“When you go to a store, you look at the olive oils on the shelf and try and figure out which one to buy,” Connie said. “A lot of people will come in and they’re almost intimidated. So you really have to educate yourself. It’s not something you can come in and spend five minutes doing. It takes

some time.”

If a customer tried to taste every single olive oil and balsamic vinegar at River Run, it would definitely take some time. The store carries 31 types of balsamic vinegars and every olive oil you could imaging, ranging from mild to robust. They also have fused olive oils, which are processed along with other herbs or produce. Some of their fused olive oils include red cayenne chili, blood orange, lemon and rosemary. The store also carries infused olive oils, where the oil is mixed with a plant-based essential oil such as basil, garlic or dill, giving it that plant’s flavor.

Each oil and balsamic is displayed on the tasting table and accompanied with a card that gives a detailed description of the product. Connie, Brooke or the other River Run employees are also available to walk the customer through the process, making sure that they find the right oil or vinegar for them.

Connie, who taught for 30 years in Bell before retiring and opening River Run, says that the habit of teaching is one she still hasn’t gotten out of.

“Now I’m just teaching different,” Connie said with a laugh. “I’m teaching adults instead of second graders.”

River Run Olive Oil is a Veronica Foods store, selling the company’s finest olive oils and balsamic vinegars. This distributor gave Connie and Mike the chance to open their own business, allowing them to choose the name and location as long as they sell their products.

As for when the store gets to the stage where it can produce its own olive oil, the product will be sent off to Veronica Foods for approval.

Other Offerings

The River Run Olive Oil Company offers more than just delicious olives oils and balsamic vinegars. The store also sells cooking products such as spices and bread mixes, artwork, lotions and scrubs and jewelry, many of which are made locally.

“We try to do local as much as we can and we try to sell Florida products as much as we can,” Connie said.

Connie and Mike also try and use every part of the olive they can. They also sell jarred olives, products made from

River Run Olive Oil store manager Brooke Williams stands in the fields of olive trees at the River Run Growers farm in Trenton. Brooke splits her time between working at the farm and working at the olive oil store in High Springs. River Run Growers has two fields totally 100 acres filled with olive trees. They are about two years away from full production.



olive tree wood, bracelets made from olive pits and olive tree branches, which are a popular trend in bridal bouquets.

The store also carries holiday gift packages that make the perfect present for someone who loves to cook.

These specialty items along with the unique olive oils and balsamics keep the customers coming back. According to Connie, 25 percent of the business is repeat customers, while they rest are people who pass through town and are curious about the store.

“High Springs is a very walkable town so we get a lot of different people,” Connie said. “There’s not a lot of places like this.”

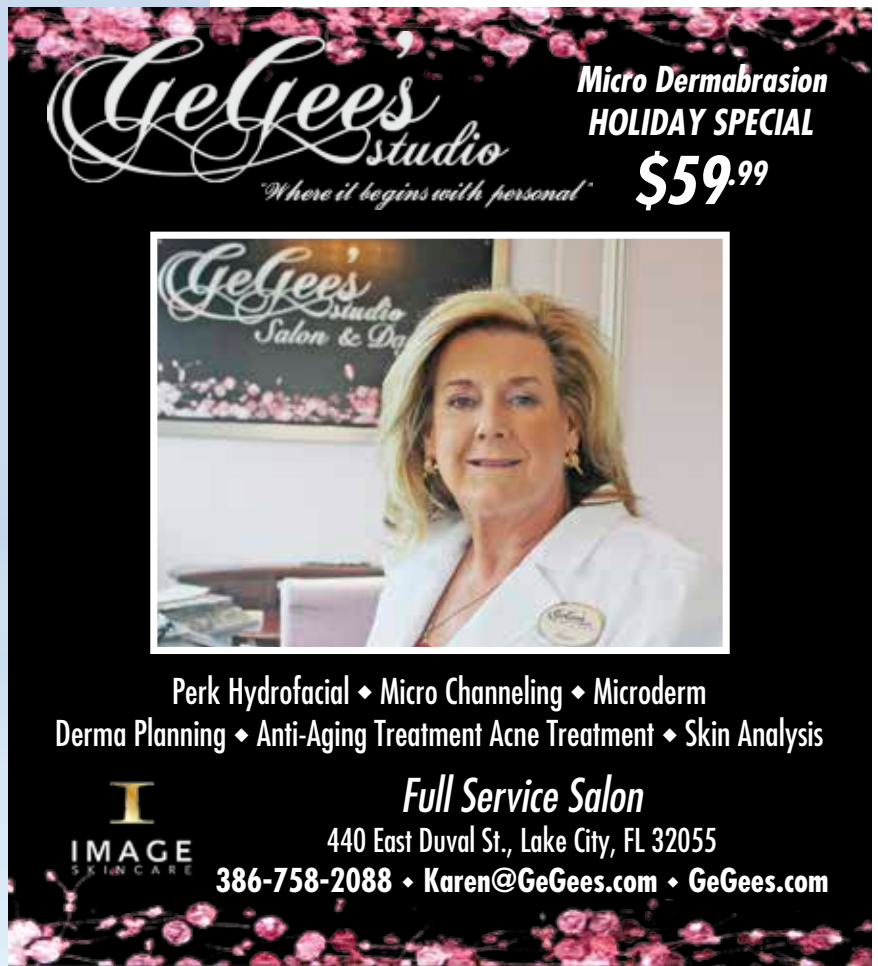
Connie is a foodie and loves experimenting with all the products in the kitchen. Her personal favorite olive oil is the tuscan and her favorite fused olive oil is the blood orange.

“My countertops have baskets full of balsamics and olive oils,” Connie said.

“I now know what it feels like to be a mouse in a test lab,” Mike added.

With a full kitchen in the store, Connie was able to share her passion for food with customers by having Chef Night. On the third Thursday of each month, the store brings in a chef who uses the store’s products for cooking demonstrations. The event can host up to 40 guests, who get to see how the chef uses the product. The chefs usually prepare an appetizer, a main dish and a dessert and give the customers a taste as well as pass out recipes that they can try at home. The store also hosts brunches and once even hosted a birthday party for a loyal customer.

The River Run Olive Oil Company is located at 115 N Main Street in High Springs. It’s hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. To find out more about the store visit www.riverrunoliveoil.com.



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Fancy Feet

**Southern Rhythm Cloggers
dominate the dance world.**

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY
(Additional photos courtesy of Dalita Peeler)



The Southern Rhythm Cloggers' Challenge Competition Team may be made up of individual dancers, but the group moves as one. While rehearsing their latest clogging routine, the dancers help each other memorize each step, doing them over and over until they are burned into their muscle memory.



From fancy footwork to high-energy dance sequences, the Southern Rhythm Cloggers are a force to be reckoned with on the dance floor. Led by their choreographer and studio owner Dalita Peeler, these ladies have danced their way to countless awards and accolades, and they're just getting started.

A Passion For Dance

Dalita has been dancing since she was four years old. She started out with tap, jazz and ballet, and when she was 18 she took her first tap class with Andy Howard, the director of the American Racket Cloggers and a renowned clogger. He introduced the dance form to Dalita, and she was instantly hooked.

"It's very high-energy and high-pace," Dalita said. "It's very audience-friendly. There's always something to look at."

In 2006 Dalita started Southern Rhythm Cloggers with herself and five other girls. Since

then the group has blossomed to about 30 dancers ranging from ages 8 to 30.

Southern Rhythm Cloggers has three competition teams: Elementary, Rookie High and Challenge. These dance teams travel to regional and national competitions about three times per year. They recently went to compete at the National Clogging Championship in Nashville in September, where they brought 12 dances and all of their routines came in either first, second or third place out of over 100 teams.

To be a member of one of the Southern Rhythm Cloggers competition teams takes hours of dedication and hard work.

"We practice longer and the routines have more details," Dalita said. "There are stricter rules that I have to follow as a choreographer from the costumes to the shoes we're wearing to the dance moves. The girls have to be extremely dedicated."

A Place to Call Home

The Southern Rhythm Cloggers moved into their own studio this past September. The team has been together since 2006 but was previously dancing out of Lake City Dance Arts. Now they have their own studio to work from.

The Southern Rhythm Cloggers Challenge Competition Team includes dancers Madison Getzan (from left), Emily Nuñez, Tori Johnson, Natalia Duarte, Eliana Duarte, Kaley Evans and Dalita Peeler.



Clogging Champions: Members of the Southern Rhythm Cloggers competition team won big at the 2017 Miss Southeastern Clogging Pageant. Pictured from left are: Madison Getzan (Age Division Queen 2017), Andy Howard (Director of American Racket), Dalita Peeler (overall Miss Southern Cloggers 2017), Eliana Duarte (Age Division Queen 2016), Natalia Duarte (overall Queen 2016), Emily Nuñez (Age Division Queen 2017) and Clay Barnhart.

“I always wanted to own my own studio,” Dalita said.

With her own studio Dalita is better able to dedicate herself to her biggest passion: choreographing award-winning clogging routines.

“I love the energy and the constant evolution of it,” Dalita said. “It’s constantly changing and trying to keep up is exciting.”

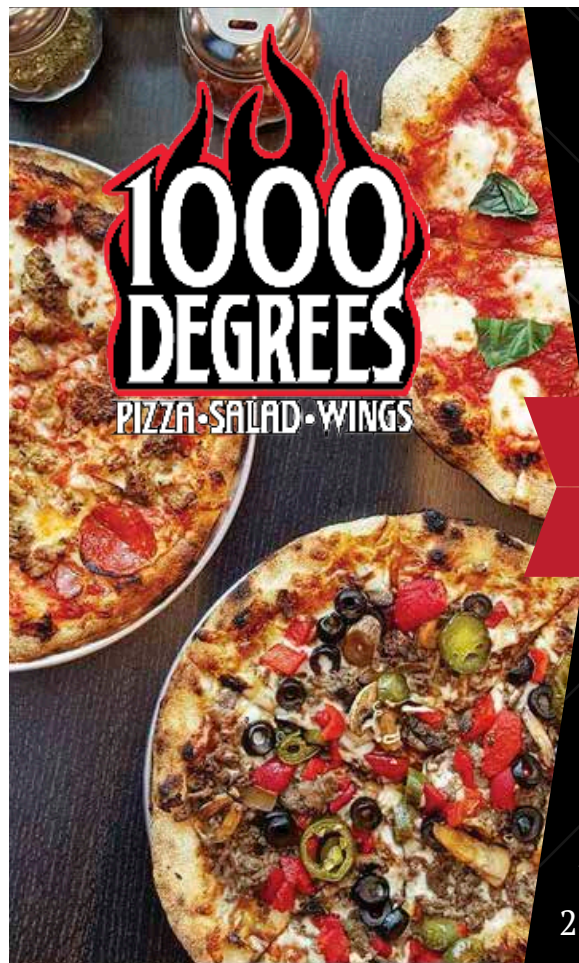
The studio is also home to two show teams that perform locally throughout the community. It also offers clogging classes for both children and adults, ballet classes, jazz classes and stretch and technique classes. In 2018 the studio plans to offer more dance classes including Zumba and Pure Barre.

In the meantime, the Southern Rhythm Cloggers are gearing up for a new competition season in February. For Eliana Duarte, who has eight years of clogging experience and is the captain of the Challenge Competition Team, the best part of clogging is getting to travel and compete against the best teams in the nation.

“I love going to competitions and getting to experience the atmosphere,” Eliana said.

Her co-captain Emily Nuñez, a 15-year-old who has been clogging for six years, agreed that the competitions are one of the best parts of being a part of the clogging team.

“I like getting to see my clogging family,” Emily said. “We’ve all come together and these girls are like my sisters.”



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HOLIDAY CHEER!

There will be plenty of Christmas spirit this year in North Central Florida.

By TAYLOR GAINES

Florida may not be known for having a white Christmas, but there's no shortage of holiday cheer here in Columbia County. No matter the weather, your holiday season can be full of joy and contentment with all the holiday events here in our area. Whether that means sitting on Santa's lap, seeing Christmas lights, taking in a parade, or even (yes) seeing snow, you can live out all your holiday dreams in North Florida. Here are some holiday events you won't want to miss.

HOLIDAY LIGHTS IN DOWNTOWN LAKE CITY

The Christmas season in Lake City kicks off when the lights turn on.

Starting on the Saturday after Thanksgiving (Nov. 25), the downtown area will be infused with hundreds of thousands of Christmas lights. Twinkling lights and spectacular light displays will line the streets all the way until the new year to celebrate the season.

Christmas Card Lane, hosted by the

Lake City-Columbia County Chamber of Commerce, will also take place once again.

Businesses have the opportunity to buy giant Christmas cards that surround Lake DeSoto, filled with thank yous and best wishes to customers, friends and neighbors. The 4-by-8-foot cards will be set up all the way around the lake.

Santa Claus is also scheduled to set up shop downtown at Olustee Park for kids of all ages to come visit.

He is scheduled to be there 6 to 8 p.m. from Dec. 1 through Dec. 22 on every day except Sundays.

"We are fortunate to live in a community where we can still all come together," said chamber executive director Dennille Decker. "It's nice that we can continue all of those long-standing traditions for generations to come."



LAKE CITY SNOW DAY & CHRISTMAS PARADE

One of Lake City's perennial favorites is back again: Lake City Snow Day.

Featuring 30 tons of man-made snow, Snow Day gives locals a chance to experience the fun of winter in a way the state cannot itself provide.

There will be piles of snow and sledding, along with bounce houses, live music and cash prizes throughout the day.

Snow Day, hosted by the chamber and sponsored by Busy Bee, is scheduled for December 9 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The annual Christmas Day Parade will take place Dec. 9 at 6 p.m. on Marion Avenue.

Hosted by the Rotary Club of Lake City, it will feature its classic mix of community leaders, local dance groups, Santa Claus and much more.

To check the status of events, call the Lake City-Columbia County Chamber of Commerce at 386-752-3690, follow the chamber on Facebook or visit lakecitychamber.com.

SUWANNEE LIGHTS

If you're looking for a larger display of lights or want to take in the full experience from the comfort of your car, check out the Suwannee Lights event at the Spirit of Suwannee Music Park.

From Dec. 2 through Dec. 30, you'll be able to drive or walk through a series of holiday scenes and characters every night starting at 6 p.m.

There will be all kinds of activities there as well, including photo opportunities, campfire karaoke, hot and tasty s'mores and the Puppetone Rockets, a children's dancing puppet show.

If you're looking to

jam out to some music, the SOSMP will also host a Santa Jam on Dec. 15. Come to the park and enjoy some live music before visiting the lights.

This year also features the addition of Snow Night, sponsored by Busy Bee, on Dec. 29 at 6 p.m.

The SOSMP is located at 3076 95th Drive in Live Oak. For more information, visit musicliveshere.com or call the park at 386-364-1683.

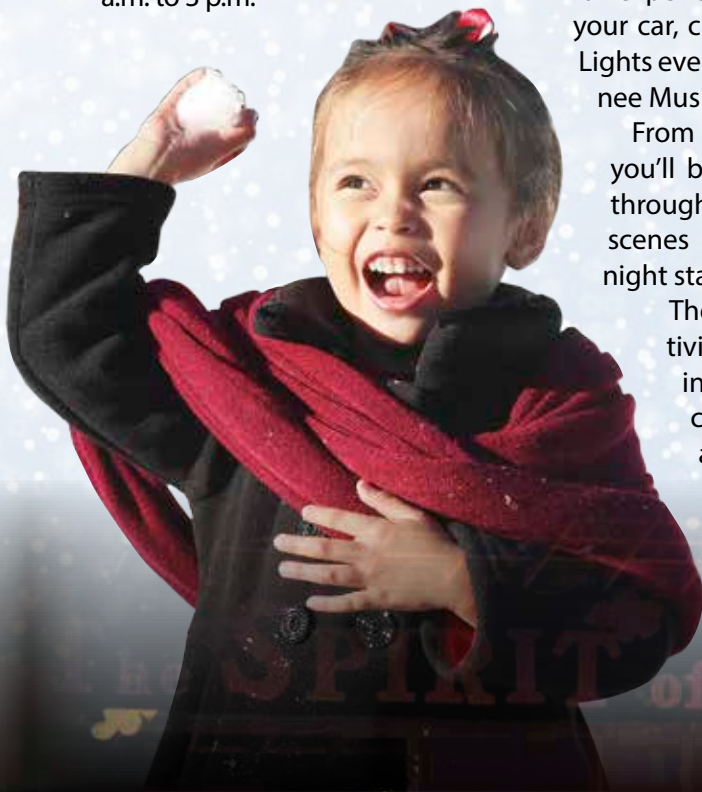
CHRISTMAS ON THE SQUARE

If you're looking to be immersed in the Christmas spirit, then make sure to attend the 33rd annual Christmas On The Square event in Live Oak.

The Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce will once again fill the town with Christmas cheer with the help of event sponsor by Busy Bee.

Starting Friday night at Heritage Square on Dec. 1, downtown Live Oak will be bustling with action. There will be live music, bounce houses, snow and a visit from Santa Claus.

The events kick into high gear on Saturday when more than 300 arts and crafts vendors join the fray, lining the streets to sell woodworks, quilts, furniture and much, much more.



Christmas on the Square kicks off at 8 a.m. on Sat., Dec. 2.

There will also be an agriculture exhibit and car show during the festivities.

Saturday night, the Jingle Bell Fun Run/Walk takes off down Ohio Avenue, setting the stage for the Christmas parade at 6 p.m., which features all kinds of floats competing for top prizes.

"We're just very excited here at the chamber for what this event brings," said chamber director Jimmy Norris. "It's a very well-received event in our community. There's such a down-home feel to it and a community spirit to this event."

Visit suwannee-chamber.com or call 386-362-3071 for the latest information.

FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

The Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center Festival of Lights is the pinnacle of light shows in the area. It has been named a Top 20 holiday event in the United States for almost a decade.

Starting December 1, you can take in the magnificent show on the banks of the historic Suwannee River all over again. The event runs until December 24.

Silent Nights take place Mon-

day through Thursday for the first two weeks of December as well as on Christmas Eve. Holiday Magic Nights take place Friday through Sunday as well as the entire last week before Christmas.

During Holiday Magic Nights, admission costs \$3 per person and is free for children 3 and under. The event includes free hot cocoa, popcorn, marshmallow roasting, a bonfire, craft activities, snow flurries, access to the gift shop, music, seeing Santa and stopping by the Lake City Train Club display, the largest display of its kind in North Florida.

The train display is open Thursdays through Sundays.

On Silent Nights, as part of the park's efforts to lessen lines and create a more intimate visitor experience, guests can walk through the park for just \$2 per person.

"We really do try to make it as family-friendly as we possible can," said Parks Service Specialist Andrea Thomas. "We try to make it memorable to the families that come out year after year."

The park is open until 9 p.m. nightly, with the last tickets being sold at 8:30.

Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park is located at the North Gate at 11016 Lillian Saun-

ders Drive in White Springs.

For more information, visit floridastateparks.org/park/stephen-foster, or call 386-397-2733.

ALACHUA AND HIGH SPRINGS

For those willing to ride down the interstate, there are even more Christmas events to take in.

Alachua is hosting its annual Christmas Tree Lighting and Santa Claus visit on Dec. 1 at Main Street Park from 6 to 8 p.m. The event is free to attend.

Alachua's Christmas Parade is Dec. 9 from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. on Main Street,

Contact the City of Alachua at 386-418-6100 for more information on the tree lighting and the Alachua Chamber of Commerce at 386-462-3333 for more on the parade.

In High Springs, the annual Christmas tree lighting will take place Nov. 17 at dusk (around 5:30 p.m.), with the parade set for Dec. 9 from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Main Street.

You can reach the High Springs Chamber of Commerce at 386-454-3120.



Congratulations Mia Merrill

**HERO NEXT DOOR 2017 awards presented by
Miss Florida Azalea 2017 Kelsey Harrison**

MIA MURRILL is a 5th grade student at Columbia City Elementary School. Her teacher is Mrs. Loris Wolff. Mia's smile and warm hugs brighten everyone's day. She works hard to make friends and follow her daily routines. She is loved by her classmates, teachers, aides, principals, and family very much. She has two step siblings, Yasmine and Dillion, and lives with her mom and stepdad. She loves to dance with her tap dance team. Mia loves fried chicken, Disney movies and swimming with dolphins!



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Breakfast with Santa

HOSTED BY HOLIDAY INN & SUITES LAKE CITY | From staff reports

Once again Lake City's Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites has planned the perfect beginning to the holiday season, a Breakfast with Santa event with the proceeds benefiting United Way of Suwannee Valley.

This year's event will be the local Holiday Inn's seventh annual Breakfast with Santa. It will be held Saturday, December 16, from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m.. Guests will enjoy a breakfast buffet featuring scrambled eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, biscuits and gravy, juice, coffee, and hot chocolate. Children will have an opportunity to visit with Santa and tell him their Christmas wish list while families have an opportunity to take photos.

The cost of the event is \$5.95 plus tax for children age three to 12 and \$10.95 plus tax for adults. To support local community agencies assisting Santa with making Christmas merry and bright for children in our community, a collection box will be available for the donation of toys by guests wishing to contribute.

Holiday Inn & Suites' generous contribution of the Breakfast with Santa event proceeds is made possible thanks to



Esha and Ria Patel are pictured with Oak Hall School's Headmaster Dr. James Hutchins.

sponsorships contributed by Esha Patel, 15; and Ria Patel, 13. Esha and Ria are the daughters of Holiday Inn & Suites owners Dr. Minesh Patel and Mrs. Ketna M. Patel.

The sponsorship for Santa's trip from the North Pole to the Lake City Holiday Inn and Suites is provided by Suwannee Valley Electric Cooperative. Sponsorships of promotional efforts are provided by the Lake City Reporter, Hunter Printing Co., and Holiday Inn & Suites.

Esha and Ria have attended Oak Hall School since they were in Kindergarten and Pre-K, respectively. Through their years at Oak Hall, the girls have learned how giving back to the community through service and leadership is valuable. When asked, the girls both showed great passion in their Latin studies, Youth in Government, STEM, and Debate. In the future, Esha hopes to pursue a career in international law and Ria in cardiovascular or orthopedic surgery. In the past two years, Esha has been developing a patent-pending Piezoelectric board (which should eventually create enough energy to power an electronic device or light in an area that lacks in adequate electricity) that she hopes to soon finish and donate to an NGO, a non-governmental organization.

Esha and Ria have assisted with the event since Holiday Inn & Suites' initiated the fundraising event. The girls help with marketing the event, delivering promotional posters to businesses for display.

For more information contact Holiday Inn & Suites, 213 SW Commerce Drive, Lake City, by contacting Katheryn Porter at 386-754-1411 extension 106.

A graphic illustration of a Santa hat. The hat is red with a white pom-pom and a white fur trim. The words "Breakfast with Santa" are written in a red, cursive font across the white fur trim. Below the hat, there are two logos: the Holiday Inn & Suites logo on the left and the United Way of Suwannee Valley logo on the right. The United Way logo includes the text "ALL PROCEEDS BENEFIT:" above it. The background of the graphic is red with a white fork and knife on the left and right sides, and a yellow belt buckle in the center.

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CELEBRATING TRADITIONS

Lake City residents share what makes their holiday celebrations special.

By CARL MCKINNEY

Close your eyes and think about the holiday season. What images most readily come to mind?

You're probably imagining people gathering around a turkey dinner, children unwrapping presents under a tree and someone sipping a glass of champagne as fireworks light up the sky.

But there's more than one way to observe the trinity of Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve.

Some families invent their own unique holiday traditions, some have celebrations that honor their culture's contribution to the American melting pot and others just have a different spin on an old classic.



A Sweet Thanksgiving

Freshly cooked cane syrup is now a regular Thanksgiving staple for Everett Phillips.

Throughout the holiday season, Phillips makes the syrup right out of a shed on his property in southern Columbia County.

Phillips marinates his turkey with the sugary sauce or injects it straight into the meat.

"It just makes it taste a whole lot better," he said.

When he was a child, Phillips would always lend a hand to his grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles when they cooked cane syrup during the winter months.

The equipment eventually started to collect dust.

"We kinda got away from it," he said.

Six years ago, Phillips decided to revive the tradition.

"I already had all the instruments," he said.

Now with his own grandchildren to aid him, Phillips typically cooks about 10 batches during the holidays, each producing about five gallons of syrup.



Everett Phillips works a batch of his homemade cane syrup.

The children enjoy helping out and playing around the equipment, he said.

"It's kinda like when I was a kid," he said.

Phillips enjoys watching the boiling cane juice turn into syrup as the excess liquid is evaporated.

"It's just relaxing," he said.

Christmas Contest

Joe Martino likes a little bit of friendly competition at his Christmas parties.

What started as a small singing contest with a toy karaoke machine has evolved into a full-blown musical standoff in his garage, complete with a stage, spotlights and prizes.

“It’s just good, clean American fun,” Martino said.

The annual karaoke competition began 10 years ago, when Martino hosted a party for the employees at his Lake City towing company.

The event attracted more and more people each year, mostly family members.

“We like singing,” he said.

Martino finally decided to build a stage in his garage last year to accommodate the influx of guests, who compete for trophies, scratch-off tickets, stuffed animals or other prizes.

The most popular song is probably “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer,” he said.



Every karaoke contest is full of memorable moments, but there’s one in particular that stands out, Martino said.

During last year’s competition, Martino’s son proposed to his girlfriend mid-song.

“It was a pretty special one,” he said.

Keeping Tradition Alive

Adrian Garcia celebrates Christmas and New Year’s by keeping traditions that Cuban families have passed down for generations alive.

“I was shown by my grandpa, and I show my kids,” Garcia said.

On Christmas Eve, or Nochebuena, “the Good Night,” Garcia roasts pork in a brick oven and eats a late-night meal with his family before going to midnight mass.

For New Year’s Day, the tradition is to eat 12 grapes for good luck as quickly as possible once the clock strikes midnight, he said.

“The faster you eat, the better the year you’ll have,” he said.

Just like the older generations, the family bonds over a few games of dominoes on both holidays.

Garcia said staying true to his his cultural tradi-



Roasting pork in a brick oven for a late-night meal before midnight mass is a favorite holiday tradition for Adrian Garcia.

tions helps him feel closer to the loved ones that have passed on.

“It’s like my roots man,” Garcia said. “I feel like it’s part of my life.”

“I feel like my grandpa would be proud of it,” he added.



A TRY

Hammer & Stain DIY Workshop in Gainesville makes crafting fun

Up until a few weeks ago, the only do-it-yourself experience I had came from my stint at scrapbooking camp in fourth grade and weekends spent at my grandma's kitchen table making paper flowers and beaded necklaces.

I've always wanted to be one of those DIY gurus who have perfect farmhouse-style homes and spend their down time staining wood and creating custom works of art for fun. Once I heard about Hammer & Stain DIY Workshop in Gainesville, I knew this was my chance to bring out my inner Joanna Gaines.

Hammer & Stain is a DIY workshop that walks participants through the process of making a farmhouse-style wooden signs or pieces of home decor. It allows everyone to personalize their items with their family name, initials or favorite quote and choose the paint and stain colors for the project.

Here's how it works. You go online and find a workshop location. They have a Hammer & Stain location in Gainesville and Ocala, and according to their website a Lake City location is coming soon. Once you choose your location, a calendar comes up showing the workshop dates along with what projects are being offered on those dates. You book the project online where it asks for the quote you want on your sign or your family name or initials (it depends on what the workshop project is). Then, the Hammer & Stain employees print whatever you want on your sign onto a stencil and it's waiting for you when you go to the workshop.

I chose to do the "Farmhouse Tray" workshop. Each



The Hammer & Stain Gainesville studio is located at 6450 SW Archer Road.

The Hammer & Stain Ocala studio is located at 6158 SW State Road 200 #205.

For more information or to schedule a workshop or private party, visit www.hammerandstain.com.

person got to customize their own farmhouse tray completely from start to finish. Well, almost completely start to finish.

I walked into the Hammer & Stain workshop and the walls were filled with beautiful handmade wooden signs and shelves filled with every paint and stain color you could imagine. At my work station was my plain wooden tray, a pre-cut stencil with my personalization on it and in the center of the table was a wooden tray filled with supplies.

As someone who has never stained wood before, I stared at my board for a few moments while trying to slyly observe how the other people were doing their projects. This was not a workshop with an instructor walking the entire class through the process step-by-step, because each project was different. Soon, a Hammer & Stain employee quickly came to my side and walked me through the wood staining process.

First, I picked my stain. I figured I couldn't mess up basic brown, and before I knew it I was painting the stain and wiping it off to create that rustic look





like a pro. After my board was stained and dried, I learned how to lay down the stencils on the board and once they were placed I chose my paint color and created my personalization.

After the board was finished, and looking pretty good, I learned that we would each be drilling our own rustic handles into the ends of the board to create a tray. I was slightly terrified of having to use a giant power tool, but quickly got the hang of it.

Once the project was done, I had my own customized piece of farmhouse decor to display in my home.

Now, I went on my own to do the workshop but this is the perfect place to go for a girls night out, date night or to have a DIY birthday party or event. Bring a bottle of wine or sparkling water and spend the evening creating your own custom work of art.

Hammer & Stain's DIY workshops are completely dummy proof, and anyone can make their own beautiful creation no matter how inexperienced they are at crafting. With the holidays right around the corner, it's a great place to go and create personalized gifts.

The workshop prices vary depending on what the project being offered that day is. However, chances are that the price of the workshop is way cheaper than if you were to buy one of these signs from a department store or have one made for you. Plus, it gives you total bragging rights so you can tell everyone who sees your creation that you made it yourself.

I know one thing for sure, I will definitely be going back to create another masterpiece.

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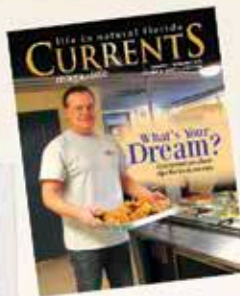
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12

YEARS of CURRENTS

We've been honored to be Lake City's original magazine for the past 12 years. Through the years we have written countless stories about the amazing people and places in our area, and featured many of them on our covers. We've had a lot of great covers over the years, but these are 12 of our favorite covers to celebrate 12 years of publication.

1. Our First Cover

Photo by Jennifer Chasteen

Our first issue of Currents debuted in November 2006. The cover featured the home of Lake City residents Willene and Bill Giles, what is now Casa Isabel on Bascom Norris Road, all decked out in holiday decor. Also featured in the inaugural issue of Currents was an interview with rocker Tom Petty.



2. Retro Fashion

Photo by Jennifer Chasteen

Our March-April 2006 issue of Currents was also part of our first volume and features one of our favorite covers to date. On the cover is Cristina Rivera posed in a 1936 Ford convertible, owned by Mike Kearney of High Springs. This issue was dedicated to classic cars and retro fashion.



3. Holidays At The River

Photo by Jennifer Chasteen

This holiday cover marked the beginning of Currents' second year. The November-December 2007 cover featured 7-year-old Bailey Wortham taking presents down the Ichetucknee River. This issue showcased all the beauty of the holidays in North-Central Florida.





4. Fun With A Porpoise

Photo by Jason Matthew Walker

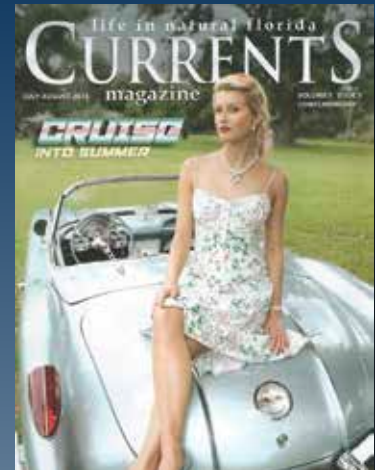
Our 2010 July-August issue of Currents featured the world's first oceanarium, Marineland, near St. Augustine. The cover shows a Marineland trainer sharing a kiss with one of the oceanarium's star dolphins.



5. In The Wake Of Summer

Photo by Jason Matthew Walker

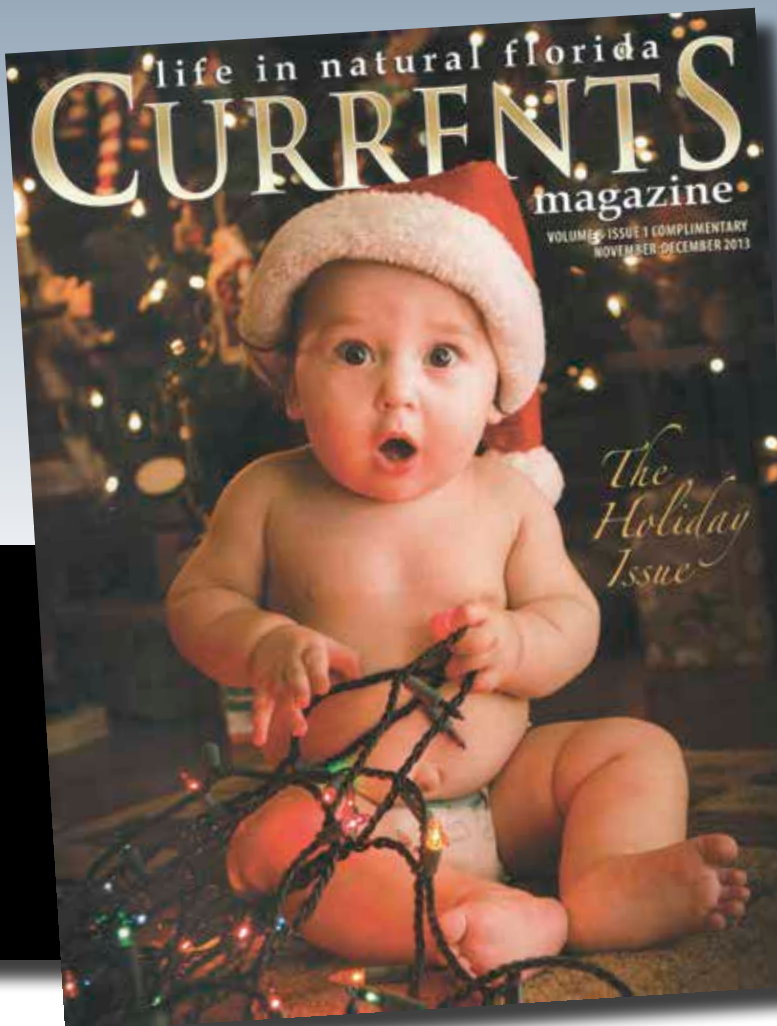
This is one of our most action-packed covers yet. The 2011 July-August issue of Currents showed Dusty Snyder leaping from the water while wakeboarding. The professional wakeboarder made waves on the Suwannee River during this high-energy photoshoot.



6. Cruise Into Summer

Photo by Jason Matthew Walker

Nothing says summer like riding around with the top down. Our 2013 July-August cover featured Stephany Mullis of Lake City posing with a 1958 Corvette restored by Gary Sparks of Lake City. This issue of Currents celebrated all the best things about summer in Lake City.



7. It's Christmas, Baby!

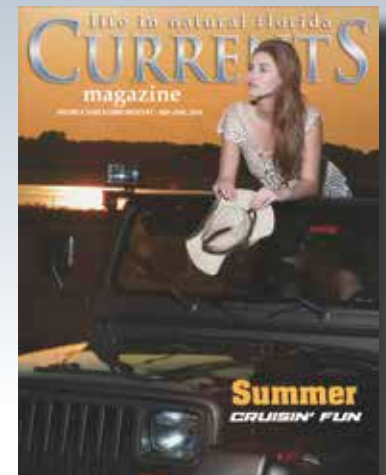
Photo by Brent Kuykendall

Our 2013 November-December cover was one of our favorites, and definitely one of our cutest. Ty Kuykendall of Lake City was photographed by his step-grandpa, Brent Kuykendall, for this Currents cover. Little Ty is featured with Christmas lights and a Santa hat, and he sure looks ready for some Christmas fun.

8. From Currents to Vogue

Photo by Bill Potts Photography

Our cover model for this issue has gone a long way since posing for our 2014 May-June issue. Grace Elizabeth, a graduate of Columbia High School, is shown



in a restored 1990 Jeep Wrangler YJ and was photographed at Lake Lona in western Columbia County. Grace is now a rising supermodel and is walking in fashion shows for the biggest designers around the world and posing for fashion magazines, as well as currently being the face of Victoria's Secret PINK.



9. A Tremendous Holiday

Photo by: Esta Eberhardt,
Captured Memories By Esta

On the cover of the 2014 November-December issue of Currents, Ali Brooks places ornaments on a cypress tree at Huntsman Tree Supplier near Wellborn. This issue marked nine years of Currents being Lake City's lifestyle magazine.

10. The Banjo Man

Photo by: John Stokes

The 2016 March-April issue of Currents featured Lake City's own Skip Johns, a bluegrass legend who is known for his banjo skills. Johns has taken his talents all the way to the prestigious stage of the Grand Ole Opry and now frequently performs throughout Lake City and the surrounding area.



11. The Mayor of Fiddleville

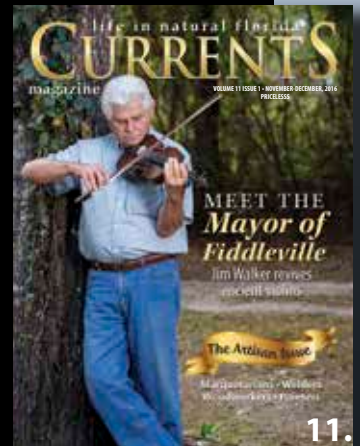
Photo by: Brent Kuykendall
Photography

The first issue of year 11 of Currents was marked with this cover featuring Jim Walker, one of the most sought-after luthiers in North-Central Florida. The 2016 November-December issue of Currents featured other local artisans throughout the area, including painters, welders and marquetarians.

12. Live Your Adventure

Photo by: Kate Herndon

The 2017 May-June issue of Currents showcased Lake City native Kate Herndon climbing the Haiku Stairs in Hawaii. This issue was marked as the travel issue, and featured stories of local travelers as well as destinations where our readers could have their own adventures.



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PERMANENT TOURIST

• INVASIVE PLANTS •

A little cool weather is good for gardeners.

At last we can work outside without worrying about keeling over from the heat. What lovely winters we have in North Florida. Never too hot and never too cold. Paradise to be sure.

The permanent tourists (invasive plants) came to Florida to visit and liked it so much they are staying. Despite our hints and downright insults, they are here to stay. These fast-growing, strong visitors are entrenched and it is up to us to be aware of these visitors which are categorized as invasive plants because of the harm they do to our environment. They displace our native species, change community structures or ecological functions and hybridize with native plants. This definition doesn't include the economic severity or geographic range of the problem, but on the documented ecological damage caused. I'm only including plants here but there are many invasive animal species that are also causing many problems.

Of the more than 4,000 plant species found in Florida, 1,300 or more are non-native or exotic. They come from other countries or regions to the U.S. At least 130 of these exotic plants are spreading rapidly throughout our natural areas. When they cause environmental or economic harm, they are considered invasive by the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council, which evaluates and revises the list every two years.

Invasive aquatic plants can completely fill the waterways, driving fish and wildlife from the areas, depleting oxygen levels and causing fish kills. The regular maintenance of invasive plants lessens overall damages but costs millions each year.

Kudzu (the vine that ate the South) alone has swallowed up 7 million acres and costs \$500 million in lost farm and timber production yearly. Climbing fern, (*Lygopodium japonicum* and *Lygodium microphyllum*) has



Top: *Nandina domestica*
Inset: Coral ardisia
Center Left: Air potato
Center Right: Japanese climbing fern
Bottom: Wisteria

NUMBERS YOU SHOULD KNOW

1,300 of 4,000 Florida plants are non-native

affected the pine straw industry in Florida. Many pine straw stands have been abandoned because the straw can't be legally sold because of the fern intrusion, and on and on the damage occurs.

“Invasives can hybridize with natives causing undesirable traits.”

Martha Ann Ronsonet | Gardening Columnist

Invasives can hybridize with natives causing undesirable traits. Animals that depend on native plants for food and habitat are often unable to adapt, so they leave the area or die out. Invasive species have no natural controls, diseases or predators as they do in their natural habitat to keep them in check.

The water-hyacinth was introduced into Florida in the 1880s and covered more than 120,000 acres of public lakes and navigable rivers by the early 1960s. By constant efforts in managing the water-hyacinths, they have been reduced to approximately 2,000 acres statewide which is a huge success, but after many years of manual labor and millions of dollars spent.

Tuberous sword fern (*Nephrolepis cordifolia*) like all the other Category 1 plants spreads in leaps and bounds but there is a native sword, not to be confused with the invasive tuberous sword fern which is the only one of the four species of sword ferns that is capable of producing tubers. So if your sword fern produces tubers

WHAT ABOUT WATER LETTUCE

Our Ichetucknee River has a problem with water lettuce, even when volunteers collect as many plants as possible and then dispose of them the next year there are just as many plants. Environmental damage caused by water-lettuce alone includes:

- Water lettuce mats can restrict water flow increasing flooding along rivers and other water bodies.
- Water lettuce mats can lower dissolved oxygen concentrations, reducing aquatic life.
- Dense populations can lower water levels because it increases evaporation rates.
- Water lettuce populations crowd out native plants and animals.
- Dense water lettuce populations produce ideal breeding environments for mosquitoes.



Because of its aggressive growth rate, water lettuce is illegal to possess in Florida without a special permit. This is just one invasive plant, just imagine the effects multiple invasives causes in our state and in many other states.

CATEGORY 1 OFFENDERS

Some of the worst offenders for our area are:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Nandina domestica | Tropical soda apple |
| Coral ardisia | Arrowhead vine, Syngonium |
| Camphor tree | podophyllum |
| Cat's claw vine | Asparagus sprengeri fern |
| Chinese privet | Air potato |
| Wisteria | Cogon grass |
| Japanese climbing fern | Torpedo grass |
| Lantana camara | Colocasia esculenta, (wild taro) |
| Mimosa tree | Ligustrum sinense (Chinese privet) |
| Kudzu | Ligustrum lucidum (glossy privet) |
| Chinese tallow or popcorn tree | Japanese honey suckle |

you have the invasive species. Their fronds are also shorter and more upright than the native ferns.

The sad thing is that after much research we know some invasive plant species will never be eradicated in Florida; they simply reproduce too fast. That is why we should strive to keep them at the lowest feasible levels. The regular maintenance of invasive plants lessens overall environment and economic damages and helps to maintain our natural areas.

Because invasives grow so easily it is tempting to think it won't matter if we grow just one little invasive plant but the result is cumulative and it is so easily spread to our natural areas by birds or animals or humans and then it gets out of control.

So do your part and help control invasive plants by learning to identify them and by keeping them out of your landscape at home. Dispose of them by double bagging them and putting them in household trash, not the compost pile or yard debris pick up.

■ **Martha Ann Ronsonet** | Avid gardner and author of Gardening in the Deep South and Other Hot Pursuits

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10

STOCKING STUFFERS FOR UNDER

\$20



When it comes to stuffing a stocking, there are plenty of options for gifts you can include. However, do you really want to be the one who fills your loved ones stockings with boring, everyday items like gum and new toothbrushes? No way! This list is full of exciting items that are the perfect size for a stocking and best of all, they're all under \$20.

Wine Thermometer

Amazon, \$17

This is the best wine gift accessory for any wine enthusiast. This digital thermometer attaches directly to the bottle and tells them the estimated temperature of the wine inside. It also comes with information on the ideal serving temperature for various blends. This is a great stocking stuffer for your wife, girlfriend, mother or bestie.

Panda Mini Humidifier

AliExpress, \$16

These mini, portable humidifiers are not only the perfect desk accessory for when you're feeling a little stuffy; they're also super adorable. Just fill it with water and plug it into USB source. You can plug it into a laptop or computer, or plug the cord into a wall adaptor and plug that in an outlet. This stocking stuffer would be great for your coworker or someone you know who frequently suffers from the sniffles.





Smart Water Bottle

Amazon, \$15

For the athletic person in your life, this water bottle takes technology to a whole new level. There is a chamber inside the water bottle that can hold a smartphone and keep it perfectly protected during their workout. There's even an earphone hole in the bottom so they can plug in their headphones. The waterproof compartment can hold anything they want kept dry. Now if they're going for a run or walk, they can use their water bottle to hold the rest of their belongings.

Tassel iPhone Charger Keychain

Charming Charlie, \$12

A great socking stuffer for your trendy teen, someone who's always on the go or someone who always forgets to charge their phone. This charger is not only stylish, but also portable. They'll no longer have to worry about low battery warnings when their charger is attached to their bag.

Scratch Art Rainbow Notes

Walmart, \$8

Help the little ones in your life make exciting mini masterpieces with these Melissa & Doug scratch art rainbow mini notes. These come in a pack of 125 and come with a wooden stylus. Kids will love writing their own messages and creating cool rainbow works of art. And best of all? They're mess free!

Hog Wild Toy Poppers

Amazon, \$10

These foam ball launchers are fun gifts for kids of all ages, and adults too! These toys can pop the balls to as far as 20 feet, and are safe for both indoor and outdoor use. Whether you're looking for a gift for someone who's four years old or 94 years old, this toy is bound to make them laugh.

Stress-Relief Goo

Citizen Goods, \$10

This scientific, magnetic space putty is as fun and twice as useful as regular putty. Not only can it be twisted and pulled to take the edge off, but it's magnetic so it can be used to tack things up on the fridge or a filing cabinet. This is a great gift to give someone who just needs to de-stress.



Cute Tea Infuser

Bed Bath & Beyond, \$19

Give your loved one's cup of tea a cheerful flair with a fun tea infuser. This "Just Ducky" floating tea infuser from Bed Bath & Beyond steepes hot water with flavor via loose tea leaves inside. With this little guy floating around it'll add the perfect amount of strength to their tea.

Crazy Socks

Sock Smith, \$10

You just can't go wrong with an awesome pair of socks. Everyone wears them, but buying some funny socks makes them not only useful, it also makes your loved ones excited to get them. From cookies and milk to smiling tacos or adorable puppies, the options are endless. These also make great gifts for a Secret Santa party or to have on-hand to give as a last-minute present.



3D Wooden Puzzle

Kikkerland, \$10

These 3D Wooden Puzzles are a challenging and creative way to pass the time. It's a great brain teaser to keep both you and the kids entertained for hours. This is taking puzzle time to the next level. Once the puzzle is complete, you can paint it to bring it to life.



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homemade FOR THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays are a time for friends and family to come together and enjoy everything the season has to offer, usually over a delicious meal. Nothing says holiday cheer quite like a home-made meal or tasty treat shared with loved ones. These local residents are sharing some of their favorite holiday recipes, so that you can say your food is homemade for the holidays.



Genie Norman

Genie's Tiramisu

(recipe from Genie Norman, Taste Buddies columnist)

Ingredients:

- 6 Egg yolks
- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sugar
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup mascarpone cheese
- 2 cups whipping cream
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup water
- 2 tsp. instant coffee granules
- 2 tbsp. brandy
- 1 pkg Champagne ladyfinger biscotti (I use the Alessi brand biscotti shaped like a lady finger from Publix, usually in the imported cookie section)
- Garnishes: grated or curled unsweetened chocolate; sprinkling of cocoa powder sugar sprinkles

Directions for Genie's Tiramisu

Directions:

1. Combine egg yolks and sugar in top of a double boiler on medium heat. Beat at medium speed with an electric mixer for 9 minutes, beating constantly.
2. Remove from heat and add mascarpone. Beat until smooth.
3. Beat whipping cream until peaks form. Fold cheese mixture into whipped cream.
4. Combine water, coffee granules and brandy. Dip half the biscuits into mixture and place on bottom of trifle bowl. Pour in half of filling. Place another layer of dipped biscuits on top and cover with remaining filling. Garnish if desired, cover and chill 8 hours.

Genie's Cheddar Chicken Casserole

(recipe from Genie Norman, Taste Buddies columnist)

Ingredients:

- 1 can cream of mushroom soup
- $\frac{1}{2}$ small package frozen peas
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups cooked chicken, bite size
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup mayonnaise
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup milk
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 cup bisquick
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup pimientos (optional)
- Salt & pepper to taste

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Stir and warm soup, peas, chicken, salt and pepper. When it is warm, place in

Genie's Tip:

I like to serve it with cranberry sauce and a salad. If you have apples on hand, cook them with some sugar and cinnamon and you have a nice combination.



casserole dish.

3. Mix mayonnaise, milk and 1 cup of cheese. Add Bisquick and spoon mixture over chicken. Bake uncovered at 400 degrees for 20 minutes. Sprinkle remaining cheese on top and bake 5-10 minutes longer until brown.

Genie's Tip:

I usually garnish with shaved chocolate or cocoa powder or sugar sprinkles.



Ingredients:

- 2 ½ cups cake flour
- 3 tbsp cocoa powder
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 2 oz red food coloring
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1 tbsp distilled vinegar
- 1 recipe cream cheese frosting (recipe below)

Directions:

1. Grease and flour 2 – 9” or 3 – 8” cake

Robert and Emmie Chasteen



Emmie’s Red Velvet Cake

(recipe by Emmie Chasteen, retired restaurant owner)

2. Sift the flour, cocoa powder and salt together in a large bowl and set aside.
3. Beat the sugar and eggs together with an electric mixer until light and fluffy (approximately 2 minutes)
4. Set the mixer to low speed and slowly add the oil.
5. Add the vanilla.
6. Pour the red food coloring in the buttermilk, mix well.
7. Set the mixer to medium speed and alternately add the dry mixture, buttermilk and wet mixture, ending with the dry mixer. Mix until combined after each addition, but do not overbeat.
8. Combine the baking soda and vinegar in a small bowl and let it fizz for a moment. Fold it into the cake batter.
9. Divide the batter evenly between the prepared cake pans.
10. Remove the air bubbles by banging the

11. Place the cake pans on the middle rack of the oven and bake 25-30 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.
12. Cool the cakes in their pans for 10 minutes and then invert on cooling racks.
13. Once cake layers are cool, frost with Cream Cheese Frosting.

Cream Cheese Frosting
Ingredients:

- 1 – 8oz cream cheese
- 1 stick butter or margarine
- 1lb confectioners’ sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla

Beat cream cheese and butter until creamy. Slowly add confectioners’ sugar until well blended and smooth. Add vanilla and mix well.



Robert’s Tip:
Try a scoop of frozen egg nog in a cup of coffee!

Robert’s Homemade Egg Nog

(recipe by Robert Chasteen, retired restaurant owner)

Ingredients:

- 12 eggs, separated
- 3 cups sugar
- Light rum or whiskey
- 3 cups heavy whipping cream
- Vanilla ice cream
- Nutmeg

Directions:

1. Beat egg yolks and gradually add 2

2. In a separate bowl, beat egg whites while gradually adding the remaining cup of sugar. Beat until stiff.
3. In a separate bowl, beat 4 cups of heavy whipping cream until peaks form. Combine egg yolk mixture and whipping cream – blend well with a wire whip. Fold in egg whites.
4. Garnish with vanilla ice cream scoops and nutmeg (if desired).



Laura Fowler Goss

Laura's Spin on Nana's Vanilla Wafer Cake

Ingredients:

- 2 sticks unsalted butter, room temp
- 1/2 cup granulated white sugar
- 6 eggs, room temp
- 1/2 box vanilla wafer cookies, crushed
- 1/2 cup whole milk
- 1/2 bag (8.8oz) Biscoff cookies, crushed
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 (7oz) package sweetened shredded coconut
 - 3 to 4 sugar pumpkins
 - 1/4 cup powdered sugar
 - 2 tbsp. orange juice

Directions:

1. In a mixer cream butter and sugar.
2. Add eggs, one at a time.
3. Mix in vanilla wafers.
4. Mix in milk.
5. Mix in Biscoff cookies and then vanilla.
6. Hand stir in coconut and pecans.
7. Pour into hollowed pumpkins, place on baking sheet, bake in preheated 350 degree oven for 45-60 minutes until done via toothpick test.
8. Glaze with powdered sugar mixed with orange juice.
9. Garnish with crushed Biscoff cookies.

Laura's Tip:

The Biscoff cookies give the cake a more enhanced caramel flavor, and a roasted candy pecans Bring a special burst of delicious nutty flavor.

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From staff reports



If you're looking to satisfy your sweet tooth, look no further than Sweet Pete's Candy in Jacksonville. From sampling decadent, homemade chocolate to making candy creations of your own, you're guaranteed to have a sweet experience.

Located just an hour from Lake City, Sweet Pete's offers homemade candies, chocolates, gift baskets and the opportunity to create your own chocolate creations in one of their candy classes. It's the perfect place to grab a sweet treat or find the perfect gift for the holidays.

Peter Behringer (Sweet Pete), has had a passion for sweets for more than 30 years. This passion stems from growing up in the industry, when his mother opened a local family chocolate business when he was 11 years old. Graduating from the Gus Pulakos RCI Candy School in 1998, Behringer returned to the family business where he helped franchise and grow the company into a regional brand with 33 stores and a large production facility.

In 2010 he and his wife Allison founded Sweet Pete's Candy – a boutique candy store in Jacksonville, Florida's historic Springfield district, featuring hundreds of confections, many made by hand, as well as classes that taught guests how to make their own candy. Peter's scrumptious, colorful and handcrafted candies steadily gained attention and notoriety in the Jacksonville area. In 2014, Sweet Pete's was featured on the CNBC hit reality series *The Profit*, where entrepreneur Marcus Lemonis applies his capital and expertise to lead companies to success. Out of thousands of businesses, Lemonis chose to work with Sweet Pete's, and a natural partnership flourished.

After appearing on *The Profit*, Sweet Pete's opened a new Jacksonville location in the historic Seminole Club, a building that dates back to 1903. The notable

location, which hosted a number of well-known visitors such as Presidents Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, sat vacant for 10 years until Pete, Allison and Lemonis renovated the property. This new confectionary emporium is a vast 23,000 sq. ft., making it one of the largest candy shops and factory in the United States.

Today, Sweet Pete's manufactures a full line of handcrafted quality chocolates and sells over a thousand different types of candies. The new location boasts a fully functioning factory with an interactive gallery, two large retail areas, a full restaurant and bar, rooftop patio and dessert bar. Sweet Pete's also features an event center that offers space for children's field trips, catered events and parties. Peter also finds joy in sharing his expertise with others by teaching the art of candy making. The fun-filled educational environment includes Sweet Pete's Sweet Science Classes, hands-on interactive candy making sessions and birthday parties.

Upon the success of Sweet Pete's Jacksonville location, the company has continued to expand to new locations located in Key West, Florida.; Buena Park, Calif., and soon to open in Atlanta, Georgia at The Battery inside the new Atlanta Braves stadium. Sweet Pete's is run by a group of naturally fun people who are committed to creating the Sweetest Destination on Earth.

For more information on Sweet Pete's visit www.sweetpetescandy.com or call 855-SWT-PETE.




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Helping You Make the Transition

**CARETENDERS OF LAKE CITY HAS A VARIETY OF SERVICES
THAT AID SENIORS IN MAKING A LIFESTYLE CHANGE.**

The life changes that come with age can be at once mystifying and frightening. Whether it's something as minor as new glasses or as major as a move to assisted living, Seniors are often concerned that lifestyle adjustments can lead to lack of independence. Thankfully, Mederi Caretenders of Gainesville has a variety of programs aimed at answering questions and easing the transitions that Seniors face.

"As with anyone, when a senior is faced with one or more major life changes - such as a move to an assisted living community where they're changing their lifestyle to accommodate some limitation, or they lose a loved one - this can be very scary and overwhelming and can possibly lead to decline in physical and/or mental health," said Susan Swirbul, a patient care liaison at Caretenders.

Caretenders has a variety of services specifically designed for clients undergoing a stressful period of change. These Seniors might be experiencing new limitations on mobility, cognitive deficits, effects of medication or other challenges that necessitate a change in lifestyle. When combined with declining overall health and other factors, clients can easily become depressed and feel as if they are losing control of their lives.

One such service, the Transitional Care Program, assists in a Senior's transition to an assisted living facility. A physician's order is placed for a comprehensive geriatric needs assessment, which is conducted by a nurse who

is thoroughly trained to identify the imminent needs of the patient.

Once the client is settled in, the program professionals help manage medical needs and communicate with families, assisted living staff and other people involved with the client's care. The program includes a team of psychiatric and medical nurses, therapists and social workers, all of whom have extensive experience and training in working with Seniors in transition.

For patients dealing with loss of mobility or cognitive abilities, Caretenders provides occupational therapists to help them re-learn and perform everyday tasks. They can also ensure that Seniors are using medical equipment correctly - for example, they can demonstrate proper positioning in a wheelchair.

All of these changes can take their toll on a Senior's morale. Psychiatric nurses provide emotional support and teach clients how to deal with their feelings of frustration and helplessness. They also partner with other Caretenders professionals to provide education and moral support to caregivers, as they play a crucial role in a Senior's outlook on life.

"Having an expert team of Caretenders clinicians that specialize in working with senior adults needing transitional support can help seniors sustain good health by incorporating proven techniques, like thorough mental/physical assessments, support counseling and engagement in meaningful activity," said Swirbul.



"I wondered if my family could manage all the care I needed after leaving the hospital."



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- Can you elaborate on your connection to FGC?
 - o Haven invests in future healthcare professionals by providing college students with internships, clinical rotations, course instruction, lectures and scholarships. Part of the FGC nursing program rotation schedule includes time in the Haven Suwannee Valley Hospice Care Center and visiting Haven patients wherever they call home.
- How long have you been involved with the college in this capacity?
 - o Haven has participated in the scholarship program for about five years.
- What led you to give, specifically to FGC and for this cause?
 - o There are still many misconceptions around hospice care. Through Haven's educational partnership with FGC, future healthcare professionals can be knowledgeable about hospice care and can experience the impact that care has on individuals and families firsthand.
- You give, and as such, you have changed lives. Can you elaborate on how your giving to FGC has impacted your business? What have you received in return?
 - o Recently, Haven has seen a growing awareness of hospice care in local healthcare organizations due to our partnership with FGC. When professionals and students can articulate the positive impact hospice care can have on individuals and families, their communications assist in eroding the social stigma of having end-of-life discussions in our community. Haven's educational partnership also encourages those students who are passionate about hospice care to join our team of associates after graduation.
- If you could offer information or wisdom to a potential donor to The Foundation for FGC, what would you say? What would you share with that individual?
 - o An investment in the FGC Foundation is an investment in not only individual students and their future but also in the economic development of our local community.
- What would you like to tell students, perhaps a recipient of your donation?
 - o Four Things:
 - Be a Servant Leader -- Remember the impact that your community had on your success and pay it forward.
 - Be Humble -- Recognize that success in life is not your own, but a shared success by all those who helped inspire, support and develop you.
 - Be Accountable -- Own your failures and remember that failure is your successfully eliminating an incorrect method. When you get it right, it will mean more to those around you who witnessed your perseverance through adversity.
 - Be Relentless -- Hustle and work like it could all go away tomorrow.

Joseph Brooks

Joseph Brooks, Haven



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