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# THE OAKLEAF

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Thursday, February 22, 2018

Vol. 5 • No. 02

## New principals, same principles

Clay Principal of the Year to lead new school

By Alex Wilson  
*The Oakleaf*

OAKLEAF – After a two-month search, School Superintendent Addison Davis discovered what he believes is the perfect candidate for Clay County’s newest school.

Tracy McLaughlin, former principal of Ridgeview Elementary and Clay County School District 2017 Principal of the Year, will be the first principal of Discovery Oaks Elementary School. The \$25 million school is currently under construction in the Eagle Landing area of Oakleaf and is on track to open this coming August.

‘I’m extremely excited and hon-

ored to represent the district and open a new school,” McLaughlin said. “As it’s becoming more and more apparent, it’s a big responsibility. We’re making a lot of decisions, not only what we are going to put in the classroom, but what curriculum are we going to lead with.”

Discovery Oaks is the first new school to be built in Clay County since Oakleaf High opened on August 26, 2010 for the 2010-11 school year. The school will help ease crowding at other Oakleaf area elementary schools, including Plantation Oaks and Oakleaf Village.

**SEE PRINCIPAL, 11**



STAFF PHOTO BY ALEX WILSON

Discovery Oaks Elementary Principal Tracy McLaughlin, right, discusses school construction progress Jan. 30 with Bryce Ellis, left, project manager for the Clay County School District.



STAFF PHOTO BY ALEX WILSON

Erik Williams, 10, a fifth grader at St. Johns Country Day School, center, won the 2018 Clay County Spelling Bee on Jan. 30. He is joined, from left, by School Superintendent Addison Davis, School Board Vice Chair Betsy Condon, board members Ashley Gilhousen, Mary Bolla, Janice Kerekes and Board Chair Carol Studdard.

## Spelling Bee goes 59 rounds

By Alex Wilson  
*The Oakleaf*

OAKLEAF – Beneath the glow of fluorescent lights in an elementary school cafeteria, two students battled each other valiantly on the stage in front of the packed cafetorium, not with weapons, but with words.

The 2018 Clay County Spelling Bee began Jan. 30 with 36 students, but in one of the longest county spelling bees in recent memory, a total of 59 rounds played out. The night

concluded with the final 23 rounds featuring a rapid-fire duel between Erik Williams, 10, of St. Johns Country Day School and Josiah Ilagan of Lakeside Junior High.

The third finalist, Alexis Grimm of Oakleaf Junior High, lasted until round 26, but was eliminated after misspelling “keelhaul.” In the final round, Ilagan misspelled “kuruma” and Williams went on to secure the

**SEE BEE, 8**

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# CSX, Amtrak sued after Orange Park conductor's death

By Wesley LeBlanc  
The Oakleaf

JACKSONVILLE – Christine Cella, the widow of an Orange Park conductor is suing Amtrak and CSX after a collision between an Amtrak passenger train and an unmanned CSX freight train.

Michael Cella, 36, died when the train he was conducting, Amtrak Train 91, was diverted onto a side track where a CSX freight train sat stopped at 2:35 a.m. on Feb. 4 near Cayce, South Carolina. The collision also killed 54-year-old train engineer Michael Kempf of Savannah, Ga. and injured 116 passengers.

At a news conference held the day after the accident, National Transportation Safety Board Chairman Robert Sumwalt said that CSX had given up track authority to the upcoming Amtrak Train 91 before the collision.

“[CSX] said we’re through which would indicate that they’ve done everything they need to do,” Sumwalt said.

Sumwalt continued stating that procedure, in this situation, would have dictated that the switch be returned to its original state, which would have allowed Amtrak Train 91 to continue straight ahead on the



This aerial photograph of the Amtrak train that crashed into a CSX train near Cayce, South Carolina Feb. 4 shows the carnage that the crash caused. The crash killed 36-year-old Michael Cella, of Orange Park, who was conductor of Amtrak Train 91 when it collided with a CSX freight train. Also killed in the crash was train engineer Michael Kempf, 54, of Savannah, Georgia. Cella's widow is suing for damages in circuit court.

track as planned. Instead, the switch was pulled and never returned to its original state.

The lawsuit filed by Cella's attorney, Howard Spier of Miami, cites the negligence of the switch as the cause of the collision.

“On or about February 4, 2018... the train was improperly and unex-

pectedly diverted into a side track known as the Silica Siding by means of a mainline switch which...was carelessly, negligently and recklessly misaligned and locked in reverse position towards the Silica Siding and away from the mainline track by [CSX employees],” states the 14-page lawsuit filed in the Fourth Judicial Circuit

Court on Feb. 8.

CSX's failure to return the switch to its mainline position is not the only cause of this problem, though, according to Spier.

“In normal conditions, this area is signaled meaning that there are track signals to guide the engineer down the track,” Spier said. “A signal suspension was in place meaning the upcoming area was dark territory.”

Dark territory is an area where train signals are out of operation – usually for maintenance and upgrade purposes – and when this happens, a dispatcher – in this case a CSX dispatcher – should inform the engineer that there is a signal suspension. The engineer is not permitted to proceed until the dispatcher releases their authority on the track segment in question.

In this specific instance, Spier said the CSX dispatcher yielded their authority to Amtrak Train 91, which means the track switch had been realigned to its normal position – not diverted to the side track – and the train should be able to proceed forward. Unfortunately, the track switch had not been realigned to its normal position, despite CSX giving up track

**SEE TRAIN, 8**

## Federal agent shares story to inspire students

By Wesley LeBlanc  
The Oakleaf

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – A federal agent who was shot five times last year is now sharing his story with students.

Aviation Enforcement Agent Anthony “Drew” Stokes spoke to students in the Clay High School Academy of Criminal Justice on Feb. 13 about the day last September when he was the target of a random ambush that ultimately placed him in a coma for weeks.

Clay High is only one stop on Stokes' tour where he plans to share his story in an effort to inspire future law enforcers and work through his

PTSD at the same time. According to Stokes, speaking to others about that fateful day is the best form of therapy he can get. Stokes begins the story by telling students about going to the grocery store.

On September 26, 2017 Stokes was heading back to his car with both hands full of groceries from the Oakleaf Publix when he heard someone yell, “I hate cops!” out the driver side window of a black SUV. Stokes immediately dropped his bags and reached for his holstered gun but before he could draw the weapon, a bullet entered his right side and

**SEE INSPIRE, 6**



STAFF PHOTOS BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Aviation Enforcement Agent Anthony “Drew” Stokes points to his left arm on Feb. 13 to show on the places on his body where he was hit last September after coming out of the Oakleaf Publix supermarket. He shared his story with Clay High criminal justice students.



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# 'Thanks to God'

Single mother finds housing stability through Habitat for Humanity

By Wesley LeBlanc  
The Oakleaf

MIDDLEBURG – Although she had put in almost 300 hours using power tools and paint brushes, Stephanie Mabey had no idea which house would be hers.

And then, around Thanksgiving last year, Clay County Habitat for Humanity was finally told that the house she had been working on all along was going to be hers and her family's.

"Originally, I thought I was going to get a three-bedroom home but they said, 'for the year that you've been through, we would like to offer you the four-bedroom,'" Mabey said. "That was the house I had been working on and I was just so excited."

This house didn't become a home until last Friday, when Habitat for Humanity officials held a dedication celebration in Mabey's honor. It was here that Mabey was officially handed the keys to the house on Timothy Street where she had already logged hour upon hour of sweat equity.

With more than 60 guests ranging from family and friends to contractors and builders – and a handful of employees from Publix, which sponsored house – Mabey and her two daughters, Kosiah and Iysahn Horton, were presented with house-warming gifts from Habitat for Humanity.

Mabey was given a hammer – equipped with a green handle that matched the green accent paint of her home, a color idea that came from the Publix team, along with a Bible, a candle, a cookbook and among other items, of course, a key.

As tears fell down Mabey's cheeks, her daughters stood by and smiled culminating a journey that began in October 2016.

"Thanks to God, to Clay Habitat, to my family and friends, to my church and to everyone that helped us get here today," Mabey said. "I just want my daughters to have a home and all of you helped make that happen."

Previously, Mabey and her daughters moved from place to place, paying rent, something Mabey hated as she felt she was wasting money on something that would never be hers.

"I don't have to [pay rent] anymore," Mabey said. "I can call this house mine."

Mabey's mom was particularly excited about this.

"She's been renting and moving around a lot," said Maureen Tango,

Mabey's mother. "I couldn't be more excited that my daughter and my grandchildren finally have a place that is theirs and only theirs."

Despite no longer paying rent each month, Mabey does still have a monthly house payment to make as part of the standard Habitat for Humanity program rules.

"Our clients have to make their mortgage payment each month, just like any other homeowners, and if they default, we have to take the house back," said Carolyn Edwards Clay County Habitat for Humanity Director executive director. "We act as the mortgage company in this situation and our clients know that."

Edwards said that every client is given months of preparation for this, though. Each client has to have a credit score in the low 600s, which Habitat for Humanity will help make happen if it isn't already there. They must also have a minimum monthly income of \$2,200 and if they have a bankruptcy in their past, it must have been discharged within the last three years.

Financials aside, no client can have a felony conviction on their record within the past seven years and they must commit to volunteering 300 hours for a single person or 500 hours for a couple.

After paying at least half of the down payment, which is \$1,100, and completing half of the required volunteer hours, the client then selects a lot from the available properties and begins work on their home.

"All of this is to help set up our clients for success," Edwards said.

For all 41 years of its existence, that has been the goal of Habitat for Humanity.

"Our purpose is to eliminate substandard housing in Clay County and we are doing that by building and renovating affordable and decent housing," Edwards said. "We are able to do this by partnering with the community, in this case Publix and others, who provide us volunteer labor or donations, reductions on supply and service costs."

Substandard housing is defined as housing whose rent exceeds 40 percent of one's income. These situations often find houses or apartments overcrowded with poor electrical and plumbing. The structure of the house might be falling apart or might be deemed dangerous. The roof might be leaking. The air conditioner might not work. The neighborhood could be considered unsafe. All of these are factors are taken into consideration when considering one's living

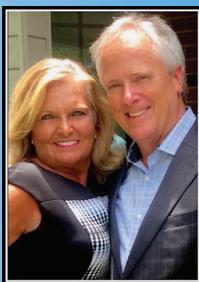


STAFF PHOTOS BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Carolyn Edwards, left, talks to guests at the Jan. 19 dedication ceremony as Stephanie Mabey and her two daughters look on anxious to move in to their new home in Middleburg.



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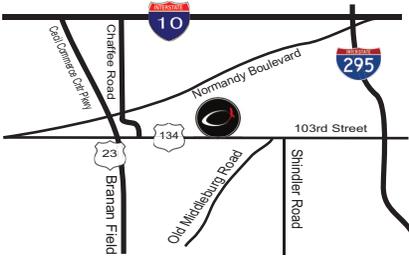
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SEE HOME, 12

## Putnam gun proposal rates 'A' for awful

By Joe Henderson  
FloridaPolitics.com

Adam Putnam may well be Florida's next Governor, that is unless voters decide his latest idea is straight out of looneyville and start asking serious questions about who he really is.

The latest ploy by this self-styled "proud NRA sellout" (his words) would be funny if it wasn't so reckless. He championed a provision in SB 740 "revising required department handling of incomplete criminal history information in relation to licensure to carry concealed fire-arms."

Translation: He wants an end run around those annoying safeguards in the law designed to keep someone with a criminal background from obtaining a concealed-weapons permit.

Under this proposal, if someone applies for a license, the state would have 90 days to complete the criminal background check. If there are no red flags in that time, the state must issue the license – even if the search hasn't been completed.

Oh, but if something bad eventually shows up, the state would revoke the license. Don't we all feel much better about that?

I mean, what possibly could go wrong?

Tell you what, while we're at it why don't we start issuing driver's licenses to people who haven't completed all the tests. And let's approve a certificate of occupancy for new buildings even if the inspections haven't been completed. People can always move out later if inspectors find the skyscraper is held together with school paste.

These regulations exist to protect the public. No one is saying a law-abiding citizen can't get a concealed weapons permit, but there is a procedure that must be followed in the name of common sense.



Joe Henderson

SEE PROPOSAL, 5

## Opinions



## Pulling out of HB 7069 suit is bad for teachers

By Juliet Cassidy-Floyd, Ph.D.

There is a popular question asked of teachers in any kind of interview: Why did you start teaching? And the answer is supposed to be altruistic, "I had a calling," "I was inspired by my 7th grade English teacher," "I wanted to do something important with my life." I never answer this question correctly. I answer with the truth: my husband was a public servant as a police officer, and as such he worked long, irregular hours. We had five small children, so I chose a job to be on their schedule. While my family worried if my husband would come home from putting his life on the line for the public every day, I became the stable parent; the one our kids and their teachers could count on. And becoming a public school teacher gave me that opportunity.



Juliet Cassidy-Floyd

What I have never said is

something magical happened to me that first year teaching. I fell in love. I fell in love with the young man who told me he did not think education beyond high school was for him, and is now an electrician helping to restore power to Puerto Rico. I fell in love with a young woman who had her baby in December and finished out the school year to graduate in May. I fell in love with countless students whose stories were varied, but who persevered and were resilient. They allowed me to touch their lives, while filling mine.

Over the course of my 16 years in public education I run into these students, and their budding families, and while I sometimes don't remember them, they remember me. "Ms. Cassidy, you were the only class I ever made an A in. I didn't know I could do that." "Ms. Cassidy, me and my friend tried so hard to get in trouble in your class, but you wouldn't let us. You always expected more of us." "Ms. Cassidy, I'll never forget the time you made us learn (enter what you will here). I loved doing that."

SEE HB 7069, 5



Word of the Week is a feature that aims to help readers boost their vocabulary in a meaningful way that has practical application. Each week, our editorial staff presents a word, its definition and its use in a sentence.

**Temerity:** An adjective meaning "a rash or reckless act."

"After he had the temerity to dispute the company's policies, Ed was forced to resign from his position as company treasurer."

## Letter to the Editor

### Reader concerned about children's health care

In 2015, the Rick Scott administration removed 13,000 children from the Children's Medical Services program.

CMS is a collection of programs that serve children with special health care needs. These children were referred to different Medicaid plans and many suffered because these new plans did not cover necessary surgeries or specialists vital to their care.

Pediatricians and parents claimed the reason for the switch was to funnel taxpayer money into the cof-

SEE LETTER, 5

## This Week in History

### 5 years ago, 2013

One day after the Florida Department of Health told Orange Park Medical Center to shut down its level two trauma center, hospital officials took part in a DOH workshop to again plea their case to continue

SEE HISTORY, 7

### Send us a letter ...

We'd like to hear from you. Perhaps you are concerned about the county commission, the school board or your city council or commission, sit down and take a few moments to write us a letter.

All we ask is that you keep it civil, no name-calling and write no more than 600 words. All we ask is that you stick to local issues, be clear and make a point. We reserve the right to edit for AP Stylebook errors, grammar and spelling. In your email, type Letter to the Editor in your subject and send it to Managing Editor Eric Cravey at eric@opcfca.com. We look forward to hearing from you!

### Opinions

The views and opinions expressed on this page are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Clay Today.



## Proposal

from page 4

“Obviously, we’re not trying to make an easier path for anyone who shouldn’t have a concealed-weapons permit,” state Sen. Kelli Stargel told the Tampa Bay Times. “Nobody wants anyone who shouldn’t have one to have one.”

Except, well, this bill would make it an easier path. That’s kind of the whole point.

Of course, we know why Putnam is doing this. After nearly two full terms as Florida’s agriculture secretary where he often came across as moderate and reasoned, Putnam has his sights set on a higher office.

To become the Republican nominee for governor, he has to first win the primary. He has two likely opponents – U.S. Rep. Ron DeSantis of Jacksonville and House Speaker Richard Corcoran. Neither one will be considered moderate.

DeSantis is running with the blessing and apparent endorsement of President Donald Trump and announced his candidacy on the “Fox & Friends” TV show. Corcoran, whose controversial (and racist) new TV ad depicting an illegal immigrant murdering a young woman, is pals with the Koch Brothers.

Where does that leave Putnam, who long has been considered the GOP front-runner in this race?

Well, for one thing, he is trying to shake off Trump’s support for DeSantis by calling his campaign “Florida First” (wonder where he got that idea) and speaking the president’s language with supportive tweets.

This latest maneuver could help assure Republican primary voters – often the most dedicated and conservative – that, doggone it, I’m one of you! See! I love the Second Amendment! Apparently, he does. Among other things, he is a big supporter of allowing guns to be carried on college campuses and gets an “A” rating from the NRA.

Maybe this is just politics, but primary candidate Adam Putnam is writing checks that general election candidate Adam Putnam could have to cash – starting with how to explain to a statewide electorate why he supports things like SB 740 to short-circuit measures designed to keep guns out of the wrong hands.

That gets an “A” rating too.

“A” for Awful.

■  
*Joe Henderson had a 45-year career in newspapers, including the last nearly 42 years at The Tampa Tribune in which he won numerous local, state and national writing awards. His column appears courtesy of FloridaPolitics.com.*

## HB 7069

from page 4

Public education is part of the foundation of our great democracy. When Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the intention was to close the achievement gap by providing resources for lower socioeconomic school districts ensuring all students received a high-quality education (Standerfer, 2006). Over the last 53 years, the ESEA has influenced education policy and has been the basis from which other legislation has been created (Jennings, 2015), such as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act.

And yet, 53 years later, our politicians want to dismantle the hard work and spirit of the ESEA. Fifty-three years later, people in power are trying to weaponize the very tool that was passed to equalize the masses and hold accountable school systems.

Florida HB 7069 passed in 2017 aims to move all funding from public education and siphon it into pet project schools. The bill was stuffed with so many cherry-picked initiatives, it’s mind boggling. And worse, it is illegal because the state constitution of Florida is very clear – legislation has to deal with single subjects. HB 7069 is packed full of changes to the school system. A system that is no longer doing its job as created by ESEA of holding accountable school systems for equitable education. Fifty-three years later, it has now become a system parceling out education with no oversight, and no accountability to charter schools and religious institutions.

I know this to be true. I sat at the school board meeting on February 1 where Betsy Condon brought forth an agenda item to rescind the involvement of the Clay County School Board to the lawsuit challenging HB 7069. She is so eager to dismantle public education, she did not even know

And yet, 53 years later, our politicians want to dismantle the hard work and spirit of the ESEA. Fifty-three years later, people in power are trying to weaponize the very tool that was passed to equalize the masses and hold accountable school systems.

the correct way to bring forth an agenda item.

How is it that someone so ignorant of government processes is representing the legislative arm of education on the school board? She is in clear violation of Sunshine Laws, as she made evident in the January school board meeting when she admitted to having conversations with Sen. Rob Bradley about appropriations “possibly being funneled to Clay” if they pull out of the lawsuit. There is an unmistakable ethics violation in this admission, and yet, she is not being investigated.

Her pal, Ashley Gilhousen, was almost giddy for the public hearing on this agenda item. And why wouldn’t she be? Her mother is on the board of the St. Johns Classical Academy Charter School on Fleming Island. When Gov. Jeb Bush opened the first charter school in 1996, it was touted as being an experiment in proving “parents do care and that black kids can learn, even though they may come from poverty.”

I haven’t pulled the statistics on Fleming Island, but I have frequented the area. It doesn’t look much like a poverty-stricken area, nor does it feel as diverse as the school Bush experimented with in Miami, and consequently failed to keep open. But if Gilhousen can channel money through her pet project, while still pretending to represent public education as she was elected to do, who can blame her if she is allowed to get away with it?

The biggest blow to rescinding our involvement in the lawsuit was Mary Bolla. She was voted in by teachers because in her own words “I am a teacher.” She agrees the bill was “done overnight as a backdoor agreement, with so much put into the law that betrayed public education.” As I sat and listened to her, I watched her change from a teacher into a politician right before my eyes. She

claimed to be “looking for the best interest of our children and teachers.” But then she told the truth: she was also “looking out for other taxpayers of this county.”

She no longer cared about ESEA, and Lyndon Johnson’s dream of having an equitable education for all citizens. She no longer cared about the expansion of the ESEA in to No Child Left Behind, an initiative of President George W. Bush. She only cared about her vote, and how it would affect her. There are just laws and unjust laws, and it was nothing short of disgusting to watch her align herself with the dismantling of public education.

Senate Bill 736, passed in 2011, was meant to silence teachers. My father always told me growing up to “toot my own horn.” I am blowing a horn and sounding an alarm: We will not be silenced. We will not allow lawmakers to disenfranchise an entire profession. We will not idly sit by as you take away a child’s right to a public education.

Now that I am leaving the education classroom, I have the security of knowing I can speak louder and louder, until one day, my dream, which is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream, that all persons are created equal, will be realized. And I will know we have reached that utopia when education is the priority, and not politicians with their monetary and political gains.

I am leaving the public education classroom. But I am not leaving public education. I have found my calling. I will continue to be a servant to my colleagues and students by continuing to call people out, such as Ashley Gilhousen, Betsy Condon, and Mary Bolla, who do not support public education.

**Juliet Cassidy-Floyd, Ph.D.**  
**Oakleaf Junior High**

## Letter

from page 4

fers of major donors to the Republican Party of Florida. In fact, nine of the eleven insurance plans the children were switched to were owned by insurance companies that donated a combined \$8.6 million to the Florida GOP in the five years leading up to the removal of the children from CMS to Medicaid HMOs.

Upon learning of this abhorrence, Sen. Bill Nelson immediately appealed to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to protect these children. Nelson urged HHS to exercise its oversight and enforcement authority to ensure children in Florida were appropriately enrolled in the plan that best fits their needs.

Please consider this when deciding who should represent Floridians

in the U.S. Senate. Do you want a representative who rewarded his political donors at the expense of our state’s children or do you want someone who has a track record of protecting our children? The choice for Florida’s future is clear.

**Shiela Kerr**  
**Orange Park**

## Inspire

from page 2

broke ribs on its way to his liver before settling near his T12 vertebrae.

"That bullet almost killed me," Stokes said to over 100 students who sat completely devoid of sound as all eyes were on him as he spoke.

A second bullet pierced his right buttock and tore his intestine, which later led to sepsis.

"That bullet almost killed me too and the sepsis that followed tried hard as well," Stokes said.

A third bullet entered Stokes' right hip and stopped there. A fourth bullet shattered his left hip and passed out the back of his right leg. The fifth bullet passed through his left forearm. Three of these five

bullets remain with Stokes today, a constant reminder of the day his life could have ended but more importantly, a reminder that he was still alive.

The final bullet is the bullet that killed Stokes' attempted-assailant, 18-year-old Thomas Jacob Lewis IV, who attempted to drive away after the drive-by shooting but chose to end his life when he couldn't escape.

Stokes said it could have been any cop that Lewis shot that day but he was glad it was him.

"He got me that day and personally, I'm glad he did, because I made it through it," Stokes said. "I would take five bullets for my brothers any day of the week and if I can take it instead of them, I would do it again."

Lewis, who was peddling drugs,

had a warrant issued for his arrest the morning of Sept. 26. When Lewis found out about the warrant, he called his girlfriend and told her he was going to kill another drug dealer or a cop that day. Shortly after that call, he tweeted, "It's payback time."

Lewis didn't find the drug dealer he was searching for but he found Stokes that day.

In the following months, Stokes explained to the students that he lost all of his blood in the Orange Park Medical Center twice. Volunteers from local, regional and nationwide agencies donated blood to help keep him alive. Although he remained in a coma for weeks, Stokes received a call from Governor Rick Scott and the Jacksonville Jaguars. He said it was easy for him to decide what was next.

"There was never a doubt that I was coming back [to work]," Stokes said. "This is what I'm meant to do."

When Stokes opened up the floor for student questions, most students asked what it was like getting shot, what it was like waking up from a coma and more. Some students asked if Stokes thought he was going to die that day. He told multiple people on Sept. 26 that he was not going to

die. Every student, though, left that cafeteria inspired that Stokes, despite all odds, despite facing death, persevered and stands today to not only tell the story, but pick up right where he left off.

"It makes me happy and keeps me inspired that there are people out there strong enough to do that," said Alyssa Pruitt, a Criminal Justice sophomore who hasn't decided if she wants to be a lawyer or an officer. "He's not going to let something so big effect his life, he's not going to let the other person win and that's just incredible to hear."

Cameron Mclain, a senior, said Stokes is fearless and strong.

"Today showed me that we can always move forward," Mclain said. "It takes strength and I'm sure it's scary but look at Stokes. He did it and that's an inspiration."

When Stokes isn't covering radar for an airplane crew tasked with intercepting drug-running planes or boats, or investigating the next international waters drug bust that might lead to a 13,000 pound cocaine confiscation, he'll be at schools like Clay High, talking to students like those of the criminal justice academy, telling his story.

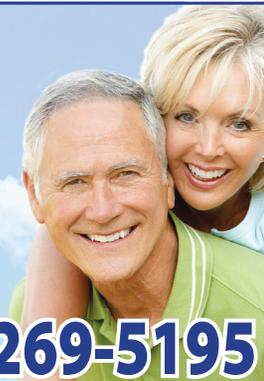
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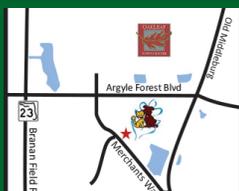
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# History

from page 4

trauma care and services.

Opponents of a zoning change that could pave the way for an asphalt plant along County Road 15A prepared for a March 5 public hearing that was to be attended by members of the local Sierra Club now interested in the subject.

Sheriff Rick Beseler laid a wreath at the gravesite of Detective David White as part of a Feb. 15 ceremony honoring White's service to the Clay

County Sheriff's Office. White was shot February 16, 2012 in a raid of a home on Alligator Boulevard in Middleburg that was found to be a methamphetamine operation.

## 10 years ago, 2008

Engineer Tony Robbins of the Jacksonville-based engineering firm Prosser Hallock told Orange Park Town Council that the town is basically built out with only 100 acres of undeveloped land remaining the town's five square miles borders.

U.S. Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Ocala) traveled to Camp Blanding to hand

out \$25 million in federal funds to help enhance the base's role in military readiness in the global war on terror.

The Blue Foundation for a Healthy Florida donated \$75,000 to the Way Free Medical Clinic in Green Cove Springs.

## 20 years ago, 1998

Orange Park Police joined Clay County Sheriff's Office deputies to apprehend James Bonnard Wells of Jacksonville who climbed an Orange Park water tower near Wells Road and threatened to jump after a lengthy police chase that started on Fleming Island.

The Clay County Sheriff's Office investigated the deaths of cattle found dead in a pasture in the 2700 block of County Road 739 in Lake Asbury.

The Board of County Commissioners approved a uniform 30 miles per hour speed limit on Moody Avenue after an engineering study supported the move, which was opposed by residents.

## 30 years ago, 1988

The Clay County Sheriff's Office investigated a drive-by shooting in the 100 block of Ursa Street near Orange Park. Jimmy Roman, 24, told officers that his mother-in-law shot him while passing by in the passenger's seat of a red pickup truck.

Fleming Island residents publicly opposed a plan by DuPont to build more than 3,000 homes on a 2,133-acre tract citing everything from air and noise pollution to strained infrastructure on schools and roads if the plan was approved.

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Just this past year, we've seen natural disasters in Texas, California, Florida and Puerto Rico – and looking back even further, it's not hard to spot other traumas in virtually every part of the country. Whether it's a tornado, hurricane, flood or wildfire, you may be at least potentially susceptible to a weather-related event that could threaten your physical – and financial – well-being. How can you protect yourself?

As far as your physical safety is concerned, you're probably already aware of the steps you need to take to shield yourself and your family. And now that many alerts can be sent directly to your smartphone, you've got an even better chance to prepare for an approaching threat. But when it comes to safeguarding your financial situation, you'll need to be ready well in advance – and the following moves can help:

**Strengthen your home.** Your home is probably your biggest asset, so you'll want to do everything you can to keep it safe. In the face of a truly calamitous event, such as hundred-mile-per-hour winds or the advance of uncontrollable fire, there may not be much you can do, but in less dire circumstances, your actions can help. Your insurance professional can offer tips on protecting your residence.

**Maintain sufficient insurance.** It's a good idea to review your existing homeowners or renters insurance periodically to make sure you are sufficiently covered for all possible hazards. Keep in mind that homeowners insurance does not typically cover flooding, so you may need to purchase flood insurance from the National Flood Insurance Program. (Depending on where you live, this coverage may be required when you get your mortgage.) Also, in conjunction with maintaining your insurance, you should document your possessions, so you

may want to make a video inventory as well as a written list containing descriptions and values.

**Create an emergency fund.** A natural disaster can lead to a wide array of unanticipated costs: appliance repair or replacement, hotel and restaurant bills, insurance deductibles – the list could go on and on. Consequently, you'll help protect yourself and your family by building an emergency fund. Some of this money should go into a liquid, low-risk account, but you may also want to keep a small amount of cash at home in a safe place, as ATMs and credit cards may not work during or following a disaster, when you must purchase needed supplies.

**Protect your documents.** As you go through life, you'll accumulate a lot of documents – mortgage papers, insurance policies, financial accounts, tax statements and so on. If disaster strikes, you may need these documents. You'll want to store paper copies in a fireproof and waterproof box or safe at home, in a bank safety deposit box, or with a relative or close friend. Of course, we're now living in a digital age, so you can store electronic copies of important documents in a password-protected format on a removable flash or external hard drive. Better yet, you might want to use a secure cloud-based service.

With luck, you can avoid being victimized by a natural disaster. But, as the old saying goes: "Hope for the best and prepare for the worst." From a financial perspective, that's good advice.

*Edward Jones, its employees and financial advisors are not estate planners and cannot provide tax or legal advice. You should consult your estate-planning attorney or qualified tax advisor regarding your situation. This article was written by Edward Jones for use by your local Edward Jones Financial Advisor.*

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## Train

from page 2

authority.

Sumwalt said that they are not attributing blame to CSX or to anyone at this time as investigations are still taking place but he did confirm that the switch was left in position to direct the train to the Selica Siding side station when it no longer should have been.

The lawsuit solely involves Cella's family on behalf of Christine Cella's self, the estate of her husband and their two children, Elena and Logan Cella. The case is an action for

damages in excess of a minimum \$15,000 – the required amount for the Circuit Court to accept the case – or greater. However, Spier said, he and the Cellas are concerned far less about money than they are answers about what happened leading up to Michael Cella's death.

"Our focus is on the who, what, when, where and how," Spier said. "The lawsuit is geared up to discover what happened here, to provide the Cella family with knowledge that they so desperately want to know to understand how this terrible and tragic accident occurred that resulted in the loss of a family member."

## Bee

from page 1

championship by correctly spelling "oleo."

While this was Williams' first county spelling bee, Ilagan is a repeat competitor who won the County Spelling Bee in 2016 by correctly spelling "powwow."

"I definitely feel great about winning, but all the contestants did great," Williams said. "There were some really hard words tonight."

Throughout the night, students correctly spelled words such as "cupolas," "cicerone," and "oologist," sometimes eliciting audible reactions from impressed onlookers. Other words such as "copis," "verdigre," and "cabochon" stumped students and knocked them out of the competition.

The spelling bee, held at Plantation Oaks Elementary, was scheduled to go until 9 p.m., but it ultimately ran about 30 minutes longer than intended. School Board Chairman Carol Studdard, who's served on the Clay County School Board for 25 years, said this was one of the longest spelling bees she can remember.

"It was exciting," Studdard said. "There were many words I've never heard before. I was very, very im-

pressed with all of our spellers."

Students used a variety of techniques to improve their chances of spelling each word. Several students, including Williams and Ilagan, visualized their words by using imaginary pens to write on their hands. Other students had different techniques. Grimm, for example, used a number system to help her spell.

"Every letter has a number, so every word has this kind of combination," Grimm said. "So, as I was spelling, if I could remember the combination to a word, then I could be sure I was spelling it right."

All three finalists emphasized how hard they prepared for the spelling bee, with some studying up to three hours a day.

"You have to really want something to get this far," Ilagan said.

To determine who competes in the Clay County Spelling Bee, students must first compete in their school spelling bee.

Both Grimm and Ilagan are in eighth grade, so this was their last year they are eligible to compete. Williams, who is in fifth grade, and Ilagan will go on represent Clay County in the Regional Spelling Bee on March 9 at the Florida Theatre in Jacksonville.



STAFF PHOTOS BY KILE BREWER

Debbie Rizer tells her son, Derek Hatcher's, story Feb. 3 at the Thrasher Horne Center during the inaugural Drug-Free Day in Clay. Rizer hopes that sharing the story of her son's addiction to and overdose from opioids will prevent other families from going through what she has been through.

## Drug-free day reaches kids with powerful message

By Kile Brewer  
The Oakleaf

ORANGE PARK – Everyone has been touched in some way by drug addiction, but all too often the users are young, successful and leave behind a wake of pain when they have overdosed or been locked in prison.

On Feb. 3, the Derek Hatcher Foundation, in partnership with Jacksonville-based City Streets 2 Student Athletes, hosted an event that was the first of its kind – Drug-Free Day in Clay.

The event, held at the Thrasher Horne Center, was aimed at parents and students throughout the county to warn them of a problem that affects parents and students just like them in Clay County and across the country every day.

In the midst of what many are calling an opioid crisis, Debbie Rizer hopes to help Clay County residents understand the unwanted side effects of the drugs for not only the users but also their families.

"When you think you're the only one that's, maybe smoking that joint or whatever," Rizer said, "there are so many people affected by that, and it's a never ending cycle that can only get worse."

She said nobody starts with heroin. They will drink some beers or smoke marijuana first, but those decisions, she said, sometimes lead to the decisions to try harder drugs and poor life decisions that

ripple through families.

Rizer doesn't want any mother to have to stand at her side and tell the same story she tells, but she knows there are others. The story is familiar, a child goes away to college or gets involved with the "wrong crowd." They slowly slip into addiction, but the parents don't notice. "Not my kid," Rizer remembers thinking when she first heard that her son, Derek Hatcher, was abusing drugs while attending the University of Arkansas.

When he was kicked out of school for drugs, she still couldn't bring herself to see him as an addict. This is something she is trying to prevent for other Clay County moms. Through her story, she hopes to encourage families to notice drug abuse and put a stop to it before it's too late.

Hatcher overdosed in 2016, but not before returning home and cleaning himself up. Rizer and her sister 'kidnapped' Derek and forced him into rehab where he sobered up and tried voraciously to prevent another kid from following the same path. "I'll never be that guy," Derek said to kids he spoke to at practices and schools in Clay County.

He repeated the phrase "just one line," throughout his speeches, just one line, the amount of heroin that it took to get him started. He thought it would just be one, but

SEE DRUG-FREE, 20

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# Fair showcases best of best in science

By **Kile Brewer**  
*The Oakleaf*

CLAY COUNTY – Last year during summer break, Ridgeview High School senior Jason Chen emailed NASA.

Chen was working on his project for this year's science fair and wanted to see if they had the equation he was developing. They didn't.

The math that makes up his project could help determine the optimal location for solar-powered bases on the moon by solving for the amount of sunlight that reaches any given point on a sphere. Should he make it to the state science fair competition, Chen will further develop the idea into a computer programming language that would take the math and put it in a practical form that NASA could actually use in mission planning.

"It's just really complicated math," Chen said when introducing his project. "Theoretically, this could work for not just our moon but other

moons, and with some tweaking, for other planets and celestial bodies."

Chen was among a couple hundred of his peers at the Clay County Rotary Science Fair held Feb. 6 at the Clay County Fairgrounds. This year, a total of 274 combined entries were accepted into both the junior and senior high divisions. Of those 274, only 14 will be selected to move forward to the state level of competition, according to Rotarian organizer Lillian Bell. This year's event was actually a first in that the judges not only selected the winners at the county level, but also selected the 14 projects that they think would do well at state.

"So far it looks like things are running pretty smoothly," Bell said about an hour into the fair. "This combined judging is something that has not happened before."

Bell said the combined Rotary groups from around the county start planning the event in November each year, then representatives from each



STAFF PHOTO BY KILE BREWER

Clay County School Superintendent Addison Davis tours the Junior High School section of the Clay Rotary Science Fair Tuesday morning at the county fairgrounds.



At right, Ridgeview High School senior Jason Chen presents his science fair project to judges Mitch Timberlake, mayor of Green Cove Springs, and Patrick Hayle from Mercy Support Services during the Clay Rotary Science Fair on Feb. 6.

Rotary group go into their respective communities to recruit judges and get sponsors for the fair.

Projects range from the more serious technical applications of math and physics, like Chen's project, to things more lighthearted on the junior high side such as attracting animals with light and whether or not fidget spinner toys affect students' concentration at school. However, many judges and even school administrators were baffled by the complexity of some of the projects and the perceived advancement in learning since science fairs held decades ago.

"This proves that our teachers are getting kids actively engaged in STEM initiatives, and it just shows that they care," said Clay County School Superintendent Addison Davis. "Our kids are more intellectu-

ally sophisticated than I was, they would've blown my project away."

As he walked from one tri-fold piece of cardboard to the next, Davis was in awe at the level of thinking going on throughout Clay County schools, and stood proud to be at the helm of a school district producing such competent young people.

"Science is becoming a bigger part of our everyday lives," Davis said. "These kids are learning quick thinking, and problem solving, but also learning to engage with adults as well as public speaking."

The State Science and Engineering Fair will be held the last week in March in Lakeland where the 14 students selected from Clay County will participate with students from across the state prior to the international level of competition in June.

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# Big box retailer offers Clay shoppers new choice

By Wesley LeBlanc  
The Oakleaf

JACKSONVILLE – Oakleaf and Argyle residents will have another warehouse retailer to choose from beginning next week.

On Feb. 8, a brand-new 154,568 square foot Costco Wholesale will open in West Jacksonville on Parramore Road near Collins Road at Interstate 295.

Described as a membership warehouse, this Costco is the second in Jacksonville with the original store being more than 20 miles away near the St. Johns Town Center. The westside store is the retailers' 26th in Florida, its 519th in the U.S. and its 747th worldwide.

This new location is not only bringing name-brand groceries, electronics and its many different private label items, it's also creating 135 jobs.

"We hired 135 off the street and we will open with a staff of about 225 to 235," said Jason Zook, general manager.

Costco began planning for the store last May and broke ground last

August. The company bought the 16-acre site for \$3.44 million and total construction costs were \$12.6 million.

Along with shopping for groceries, Clay County commuters have access to a new tire center, an optometrist, a hearing aid facility, a pharmacy, a deli, a bakery and a food court. One difference between this Costco and the one near the St. Johns Town Center is that this one has a gas station to accommodate 16 vehicles at one time.

Zook said, while every household is different, Costco works hard to make it a family's one-stop shop. Costco now gets to compete with Sam's Wholesale Club on Youngerman Circle and BJ's Wholesale Club about six miles south on Blanding Boulevard.

Because it's a warehouse concept, Costco is different from such retailers as Walmart, Winn Dixie, Publix or Aldi. Regional Marketing Manager Kelly Frasure said the company's difference is quality.

"We are known for quality," Frasure said. "We really work hard



Chas Riggleman, marketing manager for the new Costco store, and Kelly Frasure, right, Costco retail marketing manager, are all smiles Jan. 25 at a media tour of the new store off Collins Road.

with our vendors, and we are pretty demanding, but we are always looking at how can we make something better and drive down the price.

"We work to achieve the highest quality at the lowest price," Frasure said.

According to Zook, Costco, at any time, carries around 4,000 products – which is considerably less Walmart

– but because of that lower number, each product is the best in its category.

"Everything that we sell, or most of what we sell, is in pallet quantity and they have to be the top item in that category for it to justify taking a space," Zook said.

Costco has its own brand of

SEE COSTCO, 13

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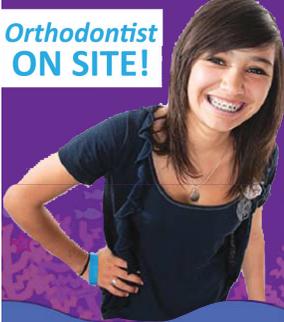


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# Principal

from page 1

McLaughlin, who has spent the last four years as Ridgeview Elementary's principal, is a seasoned educator with 25 years in education, with 12 of those years being in Clay County. She started her career in Clay as the assistant principal of Montclair Elementary and was then promoted to serve as principal of Swimming Pen Creek Elementary School where she was for four years. She started her career teaching high school English and ESE in Maine. When she started looking for a job in Florida, McLaughlin felt she could make a bigger difference as an administrator. "In the classroom you make a significant impact on a group of about 25 to 30 kiddos a year," McLaughlin said. "I knew for myself that I always liked the bigger picture and the bigger vision. I felt that I had the skill set and the knowledge and experience to offer more."

McLaughlin's performance after settling in Clay proved that this was more than just a feeling. For example, during her time at Ridgeview, she led the way for the school to improve from a B to an A in one year.

Superintendent Addison Davis said McLaughlin's ability to impact school culture, as well as create and

envision goals, separated her from the other candidates.

"We're fortunate to have a veteran principal," Davis said. "She'll use those tools to create one of the best elementary schools in the state."

The current vision calls for developing Discovery Oaks as a STEAM school where Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Math are the driving force behind curriculum. McLaughlin believes she has a strong vision for Discovery Oaks, but her main concern is creating an environment conducive to learning.

"Building a positive culture is really important," McLaughlin said. "Leadership is about inspiring others to follow. You can't lead people if they don't believe in your message. I think that building a positive culture has always been really important to me."

As McLaughlin gears up to make the transition to Discovery Oaks, she leaves Ridgeview Elementary in equally capable hands. Heather Roche, a Florida native with 12 years of experience in Clay County Schools, is already on the job as Ridgeview's principal.

"I'm fortunate to be taking over [as principal] mid-year when the wheels are already in motion," Roche said. "Things are running smoothly here, so right now my focus is to

## Discovery Oaks by the Numbers:

**33.3**  
acre campus

**862**  
student capacity

**114,000+**  
square feet

**46**  
classrooms

**\$25 Million**  
construction cost

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Source: Clay County School District

build relationships with the community."

Roche previously served as Copergate Elementary School's assistant principal, but she started her career in at Tynes Elementary, where she served as a reading coach before moving into administration.

Like McLaughlin, Roche strives to create a positive learning environment and is grateful for McLaughlin's work.

"What Ridgeview is doing and has been doing is working well," Roche said. "One [goal] is to maintain a positive morale and culture here for

the staff and the students. I want it to be a positive place to learn and where student achievement is a high priority."

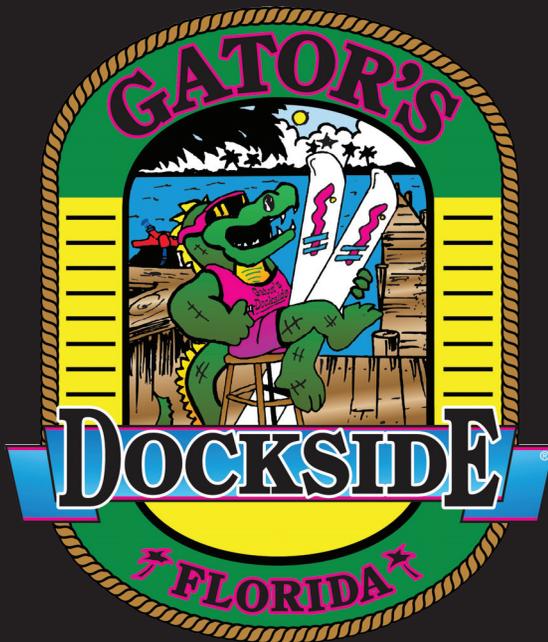
Davis said the district used the same process to find candidates for McLaughlin's replacement as they did for finding the new principal for Discovery Oaks.

"[Roche's] knowledge of how to work as an instructional coach allowed her to build the capacity of her staff members while also building a culture of care," said Davis, adding that Roche will continue McLaughlin's work.

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## Home

from page 3

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Family, friends, supporters and staff of Clay County Habitat for Humanity toured Stephanie Mabey’s new home Jan. 19 during a dedication ceremony. Mabey logged almost 300 hours in helping build the home.

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# Costco

from page 10

products, Kirkland Signature, a brand created in an effort to maximize quality in Costco products.

“We are very finicky about [Kirkland Signature],” Frasure said. “It has to be equal with or better than the competition. We are trying to maintain the highest quality while keeping it at the cheapest price possible.”

Zook calls Kirkland Signature the highest quality product in the wholesale store. He also says that Costco employees are also of the highest quality and he attributes that to the company’s ability to keep turnover rates low.

“After the first year, there’s not a lot of turnover,” Zook said, who has been with Costco for 33 years. “We have the best employees on the market.”

Frasure said employees start at \$13 an hour, and regardless of employment status, be it part-time or full-time, every employee has access to benefits.

Last year, Forbes magazine named Costco “America’s Best Employer,” a title previously held by Google.

Chas Riggleman, the marketing manager for the new store, began his time with Costco a few years back. When tragedy in his family occurred, Costco did something that sticks with him still today.

“My wife’s grandmother passed away and I showed up to work, because that’s what you do, and somehow upper management found out,” Riggleman said. “They called me into the office and sent me home with three day’s pay and it stuck there.

“I work for an amazing company,” Riggleman said. “I didn’t go looking for it and I didn’t ask about it but they took care of me.”



STAFF PHOTOS BY WESLEY LEBLANC

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STAFF PHOTOS BY RANDY LEFKO

OAKLEAF high batter Lauren Wexler heads to third base after hitting the run triple in Knights' 8-7 pre-season win over Baker County.

## District 2-8A Softball

# Knights on path of repeat?

By **Randy Lefko**  
*The Oakleaf*

OAKLEAF – With a handful of top tier graduates that are on college rosters this spring, the Oakleaf High softball team will probably not blink when it comes to keeping the program success at the highest level.

“The one difference is that the graduated players all played together for a long time,” said Oakleaf coach Christina Thompson, the Dairy Farmer coach of the year last year after guiding the Lady Knights to the Class 8A title, a 30-2 final record and an occasional USA No. 1 ranking. “New players have to step up this year, but the junior varsity has not lost in three years. We are stilling going to have one of the toughest schedules as always.”

Gone is all-everything pitcher Kelsey Sweatt, now a University of South Carolina-Upstate; Mika Garcia,

shortstop and a Clay Today player of year now at University of West Florida and Alex Acevedo, second baseman now at Florida Atlantic University as well as stalwarts Haley Willis, catcher; Tracey Ferguson, outfielder and Jenna Curtis, outfielder.

Returning is a battering ram of batter's box prowess led by junior Baylee Goddard, Rebecca Koskey and speedy Destiny Pacetti as well as power hitter Angela Agurkis.

Goddard, Koskey, Pacetti and Agurkis will be the core leaders of a lineup of players that just signed college scholarships last week.

Pitcher Madi Davis, a junior, was unbeaten in 10 outings behind Sweatt last year and an All-State selection. Junior Cambria Arturo threw the Knights to the district title last year and will need to ascend to the big time this year.

**SEE SOFTBALL, 17**

## District 4-8A Basketball

# OHS, FIHS, both lose in district semifinals

By **Randy Lefko**  
*The Oakleaf*

FLEMING ISLAND - Both Fleming Island and Oakleaf high school boys basketball teams roared out on to the court to impressive displays of aggressive defense to lead in their district 4-8A semifinal contests, but the fast pace may have been costly as both teams lost; Oakleaf 35-29 to Bartram Trail and Fleming Island 57-44.

In other district action, Orange

Park was to play Ridgeview on Wed., Feb. 14 at Wolfson in the district 4-6A semifinal while Clay was to play Ponte Vedra also on Wed., Feb. 14 at Matanzas High School in the district 5-6A semifinal. In district 3-7A, Middleburg lost to Nease 56-45 on Mon, Feb. 12 to end their season. In district 4-5A, Keystone Heights lost to Fort White 60-48 at Bradford County High School on Mon., Feb. 12. In district 2-3A, St. Johns Country Day School lost 76-63 to Christ's Church Academy.

In the first game of the double-header at Fleming Island High School, Oakleaf got an impressive five blocked shots from center Chantz Williams in their opening stanza against Bartram Trail as the



Oakleaf high guard deonte Sherwood battles for loose ball against bartram trail in district semifinal loss by knights at Fleming island high school. Loss ended knights season.

**SEE HOOPS, 16**

## Hoops

from page 15

Knights bolted to a 9-5 first quarter lead behind a three pointer from guard Deonte Sherwood and steals to layups from Kenny Thomas.

Oakleaf kept pace to lead 17-16 at the halftime break with guard Saich Williams converting a nifty layup and a foul shot to end the half.

Bartram Trail started finding their sweet spot as the third ended at 25-25 with the momentum swing guided by the Bears who found the baseline behind Williams for layups.

Bartram Trail shut down the Knights scoring at 29 points for the final 2:42 with a 5-0 run to end the game.

In the second game, Fleming

Island (18-13) took district leader Creekside (22-4) with their own aggressive moving zone defense, but the Knights led 12-8 after the first period despite Josh Deleon's opening three pointer exciting the Golden Eagle gym.

New to the Fleming Island lineup was junior varsity player Aaron Brown, a 6-3 center who manned the inside lanes admirably with key rebounds and defensive fronts. Brown also hit a layup plus a free throw with 32 seconds left to the break.

The Knights got handfuls of three-pointers from guards Noah Lippy and J'Michael Plummer to push ahead to a 23-15 halftime lead.

In the third, with 1:47 left in the quarter, Fleming Island had fought back to as close as 33-25 in the low scoring contest and an anticipated



Oakleaf center Chantz Williams tries to get off a shot against Bartram Trail in the Knights' season-ending loss in district semi-finals.

fourth quarter run seemed imminent.

A driving layup from Sebastian Astor closed the gap to 36-31 as the fourth quarter started, but Creekside kept the six point buffer to the five minute mark with a dunk from center DJ Dumas getting a time out from

Fleming Island coach Traavis Chandler. In the final two furious minutes, Creekside took advantage of Fleming Island ballhandling miscues to surge ahead, but Deleon shouldered on with a layup and a three pointer to end the game at 57-44.

## Lady Knights season ends in district semifinals

By Ray DiMonda  
*The Oakleaf*

FLEMING ISLAND – Oakleaf High School's Lady Knights basketball team got off to a great start against the Bartram Trail in the first half of their district 4-8A semifinal game on Thurs., Feb. 8 as the Lady Knights defense kept the scoring of Bartram isolated to only a single player who put up eight points. Then inexplicably, the wheels fell off. Oakleaf (21-5) fell into a hole and using everything they had, couldn't climb out as Bartram Trail rolled to a 49-46 win to end the Knights season.

"That's it. We turned the ball over." Said Oakleaf Head Coach Frank Jenkins. "Coach keeps the stats and we had too many turnovers. That's it. End of story."

The series of errors helped Bartram Trail to rack up an 18 point fourth quarter that ended the Knight's season.

In the first half, it was Oakleaf's Jalisa Lee who was hot with six points to help her team get ahead and hold the 10-9 lead at the end of the first. In the second quarter, Andrea Diaz Merced and Sabrina Littles teamed up to hit outside both putting a pair of 3-pointers on the board for the Knights. Add in Dajah Oden and the Lady Knights had a strong 18 point second quarter. Going into halftime, the Knights amassed a 28-23 lead and looked in control of the game.

At the end of three, the Knights

SEE SEMIFINAL, 17



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## Semifinal

from page 16

still had a nice lead at 38-31, but the girls just weren't hitting all the shots they needed.

In the final quarter of play, the Knights took almost two minutes to hit some points. Meanwhile, Bartram Trail began hitting inside, coming down with rebounds and had a couple three-pointers drop. The Bears narrowed the lead to 40-37 at 5:34 left.

With 5:12 left, Bartram Trail stole the ball, executed a lay-up and brought the Bears to one point of Oakleaf's 40-39 lead.

At 4:22, Jenkins called a timeout to settle his team down and address some concerns. When the team broke huddle, Bartram Trail hit a three-pointer to put the Bears up 42-40 with 3:27 left. Oakleaf's Sabrina Littles hit a layup at 2:51 to tie it back up and give the fans hope, only to have the Bears come back



Oakleaf High girls basketball coach Frank Jenkins makes a point in second half action of lady knights district semifinal loss.

and hit another three-pointer with 2:07 left giving them the lead, 45-42.

Dajah Oden hit for two at 1:33 to pull the Ladies back to within a single

point, 45-44. Off the ensuing rebound with under a minute to play, Oakleaf sailed a 3-pointer that missed. When the Bears came down with the ball, the Knights allowed them to ball handle all the way down 14.9 seconds before they stopped the clock with an intentional foul. Bartram's Bella Weary drained both shots to put the Bears up 47-44. With 11 ticks left, Oakleaf drained another inside shot to bring it to 47-46. With 4.7 seconds left in the game, Bartram threw the ball inbounds the full length of the court where Jalisa Lee was standing. The ball slipped out of her hands, into the lap of a Bear's player and Lee intentionally fouled her with 2.9 seconds remaining.

When the Bears went to the line, they missed, giving the Knights another life. Time was not on their side. The ball would go out of bounds off an Oakleaf player. On the throw-in, Oakleaf again intentionally fouled with .9 seconds left. Bartram's Grace Tyloor hit the 1+1 for the 49-46 lead.

## Softball

from page 15

Arturo started in Oakleaf's preseason match against Baker County and needed relief from Davis to push the Knights to an 8-7 win with a seventh inning run-scoring hit from JC Brookshire. Oakleaf's Lauren Wexler smashed a bases-loaded triple in the first inning as the Knights exploded to a 5-0 lead, but the Wildcats came back to tie with five runs in the third. Oakleaf beat West Nassau 5-0 in the preseason opener.

### Schedule

Feb. 22 at Mandarin  
Feb. 23 at Lee  
Feb. 27 at Atlantic Coast  
Feb. 28 vs. Fletcher

In the district, Fleming Island and Atlantic Coast remain as key threats. Atlantic Coast lost twice to the Knights; in the district final and 10-0 in the region semifinal.

Oakleaf will host a Tournament of Champions and return to the Kissimmee Klassic to defend that title plus have 1A state champion Union County on their schedule.

The Tournament of Champions, set for March 16-17 features state powers such as West Orange (9A champ), West Nassau (5A regions), Trinity Christian (4A Final Four), Aucilla Christian (2A runnerup), Lakewood Ranch (7A Region final-



One key returner for Oakleaf high girls softball is third baseman baylee Goddard, pictured hitting in Oakleaf preseason win over baker county February 10 at Oakleaf preseason tournament.

ist), Hardee (5A regions), Ponte Vedra (6A Final Four) and Oakleaf (8A champs).

### Golden Eagles to rely on senior returners

FLEMING ISLAND - Fleming Island High's softball defense lost catcher Jordan Hunt and infielder Tiffany Steczo to graduation but return five key players that can aptly fill the gap.

Hunt takes with her a .414 batting average with Steczo tops on the team at .439.

Third baseman Morgan Grimm

### Schedule

Feb. 9 vs. Keystone Heights (at Oakleaf preseason)  
Feb. 20 at Atlantic Coast  
Feb. 28 at Ponte Vedra

### District 2-8A (2017)

Oakleaf (31-2, 10-1)  
Fleming Island (9-11, 4-6)  
Lee (0-11, 0-10)  
Atlantic Coast (16-8, 8-3)  
Fletcher (7-10, 3-4)  
First Coast (11-8, -5)

should be the infield's best glove with Maya Littles showing some great play at second base last year after some time in centerfield. Mady Lanoux is a strong shortstop and dangerous baserunner for coach Jennifer Bucklew with Sammy Dill a fleet-footed outfielder. Dill, top

hitting returner at .412 and also top basestealer with 16 snags, is also a possible pitcher for Bucklew. Freshman Morgan Kendrick was on the mound in Fleming Island's preseason opener against Keystone Heights at the Oakleaf Preseason Tournament on Saturday.

Fleming Island finished at 10-10 last year and had been a strong opening team that maybe lacked depth which eventually led to late inning falters. Against Oakleaf, the Golden Eagles grabbed an early 1-0 lead, but fell 5-1 in the later innings. Fleming Island opens with two barnburners in district rival Atlantic Coast and 6A power Ponte Vedra (Final Four).

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# Rep. Yoho – VA clinic close to home?

By Alex Wilson  
The Oakleaf

FLEMING ISLAND – Despite a large concentration of veterans and close proximity to military installations such as Naval Air Station Jacksonville and Camp Blanding Joint Training Station, Clay County distinctly lacks a Department of Veterans Affairs' clinic. However, if U.S. Rep. Ted Yoho (R-3) and county officials have their way, this could change soon.

On Feb. 9, Yoho spoke at the Clay County Chamber of Commerce, where he announced the federal government is currently accepting a new round of proposals to locate a VA clinic somewhere in Clay County.

"This is an incredible day as we are at the beginning of the first VA clinic in Clay County," Yoho said. "Knowing the incredible need for our local vets, this was not a project that we were willing to give up on. I wanted to impress upon stakeholders the urgency in getting the entire community behind this project. We cannot let another opportunity slip away."

This will mark the third set of proposals sought within two years to establish a VA clinic in Clay County. The previous two rounds failed because the VA did not receive any proposals. In the last two rounds, the proposals were initiated by Yoho but generally delegated to Clay County, according to Kat Cammack, Yoho's deputy chief of staff. This time, however, Yoho is taking a more hands-on approach.

"In the past, we took the information [for the proposal process] and sent it directly to the county," Cammack said. "This time we've taken a really strong position on helping to get the word out."

Any individual with space to lease may submit a proposal, provided the space meets the requirements set



PHOTO BY ALEX WILSON

U.S. Rep. Ted Yoho (R-3) announces the third round of proposals to locate a Veterans Affairs clinic in Clay County.

by the VA. The community-based outpatient clinic would be the newest addition to the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System, joining the two locations in Gainesville and Lake City. There is also a VA clinic in Jacksonville.

The small crowd of attendees, which included representatives from Clay County, the Orange Park Town Council and the Florida Department of Veteran Services and veterans' advocacy groups, met Yoho's initial announcement with applause. However, the conversation soon turned towards the second obstacle in the clinic's way – proving the need using solid data. Cammack discussed the need for local veterans to register online with the VA's portal so they can be considered "active." The VA's online portal MyHealthVet is online at myhealth.va.gov. Over 23,000 veterans and approximately 8,000 retired veterans live in Clay County, according to the Clay County Department of Veterans Services. However, the VA only considers registered users, and currently there are only approximately 9,400 veterans in Clay

County, according to numbers Yoho's staff provided.

"We need active users," Cammack said. "We could have 100,000 veterans in Clay County, but if we only have 4,000 active users, the [VA] is going to build clinics according to that [number.]"

Cammack said registered users need only to have a yearly examination in order to be considered "active." However, the proposals are due on Feb. 26, which limits the time for veterans to register and be counted.

Up until now, red tape, budget issues and the lack of proposals for the clinic have been major obstacles. However, if everything goes according to plan, Clay County could have a VA clinic within 12 to 24 months, according to Yoho.

While Yoho has never served in the military, he still has a vested interest in veterans' issues. His daughter, Katie Yoho, is currently enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard.

"I've seen so many veterans not treated properly by our government," Yoho said. "I wouldn't be where I am if it wasn't for the willingness of veterans to serve this nation."

The proposal form for the clinic's location outlines several specifica-

tions for the space, which must be a pre-existing building of a maximum 19,999 square feet of Class A medical space. Other provisions include a requirement that the space must be on a single floor and have a minimum of 135 parking spots, with at least 14 handicapped spaces. Evidence that the property is outside of the 100-year flood plain is also necessary. No dollar amount was provided in the proposal request form.

As far as the actual location of the building goes, property within or adjacent to the following roads are being considered: Branan Field Road in the Middleburg-Oakleaf area, Bellamy Road and Treat Road in Keystone Heights, and Susan Drive in Green Cove Springs. Proposals and other comments of interest may be sent to [earnest.jackson@va.gov](mailto:earnest.jackson@va.gov).

While the process is still underway, county officials are holding out hope that this round of proposals will be successful.

"We have a very concentrated population of veterans," said County Commissioner Diane Hutchings. "We've waited a long time to get this service. We're excited about this, and we're excited to be able to support our veterans."



## Coyle named assistant tax collector

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – Holly Coyle was recently named assistant tax collector for Clay County. Coyle joins the Tax Collector's Office after 25 years of service to the Clay County Board of County Commissioners.

In her most recent role as the Director of Economic and Development Services, Coyle was responsible for the management and day-to-day operations of the Building, Code Enforcement, and Planning and Zoning Divisions, as well as the State Housing Initiative Partnership Program. During her employment with the BCC, she also managed the county's Engineering, Building Maintenance and Custodial Divisions.

"I've known Holly for many years and I've watched her advance in her roles with the county. She has always had a passion for serving the public and her local government experience will be an asset to our team," said Jimmy Weeks, Clay County Tax Collector.

"I am thrilled to be a part of the Tax Collector's team. My entire career has been dedicated to working for the people of Clay County and I look forward to continuing that commitment by providing excellent service to our current and future customers," Coyle said.

Coyle holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Florida. Her husband, Scott, is retired from the United States Marine Corps and currently works for Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Lab. She has one son, Mason, who is a student at the University of North Florida.

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# Program helps counsel the whole student

By Wesley LeBlanc  
The Oakleaf

ORANGE PARK – Students at risk of dropping out have a new resource for times of need.

Motivational Coaches of America is a nationwide organization based in Tampa that places motivational coaches in schools whose students are at risk of dropping out, or being Baker Acted, as a result of mental, behavioral and emotional health issues. On Jan. 31, Clay County Superintendent Addison Davis announced the launch of a partnership with MCUSA to place motivational coaches in Clay County junior high schools.

The program will begin with coaches being placed at Wilkinson Junior High, Orange Park Junior High and Green Cove Springs Junior High. MCUSA's goal, according to its president, Julio Avel, is to assess the needs of an individual seeking help, set them up with a coach who will work to address those needs and in turn, prepare that student for a path to success in academics and behavior, that otherwise, might have never happened.

At a media event held in Orange Park Junior High on Jan. 31, Avel and Davis spoke about the challenges Florida faces, and more specifically Clay County, and how MCUSA is here to help.

According to a report released by Mental Health America, a nonprofit dedicated to addressing and promoting the overall health of all Americans, Florida currently ranks 41st in the nation for youth mental, behavioral and emotional health and 38th in access to appropriate care.

Clay County has one of the highest increases in rates – 38 percent – in the region for children who were Baker Acted within a five-year span, according to a report released last year from the Florida Department of Children and Families. Furthermore, 1 in 4 of those Baker Acted in Clay County was a child, which is one of the highest ratios nationwide.

“As superintendent, I can no longer continue to sit on the sidelines,” Davis said. “As we continue to focus on academics, instruction and performance outcomes, we now have to go deeper and focus on the behavior and mental health of our youth.

“We continue to focus on academics but we have to focus on developing the whole child, and eventually developing the whole family and as we do that, we will continue to make sure that every learner has every

opportunity to be successful,” Davis said. Alvael said MCUSA is looking forward to the results he and Davis believe the new program will produce in Clay County.

“We think this is a trailblazing opportunity for this school district and we are honored just to be a part of it,” Alvael said.

The program comes at no cost to the school district because of MCUSA's private sponsors and donations, which provide funding for the program, according to Alvael.

Alvael said that in the last five years, not a single child in their care has been Baker Acted, which has led to a savings of \$15 million as a result of the Baker Act reductions alone. The success of MCUSA comes from collaboration, according to Alvael.

“It's a collaborative process that exists between the superintendent's office, the cabinet, the district personnel, the principal and of course, faculty on staff,” Alvael said. “If the child is demonstrating specific criteria associated with admission into the program, we will sit with the child, identify to the child advantages of the program and speak with the family members about admission into the program.”

“From there, if the family and the child would like to receive these services, a form of consent is provided and from there, an assessment and diagnostic occurs,” Alvael continued. “We identify behavior we can improve and set up a goal plan.

Orange Park Junior High School Principal Al DeJesus, whose school has already had a motivational coach on campus full-time for a few months, can already see the effects of MCUSA on the students of the school.

“We've had this program for maybe a few months now and from



STAFF PHOTO BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Clay County School Superintendent Addison Davis, at podium, explains how a new partnership with Motivational Coaches of America will help students who are at-risk of dropping out stay in school and get the help they need to remain in school.

our standpoint, and my principal standpoint, the attitude has changed and the behavior has changed,” DeJesus said. “I think that once kids know that there is an adult who is not going to throw any bias on them – they're here to listen and give help on how to deal with certain situations. It opens up the doors so much more for these kids to feel more comfortable, especially at this age in their life.”

DeJesus said his goal as principal is to make junior high a positive experience for students.

“MCUSA is another layer, another tier of support for our kids, to help make that happen,” DeJesus said. Davis said the launch of MCUSA in Clay County schools is another step in his initiative to continue the growth of a more positive and safe learning environment for students, their parents and the staff of each school.

He expects to have MCUSA coaches in every junior high by the 2018-19 school year, and is looking into ways MCUSA can help students in the educational years before and after junior high as well.

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**TV Channel 7.1 (Comcast 8, 440)**



## Student club to host K9 Karnival

EAGLE LANDING — A student-run club at Oakleaf High is hosting a community event to raise awareness and donations to help animals in need. The club called Paws 4 The Cause will host the K9 Karnival on Feb. 24 at 10 a.m. at Eagle Landing Golf Club. "This is a carnival for animals in need. We are promoting the Clay County Animal Shelter and the Safe Animal Shelter. At the carnival we will have animals up for adoption, carnival games, food trucks, a bouncy house, a dunk tank and much more! Please come out and support these shelters," states a prepared statement from the club. The event is free and all funds raised will go to help the animal shelters. Here in this photo, members of the club are holding products they collected during a recent drive to donate to the animal shelters.

## Drug-free from page 8

one led to more and eventually he was sticking needles into his arms. He shared his story frequently and passionately before overdosing on fentanyl, an opioid that's anywhere between 100 and 1,000 times as strong as what he thought he was buying and using, heroin.

"I miss him so much every day," Rizer said. "We knew he needed help, but he didn't. He didn't think he had a problem."

Rizer's story isn't a typical anti-drug speech. She is not leading the group in drug free chants, and not appealing to the agenda of a specific organization, she is just a mother, in mourning, who has chosen to tell her story. She is confident in her delivery, and the impact of her words hangs over the audience. The presentation is no-nonsense and it cuts to the core. No kid wants to end up an addict, or a victim of overdose, and no parent wants to see it happen to their child.

In addition to Rizer, CS2SA founder Rodney Blunt spoke to the audience, spreading his encouragement that kids stand up to anyone offering them drugs or alcohol.

Blunt's organization looks to get kids involved in athletics or other activities outside of school that will prevent them from even considering drugs. He wants to show kids there are ways to have fun without being intoxicated and his organization sees results.

The young men and women who travelled with him to the event looked up to Blunt, laughed at his silliness, and felt comfortable with him

in a way they can't with their parents. His goal is to be a mentor and encourage others to mentor children.

When Rizer asked Blunt to partner for the event, he was quick to accept, printing up t-shirts and delivering an engaging speech. He looks to expand the partnership and host more of these events in the future.

"My whole goal here today is simply to help spread her message," Blunt said. "We want to get this out to as many people and homes as possible."

The event also featured speakers including Wayne McKinney, who leads the detective division at the Clay County Sheriff's Office and Carissa Kosteci, who works the emergency room at Wolfson Children's Hospital. McKinney shared statistics related to narcotics, including the increase in fentanyl-related overdoses in Clay County. The drug is cheaper than heroin and used as a filler, or replacement, for heroin, cocaine and other drugs that are sold in powdered form. The problem is that this cost-saving measure carried out by drug dealers ends up costing users their lives.

Kosteci simply told three stories: three tragic stories from the ER focused on students who had overdosed on drugs at school or drank themselves into liver failure by the age of 20.

Following the presentations, all four speakers sat at the front of the room for a question and answer portion that continued through the end of the event. Though somber, the event was effective and well-attended, and Rizer is sure to continue the discussions until she has reached every home in Clay County and beyond.

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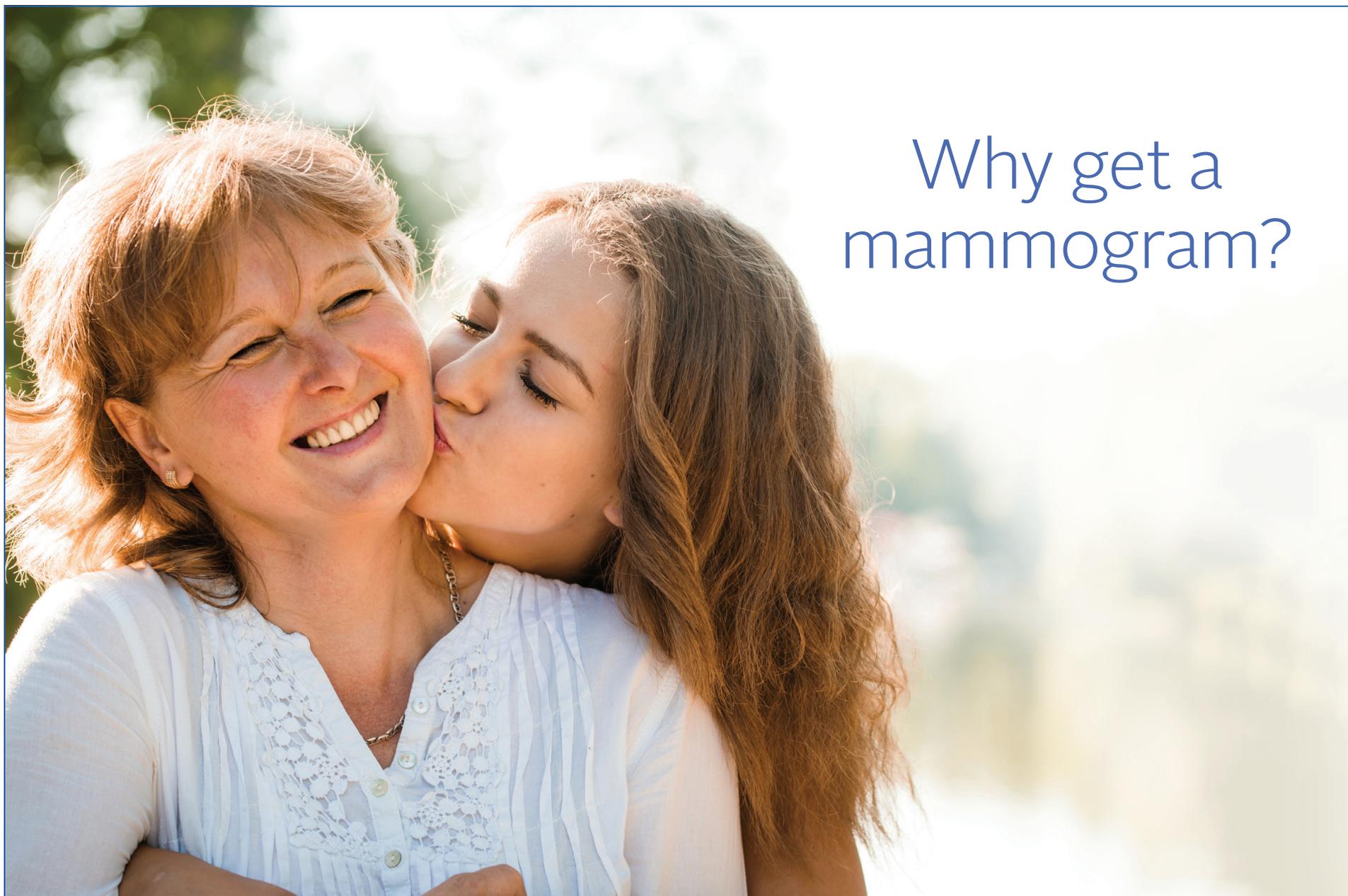
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