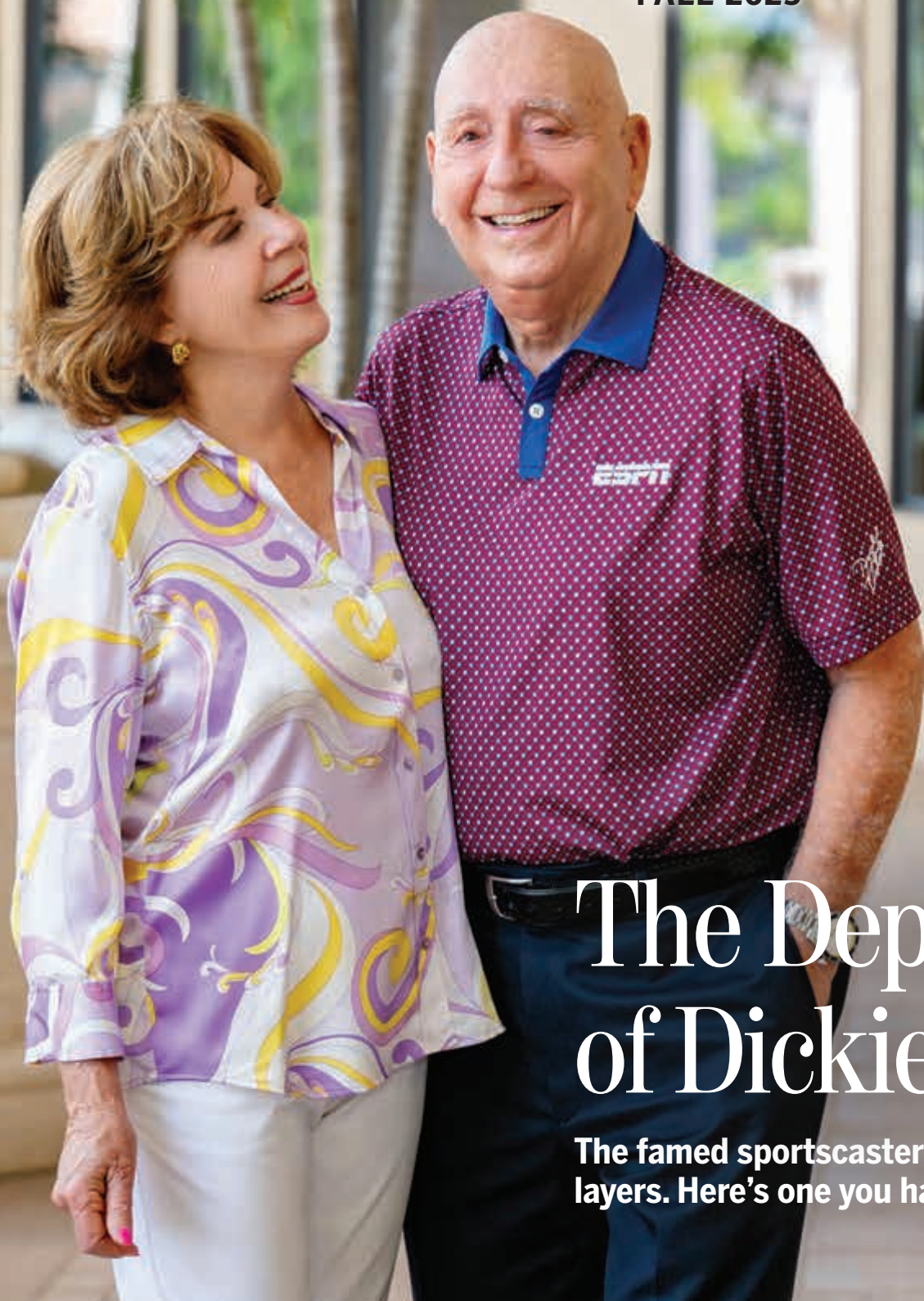


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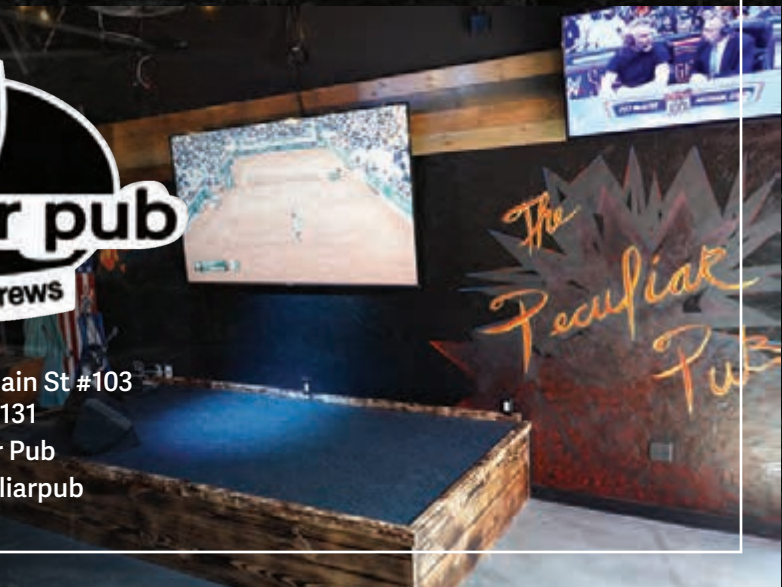
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What is your purpose?



Lori Sax

Amid Dick Vitale's awards and memorabilia in his office stands a white board with his current focus: Raising money to find a cure for pediatric cancer.

Oh boy. Talk about tough questions. It might be the mother-of-all, quintessential human question. It is both deep and complex, while also possibly being super clear and simple ... if you know the answer. What is your purpose?

I myself don't have a particularly brilliant answer, but I do know when people are in sync with their purpose, it is a beautiful thing. In this issue, we feature several people working with purpose.



Take Sara Stone, a Publix employee who taught herself to decorate cakes on the job. Twenty years later, countless families have come to rely on her smiling face to make the custom cake creations central to their celebrations. And, getting to see regulars come back year after year has made what could be just a job more of a calling. "I didn't know that I was going to love this as much as I do," she told us (Page 46).

Another one of our subjects found

purpose when her mother died, leaving the legacy of Herrmann's Royal Lipizzans in question (Page 68). Although Rebecca McCullough didn't plan on carrying on the operation, which breeds and trains the horses to perform, she stepped in to keep the farm running and the shows packed.

Her dream was to be a writer, and somehow — in between caring for the Lipizzans and working as a medical technologist — she has published a book with another on the way.

She is at peace with the way things worked out, knowing that she's keeping something special alive. "I never intended to carry on the legacy," she told us. "But in the end, I was the only one left to do it. And now I love it."

But when it comes to purpose, there's probably no one who pursues theirs more intensely than legendary sportscaster Dick Vitale. And he'll be the first to tell you his purpose has nothing to do with sports. Instead, it's all about finding a cure for pediatric

cancer.

So much so that in our interview with him (Page 86), our writer made it known he wanted to focus on Vitale's life story, not just his amazing philanthropic achievements. Because Vitale's passion for raising funds for the V Foundation will easily gobble up hours of interview time. But that's also the thing that is so cool: When it comes to appearances or interviews or anything he can do to raise a dollar or awareness for this cause, he will do it.

Because when we know why we're doing something — and why it matters to others — obstacles become surmountable. It's not a question of if, but a question of how.

It's also an essential piece of living a meaningful life, whether you're making people smile with your creations or helping find a cure for cancer.

And that makes it a question worth asking. What is your purpose?

Kat Wingert
Executive Editor



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Bottom Photos: Nicole Abbott, Patient - Florida 4xCrossfit athlete, 2nd in the world in her age group (2023).



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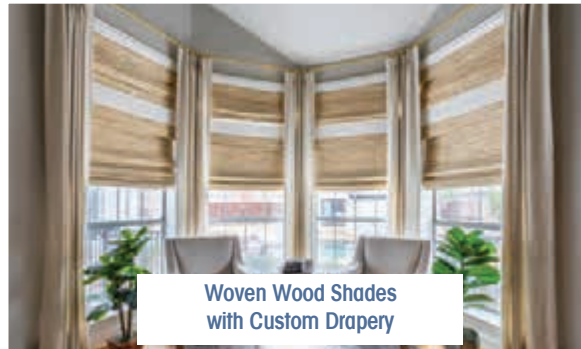
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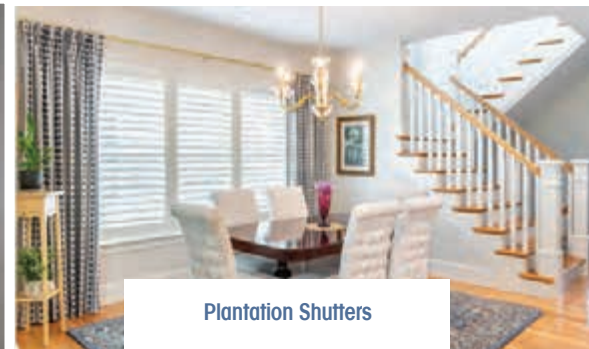
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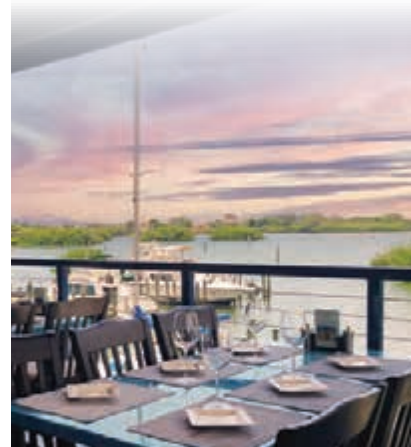
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BUZZ

NEWS, HAPPENINGS AND PEOPLE

Former Major Leaguer relishes high school coaching gig. **PAGE 40**



Mark Wemple
Ian Desmond won
three Silver Slugger
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Major League career.



Photos by Lori Sax

‘Treated Well’

Rob Anderson relocated from Texas to Lakewood Ranch to run east Manatee County’s largest hospital at a critical time for the facility. He aims to manage the growth smartly.

BY BETH LUBERECKI | CONTRIBUTOR

Like many others, Rob Anderson sees Lakewood Ranch as a great place to raise a family. And that helped the father of two boys make a major career move: transitioning from two decades as a health care executive in Texas to his new role as CEO of Lakewood Ranch Medical Center.

“Lakewood Ranch is one of the fast-

est-growing communities in the country — why wouldn’t you want to be part of that?” says Anderson, 49. “And where the community sits in terms of its location, it’s a great place to be. So it was a good match.”

Anderson most recently served as CEO of Memorial Campus and Providence Children’s Hospital in El Paso. Prior to that, he was CEO for Tenet’s Sierra Campus and Specialty Campus; market chief strategy officer for

The Hospitals of Providence Market; and administrator/COO of Providence Children’s Hospital, all in Texas.


He brings that experience with larger health care facilities to Lakewood Ranch Medical Center as it’s poised for its next phase of growth. “Everywhere you go, you always learn something,” says Anderson. “You learn from your failures. You learn from your mistakes, but you also learn what’s worked. The last two hospitals I was at were almost twice the size of this facility in terms of bed counts. But what’s here is ripe. It’s ready to expand and grow to meet what the Lakewood Ranch community needs.”

LISTENING TOUR

That includes the upcoming opening of a new tower adding 60 beds to the facility’s current bed count of 120 and the planned addition of service areas including a neonatal intensive care

Rob Anderson was named CEO of Lakewood Ranch Medical Center in April.

Continued on Page 34

A photograph of an older couple walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. The woman is on the left, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and tan pants. The man is on the right, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and tan pants, and is holding a small woven basket. They are both barefoot. The background shows the ocean and a cloudy sky. The couple's reflections are visible in the wet sand.

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unit and a second cath lab that will be able to handle more complex procedures for cardiac patients.

“Learning from where I’ve been, in terms of larger hospitals with more complexity, more service lines and more positions, is going to help us and help me here at Lakewood Ranch because that’s what this hospital needs,” says Anderson. “That’s what I do: I build hospitals ... If we don’t have a service here, why don’t we have it here?”

Since he was appointed CEO in April, Anderson hasn’t been shy about asking staff, board members and community residents about how they see Lakewood Ranch Medical Center. “I ask, ‘What would you do if you were in my shoes? What would you change?’” he says. “We want to be a community hospital in the sense that we’re part of the community. But I don’t want to be a community hospital in the sense of, oh, they can’t handle that ... as Lakewood Ranch grows, so do we.”

But he won’t pursue growth just for growth’s sake. It’ll be a balance of separating true needs from nice-to-haves or wants that aren’t a right fit for the hospital. “I’m not going to be everything to everybody,” he says. “Nor do you want me to be everything, because then if I only do little bits and pieces of it, I’m probably not as good. So we’re trying to find our service line niche and do it very well.”

HAVE IMPACT

Lakewood Ranch Medical Center already has a lot of things going for it, like its quality of care and patient experience. It’s received recognitions such as an “A” Hospital Safety Grade from independent national nonprofit watchdog The Leapfrog Group and The Joint Commission Gold Seal of Approval. “It’s a lot easier to convince people to come to a hospital that is already providing high-quality care,” he says.

He plans to build on that not only through expanded capacity and service lines, but also by making improvements to things like emergency room wait times. “Could we do better? Yeah, we can,” he says. “The emergency room is your front line into a hospital. People don’t want to wait; they don’t want to sit around. They want to be treated well. And so I think for us it’s just expanding upon that. Our emer-



Lakewood Ranch Medical Center is adding a 60-bed tower to its complex.

gency room can be quicker, and that’s what we’re working on to make people feel comfortable.”

Staffing remains an issue for almost every hospital system out there, and Anderson will be keeping his eye on that. On the plus side, the turnover rate at Lakewood Ranch Medical Center is on the low end.

“People come here and they stay,” he says. “But there is competition. They’re building new hospitals here [in the general region], and they’re going to call my staff first because they’re trained well and they’re good. Our goal here is to treat people well so they want to stay, and I think we do that.”

Anderson admits he didn’t know his “why” when he first got into the health care business, the way a lot of physi-

cians and nurses do. But that became much clearer to him as time went on.

“It’s the people,” he says. “I get to deal with people, and in my nonclinical way I’ve had the ability and the honor to be able to help hire, manage, educate and train health care providers to ensure they’re providing the best care for a patient.”

He also appreciates how his role gives him the opportunity to be part of the community both within and beyond the health care setting. “It’s giving back; it’s being part of boards,” he says. “I enjoy that. To me, I think that’s what’s exciting. Even when I looked at Lakewood Ranch and asked, ‘Why would I move here?’ It was because I felt I could be part of the community and make an impact.”

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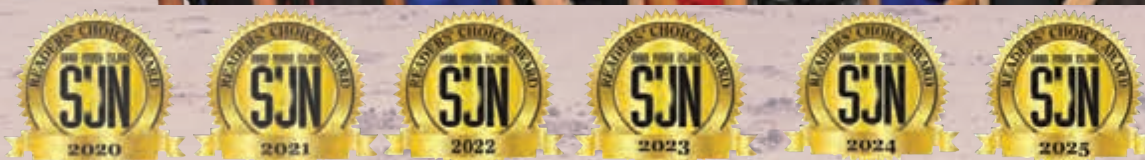
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Sarasota and Manatee county tourism leaders are joining forces with a top-tier golf course in the region for a dream-big goal: land one of the sport's four major title events.

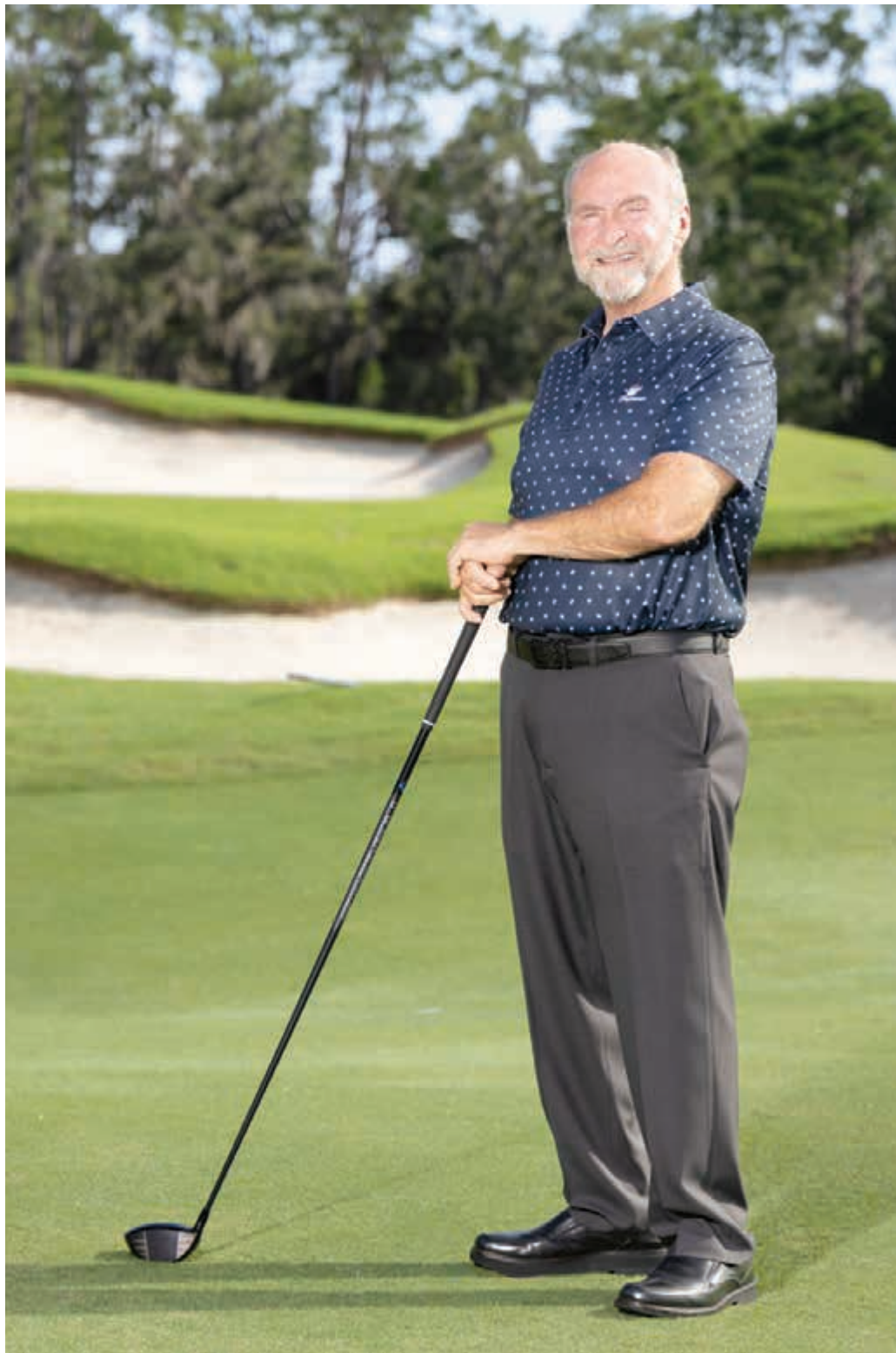
BY ERIC SNIDER | CONTRIBUTOR

Owni^g a championship-level golf course comes with plenty of perks, but few can compare to the one Bruce Cassidy experienced in 2009, when he found himself in a foursome with the designers of his course, The Concession Golf Club. One was the legendary Jack Nicklaus, and the other was Tony Jacklin, who won the British open in 1969 and the U.S. Open in '70. "Jack played in boat shoes," Cassidy recalls. "He wasn't playing that much golf then and he shot his age that day, 72."

The friendly round was rendered even more poignant because The Concession Golf Club is named after a revered moment in golf history that involved the same men who designed the course. On the final hole of the 1969 Ryder Cup, Nicklaus picked up Jacklin's ball marker, thus conceding him the putt and ending the fraught tournament in a tie. After Nicklaus's show of sportsmanship, the two came together in a bro-hug.

Cassidy recalls that Nicklaus wasn't conceding anything during the round at The Concession. "They were good, good friends, but still competitive as ever," he says. "I think Jack just made up his mind that Tony wasn't going to beat him that day."

Cassidy recounted the story during an interview in mid-June, about two weeks after The Concession landed a three-year deal to host the PGA Senior Championship, a major tournament in



Photos by Mark Wemple

Continued on Page 38

Bruce Cassidy says The Concession is a "second-shot course," where reaching the green in less than three strokes is key.



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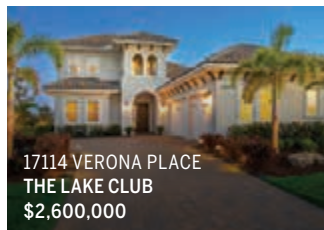
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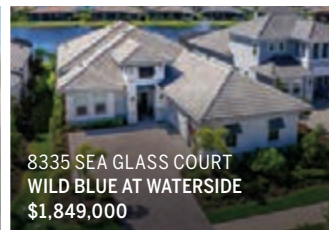
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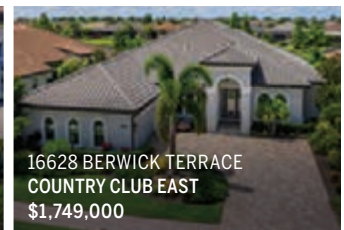
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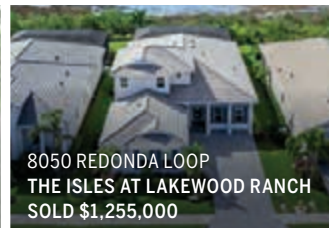
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the 50-and-over division. The first edition will be held next year, April 16-19.

Hosting a seniors major is another score in the long game to win the ultimate target: hosting the PGA Championship — one of pro golf's four major tournaments. That won't be for a while, though. The next available slot is 2035, according to Cassidy. In 2023, The Concession team made a bid for the 2031 PGA Championship, but the effort fell short. (The 2025 PGA Championship was held in Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte, North Carolina.)

BIG MONEY

For now, the focus is on the senior championship. The tournament will provide an economic boon to the region, particularly in tourism — exciting news to Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau Director Elliott Falcione. “Our destination will be seen in a half-million households in 110 countries,” he says. “I’m a pretty conservative guy when it comes to [estimating] direct economic impact, but I think it’s going to be in the \$25 to \$30 million range.”

Manatee and Sarasota counties each pledged \$4.5 million — \$1.5 million per year, all culled from tourism tax dollars — toward promoting their joint destination during the telecasts. (On-air it will be called Sarasota-Bradenton, after the airport). “That buys us a lot of brand awareness,” Falcione says. “Who’s [our] target market? Really, it’s boomers. And who’s likely to watch the Senior PGA Championship? Boomers.”

Cassidy, 75, is himself a baby boomer. He grew up one of six siblings in Steubenville, Ohio. His father was a coal truck driver, paid by the load. As it happened, coal was where Cassidy made his fortune. He worked his way up through the corporate management ranks, and in 1990, at the age of 40, he founded his own company, Excel Mining Systems, which makes roof support for underground coal mines. Cassidy picked up golf at age 35, mostly because it was the game of choice among fellow executives. (He still plays, and estimates he has a 14 handicap.)

Cassidy moved with his wife, Cindy, to the Sarasota Polo Club in Lakewood Ranch in 2006. That year he became a



Courtesy photo

The Concession Golf Club is consistently ranked as one of the top courses in the country.

member of The Concession, which Golf Digest had just named its Best New Private Course. In 2008, he purchased a stake and a year later assumed the majority interest. The new owner immediately set his sights on hosting golf events. In 2015, The Concession was the site for both the men's and women's NCAA championships. Other tournaments followed.

Then in 2021, a coup. The prestigious WGC Championship was scheduled for late February in Mexico City, but Covid forced a venue change. The Concession stepped up, and in six weeks Cassidy's team had the facility manicured and ready. The 72-player field included most of the top pros in the world — bold-faced names like Scheffler, McIlroy, Koepka, Day, DeChambeau, Rose and Morikawa, who won by three strokes.

BIG NAMES

The Concession has a unique characteristic among Florida golf courses, one that makes it attractive to tournament organizers: It's not built into a neighborhood. “That’s what I think sold me on the course,” Cassidy says. “It felt like we were playing each hole by ourselves. There are no houses.

Most people don't believe they're in Florida when they play the course. No disrespect to other golf courses, but with those you see a lot of houses, a lot of white stakes, palm trees. The only palm trees on our golf course are ones native to Florida.”

He went on to describe how the 18 holes play: “It's a second-shot course. You hit your tee shot. You've got room to drive the ball. But your second shot needs to be good. You want to be on the green. If you miss the green, it can be challenging to get up and down.” (As a point of reference, Morikawa shot 18-under when he won the WGC Championship.)

Who knows what kind of scores the over-50 players will put up next spring. But one thing is certain: The PGA Senior Championship is a major tournament, so most of the top players are sure to turn up — Angel Cabrera, Stewart Cink, Retief Goosen, Ernie Els and Pádraig Harrington, among others. And then there's the wish list. “Phil Mickelson is 50 now,” Cassidy says. “Tiger Woods turns 50 in December. Will he play in the seniors? We certainly hope that he will.”

That, friends, is a classic example of understatement.

FOR THE WIN

Golf's four majors are the U.S. Open, the British Open, The Masters and the PGA Championship. The Concession Golf Club seeks to host the PGA Championship in the future. The event has sites already picked for 2026-2031, plus 2034. A Florida course has hosted the PGA Championship twice since the tournament debuted in 1916. Both, in 1971 and 1987, were held at the PGA National Golf Club (Champion) in Palm Beach Gardens, according to the PGA website.

Future PGA Championship site hosts include:

2026: Aronimink Golf Club, Newtown Square, Pennsylvania

2027: PGA Frisco, Frisco, Texas

2028: The Olympic Club, Lake Course, San Francisco

2029: Baltusrol Golf Club, Lower Course, Springfield, New Jersey

2030: Congressional Country Club, Bethesda, Maryland

2031: The Ocean Course, Kiawah Island, South Carolina

2034: PGA Frisco, Frisco, Texas

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Dream Catcher

Ian Desmond brings an All-Star resume to his new job as Lakewood Ranch High School's baseball coach. The father of five also brings some core values to the gig, like work ethic and a family-first ethos.

BY VINNIE PORTELL
CONTRIBUTOR

Any baseball player coming up through Lakewood Ranch High's program who wants to become a Major League Baseball player now has as good a reference point as anyone.

That reference is Sarasota native Ian Desmond, named Lakewood Ranch varsity baseball coach May 21. Desmond was in the cleats of an aspiring Major Leaguer two decades ago. As a kid he recalls wishing to be a MLB player when the clock read 11:11 and when he blew out his birthday candles each year.

He also emulated Big Leaguers any way he could.

When he attended a Roger Miller baseball camp as a Little League player, Desmond saw former Sarasota High baseball player Justin Lincoln — an eighth round draft pick of the Colorado Rockies in 1998 — drive a truck to the baseball field.

When Desmond was old enough to drive, he bought a truck, too. And he's driven one ever since.

A Sarasota High graduate, Desmond had the talent and work ethic to back up his dreams: he played 11 seasons in the Majors for three teams: the Washington Nationals, Texas Rangers and Colorado Rockies. His career lasted from 2009 to 2019, and he played in two All-Star games, in 2012 and 2016.



Continued on Page 42

Ian Desmond hit 181 home runs in his Major League career.

Photos by Mark Wemple



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Desmond overcame several injuries and other obstacles in his career, including learning the ins and outs of what can be a cutthroat — and highly lucrative — profession. He can lean on those lessons and others while guiding a Mustangs team that seeks to bounce back from a 6-18 season next spring.

Three of those lessons include: the dedication and sacrifice it takes to play baseball at the highest level; the importance of giving back to your community; and why family matters. Here's a deeper look at those lessons, and how they shaped Desmond's life and career.

WORK ETHIC

Desmond's mother, Pattie Paradise, worked two hairstylist jobs. His stepfather, Chris Charron, worked as an auto detailer before going to culinary school to become a sous chef. That grit stuck with Desmond, who worked at a Christmas tree stand and at Daiquiri Deck in Sarasota in 2004 — even after the Montreal Expos drafted him in the third round of the 2004 MLB Draft.

"I watched my mom work two jobs, and I watched her put up with a lot of things," Desmond says. "I watched my stepdad work hard, and it was just part of the deal."

That penchant for hard work served Desmond well in his career. That goes back to when he declined a seven-year, \$107 million contract extension from the Washington Nationals — the team moved from Montreal to the nation's capital and changed its name in 2005 — at the peak of his career following the 2014 season. He turned down the money believing he could make more as a free agent the next year.

In pro sports lingo, Desmond bet on himself.

The bet soured: Desmond struggled at the plate and in the field the following two years, and settled for a one-year, \$8 million deal with the Texas Rangers. Then, to prove himself again — and earn playing time — Desmond moved from shortstop to outfield. That bet paid off, when Desmond made the All-Star team in 2016. He parlayed that season into a five-year, \$70 million contract with the Colorado Rockies.

"I've always been a worker," he says. "It's just been in me. My last year with Washington was a tough year. My focus was off for many different reasons,



and I kind of fell on my face in free agency. I had this choice, 'Am I going to work and address some of the issues and get better, or am I going to sulk and sit back and let the circumstances dictate themselves?'"

GIVING BACK

Desmond has spent much of the past five years devoting his time to the Sarasota community. He partnered with retired executive Vince Northfield to found Newtown Connection, a nonprofit aimed at enriching the lives of diverse and at-risk youth in Sarasota.

Desmond first tapped into his drive to give back as a member of the Nationals, when he attended a ziMS Foundation event hosted by former teammate Ryan Zimmerman. "I think at the event he handed out a six-figure check, and I was a young Major Leaguer and I just thought, 'I'm not doing enough,'" Desmond says. "He was a great player on the field and still was able to give his time to the ziMS Foundation, and I just felt like, 'You know, I've got to turn it up.'"

FAMILY TIME

As much as Desmond sought to be a Major League Baseball player growing up, he also wanted to be a father.

That dream came into focus when Grayson Desmond was born. Grayson is the first of five children Ian and his wife, Chelsey Desmond, are raising. Sons Cruz and Ashton and daughters Dakota and Naomi have since joined the family.

"Grayson is, and was at the time, probably the biggest thing that had happened to me," Desmond says. "Just as bad as I wanted to be a Major League baseball player, I wanted to be a dad. I remember being in the car with my mom when I was between 12 and 14. We were on Honore Avenue and I said, 'Mom, I'm going to be the best dad ever.' And she said, 'I know you are.' It makes me emotional now, but I love my kids, and I wouldn't be able to do this life without them."

Ian Desmond took his new position at Lakewood Ranch with them in mind. Grayson, now 14, will be a freshman at Lakewood Ranch this fall. Shortly after Desmond stepped away from baseball in 2020, he coached his three sons on a Little League team in Lakewood Ranch and won a championship.

"I had one son pitching, one son catching, and one son playing, I think, second base," he says. "They got the last out and they all ran together and then they ran to me, and you just can't buy that."

Ian Desmond aims to bring a Big League attitude to the Lakewood Ranch High School baseball team.

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PAGE 50

Photo by Mark Wemple
Elena Cassella worked in the Manatee County School District for 17 years before taking a job in fundraising with Foundation for Dreams in 2010.

class act



Photos by Mark Wemple

Flour Power

Sara Stone is nearing her 20-year anniversary of doing some edible, yet mostly behind the scenes, work: creating and baking some of Lakewood Ranch's tastiest cakes.

BY MARK GORDON
DEPARTMENTS EDITOR

From its staple chocolate chip cookies to its Key lime pies, the Publix bakery department has something of a cult following, both in Florida and across the South. Occasionally a cake made in the department goes viral — spreading sugary supremacy way beyond the grocery giant's eight-state footprint.

Consider a Southern Living magazine article published June 22 under the headline "This Publix Bakery

Shortcut Will Have Everyone Asking You for Your Cake Recipe."

"Our editors have raved about the berry-filled Chantilly Cake, cookie cakes, banana muffins and more," the magazine gushes. "But there's a lesser known item that you might not know about that could save you precious time in the kitchen: In addition to all of their other offerings, the Southern supermarket chain sells unfrosted cake layers." (The magazine says the flavors come in a range of choices, including chocolate, marble or Superfetti.)

Food & Wine magazine entered the Publix bakery chat just before that, with a June 11 story titled "Publix Transformed This Fan-Favorite Cake Into Ice Cream," on a limited-edition

Sara Stone has worked at the Market Street Lakewood Ranch Publix for 18 years.

Continued on Page 48



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Continued from Page 46

light and fruity cake-turned ice cream. “When life gives you Chantilly Cake,” the magazine adds, “make ice cream with it.”

And in 2019 the bakery department picked up a rush of internet fame, courtesy of a cake decorator in a Duval County store. She made some cakes with the hurricane swirl symbol — what she called a stress reliever for the incoming Hurricane Dorian. National news outlets like the “Today” show, CNN and Fox News covered the cakes, which generated mixed reviews: Some enjoyed the we’re-all-in-this-together gallows humor; others thought it made fun of a serious time. Publix weighed in from its Lakeland headquarters in August 2023, stating, on its website, that it wouldn’t make hurricane cakes anymore, as “it is our company policy not to create bakery cakes that would make light of a natural disaster.”

Lakewood Ranch Publix bakery department cake decorator Sara Stone has made thousands of cakes from her perch at the Lakewood Ranch Town Center store, just east of the University exit of Interstate 75. She’s become something of a customer favorite, having carved out several regular cake customers in her 18 years at that location. “I didn’t know that I was going to love this as much as I do,” says Stone, 40.

In a recent conversation with *LWR Life*, Stone talked about her career, the quirkiest cakes she’s made and more. Edited excerpts:

FAMILY AFFAIR: Stone’s sister worked at Publix for five years. Her brother is a store manager for the store on Fruitville Road and Honore Avenue and her mom worked at Publix for 21 years. “I would go shopping with my mom every Sunday, and I would watch them decorate the cakes, then put them in the display case,” she says.

BATTER UP: Her aunt worked at Publix too, and baked cakes on the side for friends and family. She became a mentor to Stone. “I thought it was so fascinating going from wet ingredients to a beautiful cake,” says Stone. “My aunt made everything from scratch.”

DEBUT DOUGH: Stone started at Publix in 2002 when she was 17. Her first location was the University and Tuttle



store, where she worked mostly 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. and helped clean up and close up the store.

CAKE WALK: Stone grew up in Bradenton, not far from Lakewood Ranch in the Elwood Park neighborhood near the former Mixon Fruit Farms. Today she lives with her husband, TJ, in the same area, two blocks from her dad’s house and where she grew up.

FLOUR FLOWER: Stone is a learn-by-doing baker, like with the flowers that go on many cakes. “I had a really hard time making the flowers at first,” she says. “It took a long time and a lot of practice to learn how to do that.” Even now, when during a busy weekend she can bake up to 30 cakes, Stone works hard to perfect fondant, a thicker and fancier frosting. “It’s hard to put the pressure on (with my hands) to do that,” she says.

KNEAD MORE: One of Stone’s regular customers asks her twice a year to make a cake in the shape of a shaggy dog. It’s a 5-inch treat, with, Stone says, a “lot of frosting.”

FUN FROSTING: Some of the odder cakes Stone has baked at Publix include one that looked like a bowl of ramen and another designed to look like chips and salsa with a side of guacamole. She also once made a cake that looked like a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket — with Rice Krispies Treats as the chicken. Back before Publix altered its corporate policy, Stone, on approved custom orders, made a few hurricane cakes. And during the height of the pandemic there was some more dessert-focused gallows humor: she made several custom cakes shaped like toilet paper rolls.

TASTY TREAT: Stone is at her best, she says, with custom orders and when her manager allows her to go off the menu a bit. “We can be creative and do some different things as long as it’s not copyrighted,” she says.

JUST SAY NO: The question Stone says she’s asked the most is “how are you not as big as a house?” working 40 hours a week in a bakery. Her answer: familiarity. “When you’re up to your elbows every day in frosting,” Stone says, “it’s actually really easy to say no.”

“
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SARA STONE



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Sweet Dreams

With some help from (lots of) friends, an east Manatee County organization aims to grow its unique camp that supports individuals with special needs, and their families.

BY MARK GORDON
DEPARTMENTS EDITOR

In the decade Connor Dzembo went to Dream Oaks Camp run by Foundation for Dreams, an east Manatee County nonprofit dedicated to individuals with special needs, he loved everything that makes summer camp summer camp: archery, horseback riding, canoeing; basketball, too, and the occasional foam party. The one thing he didn't like: crafts. Too boring, says his mom, Samantha Dzembo, and too much inside time.

Connor, with a rare genetic condition called ataxia telangiectasia, which affects the nervous and immune systems, especially loved the talent show and karaoke singalongs. His favorite band to sing? Imagine Dragons. "He wouldn't do that in front of his mom," Samantha says, smiling. But he never missed a chance to grab the microphone and, mom adds, "just go for it."

Now 18, the summer of 2025 is the first one since Connor was 8 years old that he hasn't attended a week-long or overnight session at Dream Oaks Camp. But the coming-of-age experiences, combined with the indepen-



Photos by Mark Wemple

Elena Cassella was named executive director of the Foundation for Dreams in 2014.

dence and confidence he gained, Samantha says, was life-changing. The experience was significant for Samantha, too. "To be able to drop him off and have the full confidence he is going to be well-supported and taken care of ... that's priceless."

While Connor is aged out of Dream Oaks, the camp, for kids ages 7 to 17, keeps on churning out memories for dozens of kids like Connor and comfort for parents like Samantha. It's what

A HISTORY OF DREAMS

Dream Oaks Camp traces its history back to longtime Bradenton attorney Eddie Mulock, who died in 2022. According to the camp's website, Mulock, while recuperating from heart transplant surgery at Shands Hospital in 1995, witnessed the plight of many children with disabilities and chronic illnesses. He was "inspired to create a place these children could call their own, outside of the hospital or medical setting," the organization says. So Mulock set out to build a camp designed to meet the needs of children with physical and developmental challenges. Foundation for Dreams, founded in 1996, debuted its summer camp, with 56 children, in 2001.

Continued on Page 52

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motivates Foundation for Dreams Executive Director Elena Cassella. “Raising a child is hard,” Cassella says, but “raising a child with special needs can be super-challenging.”

RYE NOT

Now Foundation for Dreams, with \$2.77 million in assets in its most recent fiscal year according to public tax filings, is on the cusp of expanding its mission with what Cassella calls Dream Oaks Camp 2.0.

This centers on a move from space the Boy Scouts provided at Camp Flying Eagle off Upper Manatee River Road to a formerly abandoned compound on 62 acres next to Rye Preserve in Parrish. Manatee County owns the 62-acre site, formerly occupied by the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches. Manatee officials handed over the site to the foundation last summer, in a partnership that will include the county reimbursing the organization up to \$1 million for remodeling the buildings up to ADA standards.

The move to 751 Rye Wilderness Trail, several years in the making, is a win for Foundation for Dreams on several fronts: more space for programs; more capacity to expand the range of ages of people it serves; and more attention for the work the camp and the foundation, Cassella says, do in their mission to help individuals develop more productive behaviors, meaningful relationships and a more comprehensive profound skillset. That last part is to help bring in more donors and raise money, something Cassella says is one of her biggest challenges.

The Rye property includes a multi-purpose building, maintenance building, learning center, three cottages, two houses, a pool and a basketball court. The structures were built between 1991 and 2001 and sat deserted for two years. When the foundation took over the property, the parking lot had cracks, the road to the cottages was dirt, and the sidewalks didn’t connect to the buildings.

Cassella says rehabbing the facility is a five-year project expected to cost up to \$2.5 million, and a capital campaign has been launched to fund it. The work also requires some sweat equity: crews of volunteers — including veterans from Team Rubicon and



Dream Oaks Camp serves children from ages 7 to 17.

members of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance — are clearing debris, repairing roofs and readying the site for ADA-compliant renovations.

It’s a big cost, with a big payoff: The upgrade will allow the camp to increase its residential camper capacity from 45 to more than 60 people per session, while maintaining its hallmark 3-to-1 camper-to-staff ratio. In addition to ADA compliance in buildings and on sidewalks, plans include resurfacing parking lots, relocating cabins from the old site, constructing a \$250,000 playground and adding a ropes course. The organization has some 60 employees, a number expected to rise as the camp grows.

FOR THE LOVE

One aspect of the foundation and camp that Cassella is most proud of is progress. Children who attend Dream Oaks Camp have more than 136 different diagnoses, including autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, ADHD and rare genetic conditions. Each camper sets two personalized goals upon arrival, from learning new social skills

to gaining independence in daily routines. About 99% of children make progress toward their goals, she says.

Cassella grew up in Bradenton — the oldest of seven kids — and graduated from Manatee High School. She worked for the Manatee County School District as an instructional coach for inclusivity in the classroom for 17 years before taking a position in fundraising for Foundation for Dreams in 2010. During her first year at Foundation for Dreams, revenue grew 300%. She was named executive director of the foundation in 2014.

Cassella says the work she and her colleagues do is both humbling and rewarding. “I have always been an advocate for children,” she says. “When you look and actually see the gains being made, it’s really beautiful to see the success.”

“You’re not going into this to make a lot of money; people don’t go into this field to make a lot of money,” she adds. “They go into this kind of work so they could have something that lights their fire.”

FUND THE DREAMS

More than 90% of families with children at Dream Oaks Camp require financial assistance, officials with Foundation for Dreams say. Every dollar raised at events like its annual Endless Summer Nights gala helps cover scholarships, adaptive equipment, meals, supplies and transportation.

Funds for the renovation project for the new Dream Oaks Camp, meanwhile, have come from a variety of sources, including:

- \$109,000 from Impact100 SRQ to renovate the administration building

- \$100,000 from the Bishop-Parker Foundation in Manatee County to renovate a cabin

- \$50,000 from the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation to renovate a cottage

- \$50,000 from the B Thomas Golisano Foundation to fund sensory rooms.

- \$30,000 from the Bradenton Kiwanis Club to help renovate a cottage



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SEPTEMBER

SEPT. 5 MUSIC ON MAIN

This monthly event returns on Lakewood Ranch's Main Street from 6-9 p.m. Enjoy a free concert by BABYL, food vendors, beer trucks and kids' activities. Proceeds will benefit Sertoma Club of Greater Sarasota.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

SEPT. 7 THE MARKET AT LAKEWOOD RANCH

The Market at Lakewood Ranch, featuring fresh vegetables, produce, baked goods, honey, guacamole, pastas and more, along with ready-to-eat foods like empanadas, fresh bagels, donuts, barbeque, and hot and cold coffee from local vendors. Hours are 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Waterside Place, 1561 Lakefront Drive, Sarasota. Continues every Sunday.

■ Visit TheMarketLWR.com.

SEPT. 12 MOVIE IN THE PARK

Enjoy a free movie night at Waterside Park, 7301 Island Cove Terrace, Lakewood Ranch. Inflatables for kids will be available at 7 p.m., and "Encanto" will begin at approximately 8 p.m. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Those who attend are welcome to bring a blanket and lawn chairs. Concessions will be available from We B' Poppin Popcorn and Kettle Corn.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

SEPT. 13 SARASOTA CARS AND COFFEE

Join fellow car enthusiasts from 8-10 a.m. every second Saturday of the month at the West District at UTC, 125 N. Cattlemen Road, Sarasota. Continues Oct. 11 and Nov. 8.

■ Visit SarasotaCarsAndCoffee.com.

MEN WEAR PINK FASHION SHOW

The Mall at University Town Center, 140 University Town Center Drive, Sarasota, will unveil its Real Men Wear Pink of Sarasota and Manatee candi-

dates during this high-energy fashion show benefiting the fight against breast cancer. Details to come.

■ Visit Cancer.org.

SEPT. 18 UTC NIGHT MARKET

UTC's monthly night market is 6:30-9:30 p.m. at The Green at UTC, 125 N. Cattlemen Road, Sarasota. Enjoy live music and more than 35 local vendors selling gifts, jewelry, art, handmade goods and more. Continues from Oct. 16 and Nov. 20.

■ Visit MallAtUTC.com.

SEPT. 19 SIGHTS + SOUNDS AT WATERSIDE PLACE

The September event of the Sights + Sounds cultural series features Sarasota's Sailor Circus Academy students displaying dazzling acts. The performance begins at 6 p.m. at Waterside Place, 1560 Lakefront Drive, Sarasota. Seating is limited.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

SEPT. 20 CENTERSTONE LIFE; STORY RUN/WALK

Run or walk in Centerstone's annual 5K/10K at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota, to raise awareness of depression, share that suicide is preventable and erase the stigma around seeking help for mental illness. The run is also available virtually. Registration starts at \$45 for the 5K and 10K run/walk and is \$20 for the youth 5K and 10K.

■ Visit Centerstone.org.

SEPT. 27 MEDAL MADNESS 5K, 10K, & HALF MARATHON

US Road Running Race Club hosts its Medal Madness races at 8 a.m. at Heritage Harbour Park, 700 River Heritage Blvd., Bradenton. Registration is \$25 for the 1-mile, \$30 for the 5K, \$45 for the 10K, \$50 for the 15K and \$65 for the half-marathon. All finishers will receive a themed medal.

■ Visit USRoadRunning.rsupartner.com.



Madison Bierl

Lakewood Ranch residents Jerry and Carol Wood dance in front of a crowd at Music on Main on May 3.

OCTOBER

OCT. 1 CLASSIC CAR SHOW

Enjoy classic cars from 5-8 p.m. on Lakewood Main Street. Anyone with a classic car, truck or anything with wheels is welcome. Enjoy food, music and prizes. Admission is free; participation is \$10 per vehicle. Continues Nov. 5.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

RANCH NITE WEDNESDAYS

This mid-week community Ranch Nite event features food trucks, live music and cornhole. The event is 6-9 p.m. at Waterside Place, 1561 Lakefront Drive, Sarasota, every Wednesday through May.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

OCT. 3 MUSIC ON MAIN

This monthly event returns on Lakewood Ranch's Main Street from 6-9 p.m. Enjoy a free concert by Tropical Ave, food vendors, beer trucks and kids' activities. Proceeds will benefit Bring on the Ministry.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.



Courtesy image

Sights + Sounds will feature Sailor Circus Academy students in September.

Continued on Page 56

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Donna Wrobel is a Lakewood Ranch resident with over 28 years of experience as a Luxury Home Specialist. A longstanding professional and certified stager, she will help your home show like a model and sell in record time! Donna's greatest talent is finding her clients their "Dream Home" that perfectly matches their lifestyle.

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donna.sarasotarealestate@yahoo.com

Continued from Page 54

**OCT. 10
MOVIE IN THE PARK**

Enjoy a free movie night at Waterside Place, 7301 Island Cove Terrace, Lakewood Ranch. Inflatables for kids will be available at 7 p.m., and "Hotel Transylvania" will begin at approximately 8 p.m. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Those who attend are welcome to bring a blanket and lawn chairs. Concessions will be available.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

**OCT. 11
OKTOBERFEST: A DAY
OF OARS & POURS**

Nathan Benderson Park will host its first Oktoberfest this season after Hurricane Milton caused last year's cancellation. Enjoy authentic German food, live music and plenty of beer from noon to 5 p.m. at 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota. Admission is free; parking is \$20.

■ Visit NathanBendersonPark.org.

CELTOBER FEST

The New World Celts Sarasota Chapter holds its annual Celtober Fest at Motorworks Brewing, 1014 Ninth St. W., Bradenton. Enjoy beer-swilling, kilt-sporting, Lederhosen-loving entertainment. Vendors, live music, food trucks, cocktails and wine will be available, along with, of course, refreshing craft beer.

■ Visit CeltoberFest.org.

**OCT. 11-12
BENDERSON CHASE**

The annual rowing regatta will be held at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota. Athletes ages 13-75 will participate in 100 races, taking place 9:15 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Saturday and 8:30 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. Sunday.

■ Visit NathanBendersonPark.org.

**OCT. 11-26
HUNSADER FARMS PUMPKIN
FESTIVAL**

Hunsader Farms hosts its annual pumpkin festival from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays at 5500 County Road 675, Bradenton. In addition to pumpkins, the festival features hayrides, a petting zoo, pedal carts, live music and more. Admission is \$15

for adults and free for children 10 and under. Parking costs \$5.

■ Visit HunsaderFarms.com.

**OCT. 17
SIGHTS + SOUNDS AT
WATERSIDE PLACE**

Asolo Repertory Theatre brings "Alice in Wonderland" to the October event of the Sights + Sounds cultural series. The performance begins at 6 p.m. at Waterside Place, 1560 Lakefront Drive, Sarasota. Seating is limited.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

**OCT. 18
MAIN STREET MARKET**

From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., visit Lakewood Main Street to shop from dozens of vendors featuring local art, jewelry, retail, food, plants and more. The market continues Nov. 15.

■ Visit MainStreetMarketLWR.com.

**OCT. 25
HAUNTED 5K, 10K, 13.1 & 26.2**

US Road Running Race Club hosts its Haunted races at 8 a.m. at Heritage Harbour Park, 700 River Heritage Blvd., Bradenton. Registration is \$30 for the 5K, \$45 for the 10K, \$65 for the half-marathon and \$90 for the marathon. All finishers will receive a themed medal. Costumes are encouraged.

■ Visit USRoadRunning.rsupartner.com.

WATER LANTERN FESTIVAL

Enjoy the magic of hundreds of lanterns lighting up the lake at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota. Food trucks and live music start at 4 p.m., and at 6:30 p.m. you can design your own eco-friendly lantern. Lanterns launch at 7 p.m. General admission is \$38 in advance or \$58 day-of.

■ Visit WaterLanternFestival.com.

**OCT. 28
TRICK OR TREAT ON THE LAKE**
Celebrate Halloween at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota, with its annual Trick or Treat on the Lake. Come dressed in Halloween costumes for an evening of trick-or-treating along a candy trail decorated by community organizations. Admission is free.

■ Visit NathanBendersonPark.com.



Courtesy image

Design your own lantern at Nathan Benderson Park lake at the Water Lantern Festival.

HOB NOB BBQ

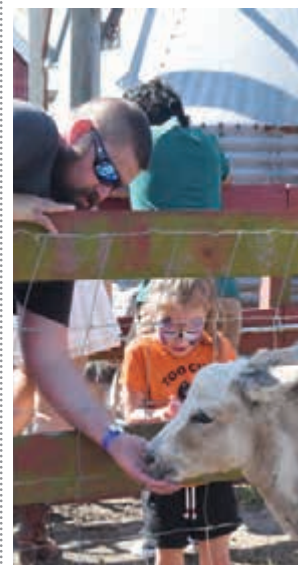
The Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance brings together the Sarasota, Bradenton and Lakewood Ranch business communities for its annual barbecue. The event is 4:30-7:30 p.m. at Lakewood Ranch Library, 16410 Rangeland Parkway, Lakewood Ranch. Tickets are \$65 for LWRBA members and \$75 for nonmembers.

■ Visit LWRBA.org.

**OCT. 31-NOV. 2
FALL FESTIVAL & CARNIVAL**

The weekend kicks off with a free Trunk or Treat from 4:30-6 p.m. Friday at The Mall at UTC, 140 University Town Center Drive, Sarasota. From 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, enjoy a fall festival with carnival rides, a pet costume contest, food trucks, local performers and more. Admission is free.

■ Visit FloridaPenguinProductions.com.



Liz Ramos

Mark Beauchamp feeds a donkey with his 5-year-old daughter, Everleigh, at Hunsader Farms' 2024 Pumpkin Festival.

NOVEMBER

**NOV. 1
LAKESIDE LEGACY WALK**

Tidewell Foundation's "Eternally Hopeful" walk will be held at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota. Tribute signs to honor loved ones are available for advance purchase. Attendees can choose their distance, up to 3 miles. Registration opens at 8 a.m., and the walk begins at 9 a.m. An awards ceremony will follow the walk for top fundraisers, and food trucks and

Continued on Page 58



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Continued from Page 56

refreshments will be on-site.

■ Visit TidewellFoundation.org.

‘SUMMON THE HEROES’

Manatee Community Concert Band performs a Veterans Day celebration at 3 p.m. at Neel Performing Arts Center, 5840 26th St. W., Bradenton. Tickets are \$10; students and children 12 and under are \$5; veterans and active-duty military free.

■ Visit ManateeConcertBand.org.

SUNCOAST FOOD AND WINE FESTIVAL

The Rotary Club of Lakewood Ranch hosts the annual event from 1-4 p.m. at Premier Sports Campus, 5895 Post Blvd., Lakewood Ranch. Tickets — \$100 for general admission and \$195 for VIP — include samplings of wine and food from dozens of the area’s finest restaurants, as well as live music and cooking demonstrations. Proceeds benefit charity.

■ Visit SuncoastFoodAndWineFest.com.

NOV. 1-30

SARASOTA MEDIEVAL FAIR

Runs each Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Woods of Mallaranny, 29847 State Road 70 E., Myakka City. Visitors can enjoy the medieval era through a wide range of family-friendly activities. Features include local artisans and craft demonstrations, live performances, food vendors and a children’s area. A single-day ticket is \$27 for adults; \$24 for students, seniors and military; \$17 for children ages 4-10; and free for children 3 and younger.

■ Visit SarasotaMedievalFair.com.

NOV. 6

DESIGNER BAG BINGO

The Sisterhood for Good is holding a night of fundraising bingo with designer bags as the prizes. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. at Grove Ballroom, 10670 Boardwalk Loop, Lakewood Ranch. Tickets, which include three bingo games, wine and beer, a buffet dinner and dessert, are \$150 for guests and \$125 for members.

■ Visit SisterhoodForGood.org.

NOV. 7

MUSIC ON MAIN

This monthly event takes place on

Lakewood Ranch’s Main Street from 6-9 p.m. Enjoy a free concert by Jesse Daniels, food vendors, beer trucks and kids’ activities. Proceeds will benefit The Sarasota Players.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

NOV. 8

FLORIDA INLINE SKATING MARATHON AND 5K RUN

Run941 and Bont Skates host an Associated World Inline Cup race at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota. Skaters of all ages and levels can choose from a world-class marathon, an age-class marathon, a half-marathon, and a 13K. An awards ceremony will be held at 2:30 p.m. Prices vary by race type and registration date.

■ Visit FloridaInlineSkatingMarathon.com.

SANTA’S GRAND ARRIVAL PARADE

Ring in the holiday season with a parade through University Town Center. Enjoy festive floats, costumes and choreography down Cattleman Road. Attendance is free. Parade participants have a chance to win a share of \$75,000 in prizes. Event schedule to come.

■ Visit UTCsarasota.com.

NOV. 9

OUT OF THE DARKNESS WALK

The Out of the Darkness Walk, a journey of hope and support, begins at 10 a.m. at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota, benefiting the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Registration is free; donations are accepted.

■ Visit AFSP.org.

NOV. 14

EMPTY BOWLS

Come to Lakewood Ranch Main Street to enjoy delicious soup from area restaurants while raising money for the Food Bank of Manatee. Attendees of the event, which runs from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., will get to enjoy a selection of soups, fresh-baked bread and desserts and take home a hand-painted ceramic bowl. Ticket details to come.

■ Visit MealsOnWheelsPlus.org.

SIGHTS + SOUNDS AT WATERSIDE PLACE

Sights + Sounds brings back Asolo



Madison Bierl

Luke Traynor goes down a bounce house July 12 at Lakewood Ranch’s Movie in the Park.



Jay Heater

UTC kicks off the holiday season with Santa’s Grand Arrival Parade.

Repertory Theatre for “Shakespeare 45,” a revue of scenes, sonnets and soliloquies sharing insights into the life and legacy of William Shakespeare. The performance begins at 6 p.m. at Waterside Park, 1560 Lakefront Drive, Sarasota. Seating is limited.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

MOVIE IN THE PARK

Enjoy a free movie night at Waterside Park, 7301 Island Cove Terrace, Lakewood Ranch. Inflatables for kids will be available at 7 p.m., and a family-friendly movie will begin at approximately 8 p.m. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Those who attend are welcome to bring a blanket and lawn chairs. Concessions will be available from We B’ Poppin Popcorn and Kettle Corn.

■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

NOV. 22

PIE GOBBLER

US Road Running Race Club hosts its Pie Gobbler races at 8 a.m. at Heritage Harbour Park, 700 River Heritage Blvd., Bradenton. Registration is \$30 for the 5K, \$45 for the 10K and \$65 for the half-marathon. All finishers will receive a themed medal. Costumes are encouraged.

■ Visit USRoadRunning.rsupartner.com.

NOV. 23

PONIES UNDER THE PALMS

The Mustang Club of West Central Florida presents its 33rd annual car show that benefits Take Stock in Children and Denis V. Cooper Foundation “Wishes for Heroes.” The show takes place 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Main Street at Lakewood Ranch. Registration is \$25 in advance or \$30 day-of.

■ Visit MustangClubOfWestCentralFlorida.com.

NOV. 27

FLORIDA TURKEY TROT

Spend your Thanksgiving Day morning burning prefeast calories while benefiting Nathan Benderson Park Conservancy and The Big Bill Foundation. The 5K run/walk begins at 8 a.m. and the kids’ dash at 7:15 a.m. at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota. Registration details to come.

■ Visit NathanBendersonPark.org.



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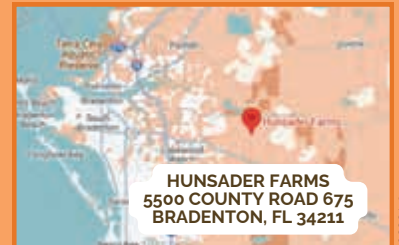
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Back to Work

Put the style back in 9-to-5 with these business essentials.

BY EMILY LEINFUSS | CONTRIBUTOR

Boss Store

140 University Town Center Drive, Ste. 261
941-536-9000, HugoBoss.com/us/home

Hugo Boss brings the boardroom edge without the bulk. The men's seersucker two-piece suit (jacket seen here) is tailored for motion — with built-in stretch and wrinkle resistance that keeps pace from 8 a.m. meetings to after-hours mixers. For women, this double-breasted blazer dials up confidence in a buttery faux leather that looks bold but feels breathable. Carry on, boss.



Woman's double-breasted blazer in faux leather (jacket shown here): \$599

Men's two-piece suit in performance-stretch seersucker (jacket shown here): \$799

Chico's

140 University Town Center Drive
941-388-0507, Chicos.com

Chico's Brigitte pants are made for power moves — stylish, structured and right on trend. Pair them with the brand's no-iron linen shirt, available in classic white — or 10 mood-boosting shades like Moroccan mint and crushed berries — for a look that's polished, effortless, and ready for anything the workweek throws your way.



Linen shirt:
\$89.50



Brigitte
wide leg
pants: \$99

Rolex Datejust
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and 18k gold
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For the accomplished professional, a Rolex is more than a timepiece — it's a mark of success and enduring style. Among the curated collection at Cileone are two standout treasures: the Rolex Milgauss with a stainless-steel case and black dial for him, and the women's Rolex Datejust in steel and 18k gold with a rare meteorite diamond dial. Gently worn, expertly crafted, these watches make every second count.

Tumi

140 University Town Center Drive, 941-866-6304, Tumi.com

Whether you're back in the boardroom or just back to reality, Tumi's got your 9-to-5 covered. The Alpha Bravo Academy briefcase (for him) and the Voyager Kendallville briefcase (for her) pack in sleek style, smart organization and just the right amount of swagger. Who says your laptop bag can't work as hard as you do?

Alpha Bravo Academy
briefcase: \$495



Voyager Kendallville
briefcase: \$495



Continued on Page 62

Continued from Page 61

Peltz

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PeltzShoes.com

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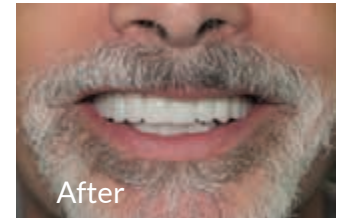
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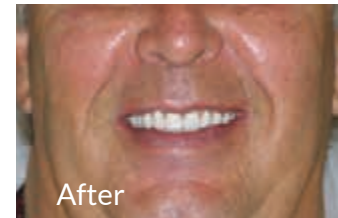
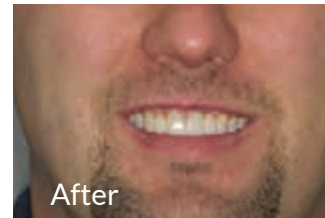
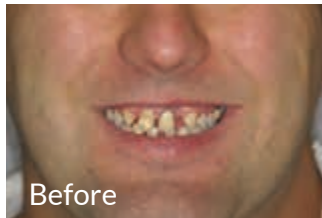
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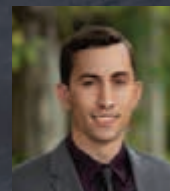
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Jill Morris, DMD

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- Post Doctoral Instructor of Full Mouth Reconstruction
- Member International Academy of Oral Biological Dentistry and Medicine
- Practicing dentistry for 33 years

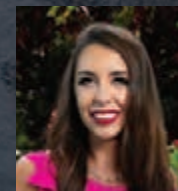
Orthodontics



Cameron Johnson, DMD

- Member of North American Association of Facial Orthotropics
- Member of the American Orthodontic Society
- Member of the International Association of Orthodontics
- Member of American Academy of Dental Sleep Medicine
- International Academy of Oral Medicine and Toxicology

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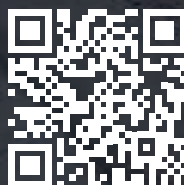
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A Myakka City State of Mind

In a place where cowboy hats outnumber stoplights,
three locals live by the rhythm of the land.

BY SU BYRON | MANAGING EDITOR

There's not much "city" in Myakka City. Blink and you might miss it. This modest commercial hub, about 20 miles from Lakewood Ranch, boasts a lone convenience store, a scattering of small businesses and the **Silver Star East Restaurant**, where pickup trucks fill the parking lot and regulars fill the booths. At chow time, you'll find a spirited cross-section of locals — ranchers, farmers, business owners, teachers, horse and goat whisperers and back-to-the-landers — all tucking into heaping plates of country-fried steak, meatloaf and burgers. It's a place where stories are traded over sweet tea and the pace of life is in sync with the heartbeat of the land.

What Myakka City lacks in strip malls and stoplights, it more than makes up for in character. Its residents aren't looking for the bustle of the city — they've chosen the countryside's quiet, open spaces. Their lives are shaped by nature's rhythms, the pull of community and the desire to live just a little off the grid. In this story, you'll meet three of them: **Jean Blackburn**, an artist whose work is deeply rooted in the land; **Gordon DeCou**, a biologist and business owner bringing innovation to farming; and **Rebecca McCullough**, who carries on a proud equestrian legacy with Herrmann's Royal Lipizzans. While their paths are wildly different, they all lead back to this rural stretch of East Manatee County — a place of beauty, independence and fierce attachment to the earth.

Continued on Page 68



REBECCA MCCULLOUGH



GORDON DECOU



JEAN BLACKBURN





Courtesy photo
Jean Blackburn rides through
a canopy of oak and palm on
her Old Miakka property — 14
acres of native Florida habitat
that fuels both her artwork
and conservation efforts.

Rebecca McCullough

You wouldn't expect one of America's most storied equestrian legacies in Myakka City — but that's exactly where you'll find Herrmann's Royal Lipizzans. It was founded by the late Col. Ottomar Herrmann Sr. and brought to the U.S. by a circus sponsor who had settled in the area. "There's a strong circus community here," explains Rebecca McCullough, Herrmann's granddaughter and the Royal Lipizzans' current owner. "Many performers had exotic animals and needed land. My family fit right in."

Today, McCullough continues the tradition with a herd of 15 horses — 10 of them purebred Lipizzans — all born and trained on-site. She began riding before she could walk, perched in front of her mother on the saddle. "She did the same with my daughter, Sydney," McCullough says. "I didn't start training until my teens, and honestly, I never intended to carry on the legacy." She notes that she'd initially dreamed of being a writer and later became a medical technologist to pay the bills. "But in the end, I was the only one left to do it. And now I love it."

Herrmann's Royal Lipizzans is known for preserving classical training while making the breed more accessible. "We generally breed to support our shows," McCullough explains, "But we're now opening up to selling mares to other farms and bringing in outside mares to diversify the gene pool." Their next show season is expected to begin in early 2026. Her daughter Sydney has also stepped into the arena, after the death of her grandmother in 2021.

"This past season Sydney really bloomed. I'm proud of her either way — whether she carries it on or finds her own path."

If You Go:

Visit HerrmannsRoyalLipizzans.com for upcoming show announcements and volunteer opportunities.



Photos by Lori Sax

Rebecca McCullough balances managing Herrmann's Royal Lipizzans with her day job as a medical technologist — and her passion for writing. "In the end, I was the only one left to carry on the tradition," she says. "And now I love it."

FROM BARN TO BOOKSTORE

When she's not training horses, Rebecca McCullough is building worlds with words on the page. Her first book, "Planet of Equus," imagines a society ruled by intelligent horses. The main character, Thraxis, was inspired by her horse, Jagger. She describes him as, "goofy, uncoordinated and full of heart. He wants so badly to do the right thing, but he's always tripping over something — literally or figuratively." The next book in the series, "Skies of Equus," arrives in January 2026. McCullough also dives into darker territory with "The Light of Dark Things," a supernatural thriller about a woman possessed by entities that prey on humanity's worst impulses. "That one's definitely not for kids," she says with a laugh. Whether through performance or prose, McCullough is always telling stories — grounded in history, imagination and heart.



Sydney McCullough rides one of the Lipizzans during training at the Myakka City farm, where the horses are bred, born and classically trained on-site.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bred for royalty and battle, the Lipizzan is a creature of power, poise and rare grace. With roots in the Habsburg Empire, this centuries-old breed is famed for its luminous white coat. Lipizzans are celebrated for their intelligence and their ability to perform the soaring, balletic movements of classical dressage. Fewer than 15,000 remain in the world today — living testaments to beauty, discipline and enduring legacy.



Sydney McCullough practices whip cracking. A fourth-generation performer, she's taken a more active role since the death of her grandmother in 2021.



Jagger, one of Herrmann's Royal Lipizzans' homebred stallions, inspired the character Thraxis in Rebecca McCullough's fantasy novel "Planet of Equus." "He's goofy, uncoordinated and full of heart," she says.

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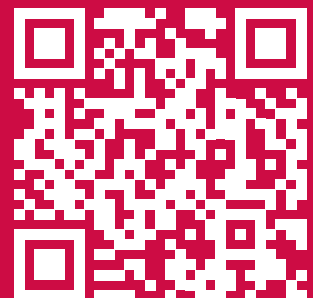
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Gordon DeCou

For Gordon DeCou, stewardship isn't a lofty abstraction — it's a way of life. As president of Agri-Tech Services Inc., a company specializing in environmentally responsible land and pest management, he's spent the last four decades helping farmers strike a balance between productivity and sustainability. His fleet of planes definitely helps. From his 125-acre farm outside Myakka City, DeCou often trades boots for wings. "I can walk out of my house and head to the office — or jump in a plane and be on a farm in Georgia by lunch," he says.

Originally from New Jersey, DeCou first came to Florida through an off-campus marine biology program. After college, he lived on Anna Maria Island but eventually moved inland when long-distance commuting to rural areas became problematic. "As farming took over every day of the week, traffic made it impossible to get home in time," he says. "I bought this farm about 12 years ago."

Along with convenience, the move offered a deeper connection to the land. "What I love most about living in the country is solitude," DeCou says. "You don't need a gym membership living here. There are fences to fix, trees to cut and a lot of wildlife. It's something you work all your life to get toward."

That grounding in simplicity and purpose shaped Agri-Tech Services, the company DeCou founded after working in entomology at a University of Florida research station. "I was trying to keep tomato growers from spraying insecticides all the time," he explains. But that proved to be a hard sell. "Back then, you could spray for \$10 an acre. Now it's \$100."

Over time, his approach evolved. "I got involved with a Dutch company that sells biological insects. That blossomed into a huge part of our business. We help growers reach a biological balance where pests are managed by parasites or predators. It's a win-win-win — for the farmer, the environment and the consumer."

His philosophy extends to chemical use. "The land is forgiving to a point, but you can hurt it too. When I start-



DON'T MISS!

SILVER STAR EAST A fixture in Myakka City, Silver Star East is the kind of place where regulars have their booths and newcomers are quickly welcomed. Known for generous portions, friendly service and a homespun atmosphere, this restaurant serves comfort food classics alongside strong coffee and downhome conversation. Handwritten signs, vintage décor and local classifieds add to its charm. It's not just a place to eat — it's where the community gathers, one plate at a time.

If You Go: 36251 SR-70, Myakka City; 941-322-8405



Photos by Lori Sax

The Silver Star East is known for hearty meals and a welcoming atmosphere. The motto painted on the wall, "Where friends meet friends," captures its enduring role in the community.

Myakka City 101

WHERE IT IS

Tucked into southeastern Manatee County, Myakka City is a loosely defined rural community centered along a quiet stretch of State Road 70, southeast of Bradenton. Though unincorporated and without formal boundaries, its landscape of farms, pastures and oak hammocks gives it a wide-open, untamed feel. Just 20 miles from Lakewood Ranch, it feels a world apart.

HOW IT CAME TO BE

Founded in 1915 by retired New Jersey judge Frank Knox, Myakka City began as a planned community along the East and West Coast Railway. Named for the nearby Myakka River, it launched with grand ambitions — complete with a hotel, train depot, saw-mills and a turpentine plant. But economic setbacks soon stilled the boom. Today, Myakka remains one of Manatee County's last unspoiled corners, steeped in the quiet beauty and stories of Old Florida.

ed, the chemical companies hated us. Now they see we're the stewards. We're all on the same page: conserve the chemistry, conserve the environment."

DeCou's family is woven into the fabric of this down-to-earth life. "My son Colton is a pilot too," he says. "My daughter Abby helps with our website. My wife recently retired as a nurse practitioner and now helps on the farm. She says after years under fluorescent lights, she's thrilled to be out among the cows."

What would he like people to know about Myakka City? "It's only country once," DeCou says. "And the country's still here — until it's not."

If You Go: Agri-Tech Services is an independent farm management and consulting service that provides integrated pest management services and bio-control systems for commercial clients. Visit AgritechServicesInc.com.



SKYBORNE STEWARDSHIP

For Gordon DeCou, managing farms isn't just about boots on the ground — it's also about wings in the air. With three aircraft at his disposal and a private runway on his property, DeCou uses flight to connect with farms scattered across Florida and the eastern seaboard. "We follow the crops like migratory birds — only we do it with airplanes," he says. A lifelong pilot raised in a family of aviators, DeCou turned this aerial advantage into a cornerstone of his consulting business, often reaching remote clients in time to make a difference before pests or disease take hold. "We'll fly to a farm, work 10 hours and be home for supper," he says. "It's a lot of stress, but it's also a privilege."

Courtesy photo

Left: Gordon DeCou on his Myakka City farm. With decades of experience in sustainable agriculture, DeCou helps farmers manage land and pests through a balanced, environmentally conscious approach.



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Jean Blackburn

Drawn by deep family ties and a love for the natural world, Jean Blackburn found her way to Old Miakka, a few miles from Myakka City, more than three decades ago. Today, this third-generation Floridian, artist and ecologist makes herself at home on 14 acres of unspoiled, native Florida habitat, living in harmony with the land that fuels her work. She and her husband, Steven Schaefer, have called Old Miakka home for 34 years.

Blackburn's art is shaped by her environment — literally. "My art has always been informed, almost entirely, by the living things in my surroundings," she says. "We've reintroduced native plants that support a complex Florida ecosystem. I've documented over 90 bird species here, along with countless invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians and mammals."

She and her husband also help prepare wildlife for release, working as an extension of a state-licensed rehab facility devoted to river otters, birds of prey and raccoons. "The animals come to us prior to their release into the wild."

The couple grows an abundance of fruits and vegetables, organically and in sync with the land. "We grow just about every variety suited to this climate, including about 30 types of mangoes," Blackburn explains. "Our produce coexists beautifully with the native ecosystem."

Blackburn splits her time between the studio and the land — although hurricane recovery efforts have consumed much of her creative time. "Ideally, I spend half my day working with the plants and animals, and the other half in my studio."

Despite the slow encroachment of suburbia, Blackburn remains connected to the Old Miakka community. "The core is intact, but the eastward spread of development threatens to squeeze the authentic, rural life from it."

If You Go: Visit JeanBlackburn.com to view her work, learn about her environmental efforts or reach out directly.



DON'T MISS! BLISSFUL GOAT YOGA

Founded by Navy veteran Corinn Smith, Blissful Goat Yoga invites participants to practice yoga alongside playful goats and friendly donkeys. Smith, who transitioned from a career in law enforcement and fire investigation, discovered the therapeutic power of goat yoga after witnessing its positive impact on veterans. Now, she hosts classes on her 5-acre farm, providing a space where guests can unwind, connect with animals and find unexpected joy. Whether you're a seasoned yogi or a curious newcomer, Blissful Goat Yoga promises a memorable and heartwarming experience. Visit BlissfulGoatYoga.org.

Photos by Lori Sax

Founder Corinn Smith cares for her herd like family. Each class includes plenty of up-close time with the goats — whether you're on a mat or offering a bottle.



Myakka City Grocery serves as the town's all-in-one stop for gas, groceries and community chatter.

DON'T MISS! MYAKKA CITY GROCERY

Part gas station, part general store, and part local institution, Myakka City Grocery is the only retail stop in town — and it wears that title proudly. Whether you're fueling up, grabbing a cold drink or picking up dinner (the fried chicken has a fanbase of its own), this no-frills spot delivers. Packed shelves, handwritten signs and friendly service make it more than a store; it's a gathering place for locals and a lifeline for the community.



Courtesy photo

Whether tending wildlife, planting mango trees or diving into one of Florida's freshwater springs, Jean Blackburn embraces the living landscape with the spirit of a naturalist and the soul of an artist.



"Painted Buntings" by Jean Blackburn



"How Many Does It Take" by Jean Blackburn

THE WILD SIDE OF LIFE

Jean Blackburn doesn't just observe nature — she lives in the middle of it. Her property operates as an extension of a state-licensed wildlife rehabilitation facility, welcoming animals in transition. From river otters to hawks and raccoons, each creature arrives with the same goal: healing and reentry into the wild. Blackburn's caretaking rhythm mirrors her artistic process — it's attentive, patient and rooted in place.

DID YOU KNOW?

In addition to her MFA from the University of Oregon and a BA from the University of Florida, Blackburn holds an AS in Biological Parks Technology. She's also a certified Master Gardener and Master Naturalist and held teaching positions at Ringling College of Art and Design, University of Oregon and State College of Florida, Manatee. Blackburn has sailed and painted throughout the Caribbean, Bahamas and Central America with her husband, Steven, but she always returns to Old Miakka.



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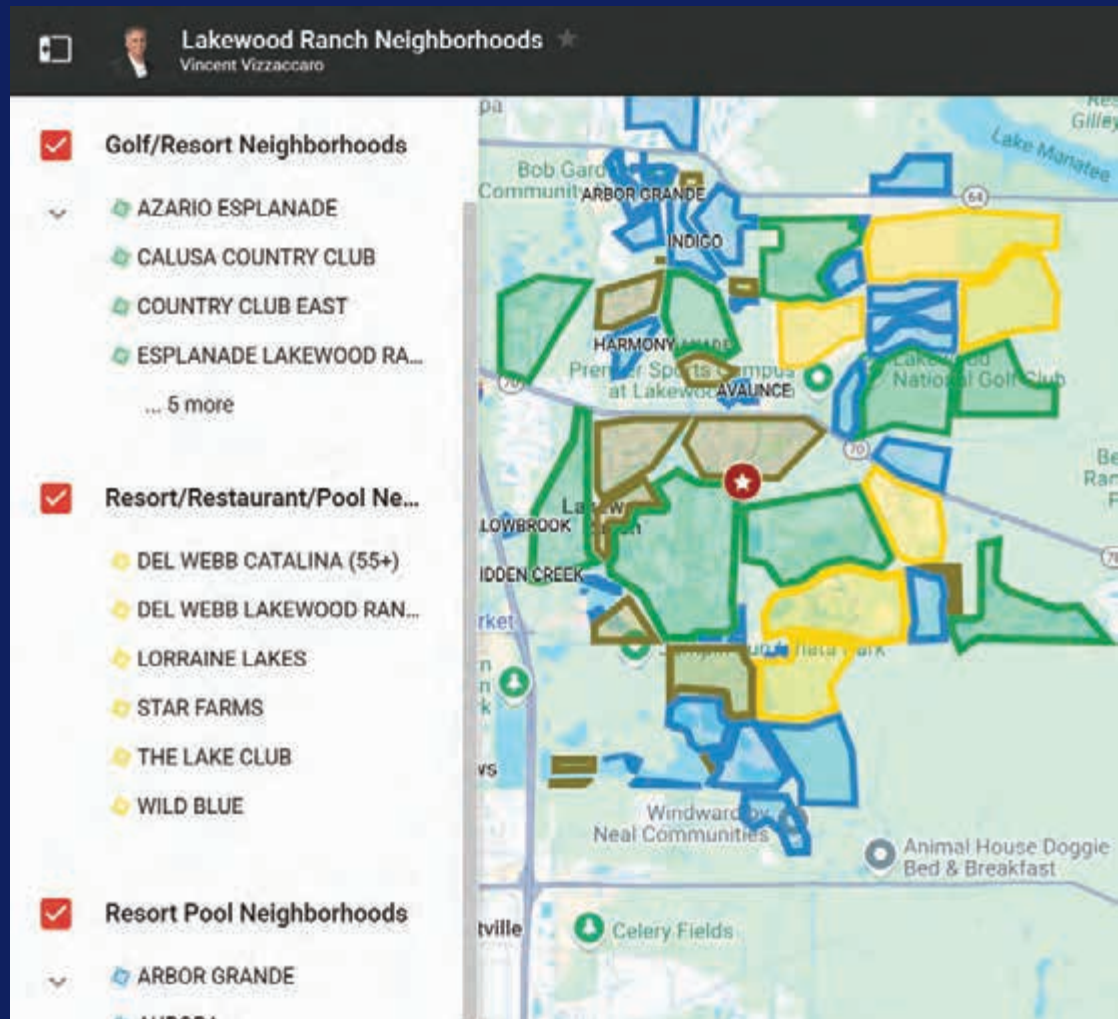
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WILD BY

The Heritage Ranch Gopher Tortoise Preserve offers a long-term refuge

Photo by Todd Ness

A gopher tortoise emerges from the grasses of Heritage Ranch Preserve. More than 350 animal species rely on abandoned burrows like this one for shelter, nesting and survival.

DESIGN

for slow movers with a big ecological role. BY EMILY LEINFUSS | CONTRIBUTOR





Photos by Lori Sax

My iPhone's GPS couldn't find the Heritage Ranch Gopher Tortoise Preserve. It claimed I'd already arrived, although I clearly had not. Turns out, the preserve is located farther east than the digital map could register. Fortunately, Todd Ness knew that would happen. He was ready for my call and waiting for me in his UTV at the preserve's actual entrance.

As equipment ranch manager for Schroeder-Manatee Ranch (SMR), Ness oversees all 2,100 acres of SMR's conserved land, including the 640-acre Heritage Ranch Gopher Tortoise Preserve. Driving me through miles of rugged trails lined with scrub grasses, vegetation and mostly native trees, Ness, a Manatee County native and former construction worker turned conservationist, explains that gopher tortoises are all around us. As we walk, he points out sandy mounds — entrances to the burrows where these ancient creatures stay hidden until dusk.

This refuge for one of Florida's most iconic and ecologically vital species was permitted in 2012 by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). It currently shelters 346 gopher tortoises, with enough room to house nearly 300 more. The preserve offers a long-term solution

to a recurring challenge in Florida's fast-developing regions: what to do with wildlife displaced by growth.

But it isn't just a safety net for tortoises. It's a cornerstone in Lakewood Ranch's broader environmental planning and a case study in how business, development and conservation can work together.

WHY GOPHER TORTOISES MATTER

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is more than just a slow-moving reptile that burrows in Florida's sandy soils. It's a keystone species, meaning its survival supports the survival of many others. More than 350 animal species, from snakes and burrowing owls to insects and frogs, use abandoned tortoise burrows for shelter and nesting.

"They're like little ecosystem engineers," says Craig Wolfe, a lifelong

Todd Ness, equipment ranch manager for Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, oversees 210,000 acres of conserved land — including the 640-acre Heritage Ranch Gopher Tortoise Preserve.

Continued on Page 82



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Continued from Page 80

Manatee County resident and environmental scientist with Ardurra who oversees preserve assessments. “If we lose the tortoises, we risk a domino effect on Florida’s native wildlife.”

The species is classified as “threatened” in Florida, and any relocation or disruption of their burrows requires state permitting. That’s where long-term recipient sites like Heritage Ranch come in.

PLANNING AHEAD FOR PRESERVATION

The vision for the gopher tortoise preserve began in the 1990s when SMR — the parent company of Lakewood Ranch — started transitioning its 35,000-acre agricultural property into a master-planned community.

“Even before development really took off, SMR recognized that they had a significant gopher tortoise population already on the land,” says Alec Hoffner, a senior project manager at Kimley-Horn who, along with Wolfe, co-founded the now shuttered EcoConsultants, the firm that handled the preserve’s permitting. “Rather than moving the tortoises offsite, they wanted a way to keep them on the Ranch.”

The solution was a preserve under permanent conservation easement, which means the land can never be developed. It would serve as a destination for gopher tortoises displaced during new construction in Lakewood Ranch. “We helped create a sustainable system,” Hoffner adds. “One that balances environmental responsibility with the realities of growth.”

RESTORING THE LAND FOR THE TORTOISES

Although the preserve had a baseline gopher tortoise population, the land wasn’t immediately ideal for expansion. In the decades prior, it had been used for timber production, and native southern slash pine grew too densely, limiting the low vegetation gopher tortoises rely on for food.

Wolfe explains: “They eat wire-grass and other native ground cover. But they’re short; they can only reach about two inches off the ground. If the canopy is too thick, sunlight can’t reach those plants.”

Several strategies were used to restore, and are now used to maintain,



Typical gopher tortoise burrow entrances. These underground shelters can extend over 20 feet and provide refuge from extreme heat, fire and predators.



the habitat, including prescribed burns and mechanical rollers to reduce overgrowth and allow grasses to regrow.

“The prescribed burns are critical,” Ness says. “We burn in a checkerboard pattern so there’s always food available in one section while the other regenerates.”

The preserve is also home to a wide array of other wildlife, including deer, turkeys, bobcats, eagles and snakes. “We’re preserving more than just tortoise habitat,” Ness says. “We’re keeping a piece of Old Florida alive. That really means something.”

HOW RELOCATION WORKS

When construction breaks ground elsewhere in Lakewood Ranch, gopher tortoises living onsite must be safely relocated. That process starts with an environmental consultant, who performs a wildlife survey. If tortoise burrows are found, a permit is filed with FWC.

Once the permit is granted, SMR’s land management team builds a temporary pen — about a half-acre per tortoise — at the preserve.

A CONSERVATION KEYSTONE: WHY GOPHER TORTOISE BURROWS MATTER

The gopher tortoise is protected under Florida law (Chapter 68A-27 of the Florida Administrative Code), but it’s not just the tortoise that matters: its burrow supports entire ecosystems of critters, flora and fauna. These underground shelters play a key role in maintaining Florida’s biodiversity. As a keystone species, the gopher tortoise helps hold Florida’s wildlands together. Without it, entire ecological communities could be at risk.

■ **Nature’s Apartment Complex:** Gopher tortoises are expert diggers, capable of tunneling up to 10 feet in a single day. Their burrows can extend more than 20 feet long and several feet deep, providing a refuge from extreme temperatures, predators and even wildfires.

■ **A Safe Haven for 350+ Species:** The gopher tortoise burrows shelter more than 350 species, from insects and frogs to lizards and snakes. It also includes other endangered species like the gopher frog and the Eastern indigo snake. In addition, commensal species like raccoons, box turtles, rats, opossums, and even birds drop in as visitors for safety and shelter.

■ **Built-In Climate Control and Fire Refuge:** Burrows offer fire protection during controlled and natural burns; cooler, humid conditions during scorching Florida summers, and year-round shelter from predators and extreme weather.

■ **Boosting Biodiversity and Sustainability:** By digging and grazing, gopher tortoises have a positive impact in other ways including aerating the soil, dispersing seeds of native plants and supporting healthy plant communities in upland ecosystems like sandhills and pine flatwoods.

Continued on Page 84



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“They live in those pens for six months,” Ness explains. “It gives them time to dig new burrows and acclimate to their surroundings.”

Relocated tortoises range from tiny hatchlings to 15-inch adults. Temperature is carefully monitored during transport, and the new pens provide shade, food and security. “We’re giving them a fresh start,” says Ness. “And once they settle in, they’re free to roam.”

THRIVING TOGETHER

That freedom is key to their wellbeing, Wolfe notes. Gopher tortoises once roamed widely across what is now Lakewood Ranch. “At one point, the land was native and uncultivated, so they ran free,” he says. But over time, farming, development and natural barriers like rivers and creeks fractured their habitat. Small, isolated groups, what Wolfe calls “fringe populations,” were left behind, often with just five to 10 tortoises per area.

The preserve is helping to change that. “The majority of the gopher tortoises in the preserve are from isolated areas of Lakewood Ranch,” says Wolfe. “To keep them on the property, SMR moved them into a suitable habitat.” Now, these once-separated tortoises are reconnected and thriving in a shared, protected environment. “Any other option, like areas farther away in different parts of Florida, is not advantageous,” Wolfe adds. “It’s best to keep the population as close to their original area as possible.”

A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION

Today, the preserve is maintained through regular assessments submitted to FWC every three years. Wolfe conducts these assessments, checking for habitat quality, wildlife presence and compliance with management plans.

Maintaining the preserve is also a savvy financial decision, notes Hoffner. Relocating gopher tortoises off-site can cost up to \$5,000 per tortoise. By keeping them local, SMR reduces costs while meeting environmental standards, demonstrating its commitment to responsible land stewardship.

“Conservation and economics don’t have to be at odds,” Hoffner says. “In this case, they reinforce each other.”



Todd Ness drives through the preserve in a UTV used for land management and tortoise relocation efforts. Prescribed burns and habitat monitoring are part of the routine.

Laura Cole, senior vice president of Lakewood Ranch, emphasizes the deep responsibility involved in conservation. “Setting aside land for nature isn’t just a short-term decision — it’s a commitment that lasts for generations. With gopher tortoises living 50 years or more, every time we relocate a young tortoise, we make a promise to care for the land and habitat for decades to come. This is an example of how SMR has always made decisions — with the long view in mind.”

MORE THAN JUST TORTOISES

The preserve benefits more than gopher tortoises. Its habitats support species like the Eastern indigo snake, Florida mouse and even the rare, crested caracara.

“People might not see it day to day,” Ness says, “but when I’m riding through in the evening, I see it all — the eagles, the deer, the wildlife just living. That’s the best part of the job.”

And the need for this refuge is on-

“
We’re
preserving
more than
just tortoise
habitat.
We’re keeping
a piece of
Old Florida
alive. That
really means
something.”

TODD NESS

ly growing. With most of Lakewood Ranch’s developable land already built or planned, the remaining tortoise relocations are expected to taper off over the next decade. But the preserve will remain, a permanent safe haven.

“Once all the relocations are done, there’s potential to accept tortoises from outside Lakewood Ranch,” Wolfe says. “But only if there’s room.”

The Heritage Ranch Gopher Tortoise Preserve serves as a quiet example of long-term planning in action. As the community continues to grow, the preserve is a reminder that development and conservation don’t have to be at odds. Overall, 46% of Lakewood Ranch’s land is set aside for open space, including conservation, recreation and wetland areas.

“It’s not just about building homes. It’s about keeping wild Florida wild,” says Ness. The goal, he adds, is to give these species a place where they can thrive long after the construction dust has settled.



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Photos by Lori Sax
Dick Vitale in his
Lakewood Ranch
office, surrounded by
a lifetime of achieve-
ments — and still
chasing new goals.



The Bounce-Back King

From national fame to personal travails, ESPN's Dick Vitale talks resilience, reinvention and what keeps him going.

BY ERIC SNIDER | CONTRIBUTOR

.....

The most famous resident of Lakewood Ranch opens the door to the south wing of his mansion, issues a quick greeting, ushers me into his office and gestures that I should have a seat in a cushy chair across from an arc-shaped wooden desk.

On this Thursday afternoon in early June, it's immediately apparent that I'm dealing with Dick Vitale — not “Dickie V,” the ebullient color commentator who has called basketball games on ESPN since 1979. There's no booming voice, no radiant smiles or hearty handshakes, not one “it's awesome, baby.”

This is Dick Vitale, just a few days short of his 86th birthday, who has overcome serious health issues in recent years and is, somewhat miracu-

Continued on Page 88



At home in Lakewood Ranch with Lorraine, his wife of 54 years. Through career highs and health battles, she's remained his strongest teammate.

Continued from Page 87

lously, back announcing games. A few days from now, he'll sign a contract extension with ESPN through the 2027-2028 season.

"My one personal goal is to see all my five grandchildren graduate college, and to do that I have to be 90," he says. "And my other goal is I want to be the first guy on ESPN [for] 50 years. I'm in my 46th now."

It's the offseason, and Dick Vitale's days are still full to the brim. Most start with breakfast at the Market Street First Watch, where people approach him and he obliges with autographs and pics. "I'm not going to put myself in my house and hide from people," Vitale says. "I'm not that way. If people don't recognize me, I'll put a sign on my back."

He runs errands, makes phone calls, dines out most nights with his wife of 54 years, Lorraine, and pours relent-

less effort into raising money for his high-profile fight against pediatric cancer. It's 2:30 in the afternoon and Vitale has already lived a full day, certainly for someone in his mid-80s. It's fair to say that the man needs to conserve energy, so it comes as little surprise that I'm not getting Dickie V today.

But I wonder: What Dick Vitale will I get?

Amid the office's deep-brown decor — desk, chairs, walls and shelves covered with framed photos and awards — stands a big grease board scrawled top to bottom with black magic marker: The Dick Vitale Pediatric Fund, it says, has raised \$105 million, punctuated by "WOW!" Vitale's charity is part of the V Foundation, which was founded by and is named after Jim Valvano, an accomplished college coach and Vitale's dear friend who died from cancer in 1993.

Vitale, dressed in navy blue shorts and a pink-patterned golf shirt with

the ESPN logo on the chest, starts pulling printouts of news clippings from piles and stuffing them into a padded envelope, all the while delivering a monologue about his charity and how important it is to ease the suffering of children with cancer. After a few minutes, he hands me the envelope, sits across from me behind his desk, and continues his pitch about the need for cancer research. This is Dick Vitale, the tireless promoter of his passion project. It's a default mode.

But it's not the Dick Vitale I've come to see.

After a few minutes, I politely interject, explaining to him that his philanthropic efforts are widely known, widely chronicled and highly revered by the community, including me. But what I hope to do is write a story about Dick Vitale the person. In effect, I've come to get as much of his life story

“.....
On December
5, 1979, ESPN
aired its first
college game
— with Dick
Vitale on the
call. He made
\$350 and had
fun doing it.
.....

Continued on Page 90

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as I can.

"Is that OK?" I ask him.

"Sure, whatever you want," he replies.

And, man, do I get it — a two-hour-plus version of the Dick Vitale saga, the ups, the downs, the joy, the pain, the dark times that challenged his unrelenting optimism. Above all, it's been a life full of boundless love — given and received.

Vitale gets choked up and misty-eyed several times during the interview. "A lot of people say they've never seen their father cry," says Vitale's daughter Sherri, the youngest of two. "My dad cries. He's an extremely sensitive man."

TIP-OFF

He went by Richie. Richie Vitale, a likeable kid.

The Vitales lived in a working-class neighborhood in East Paterson (now Elmwood Park), New Jersey, 20 miles from New York City. Neither of his parents got past the eighth grade. His father, John, pressed coats in a factory, paid by the coat, and at night had a job as a security guard at a nearby shopping mall. His mother, Mae, worked as a seamstress and held down the house. "I grew up in a home full of love," Vitale says.

Before kindergarten, Richie lost the sight in his left eye after injuring himself with a pencil. That didn't stop him from mixing it up on the playgrounds. He pitched in Little League and was "a pretty good little quarterback," Vitale recalls, "a pretty good athlete."

The Vitales attended Mass every Sunday, and afterward many of Richie's 16 aunts and uncles on his father's side would stop by the small, one-bathroom home to watch sports and to argue about it. Richie, a Yankees fan, eagerly joined in.

He had a wandering left eye, which made him the brunt of teasing from his classmates. The mockery stung, but he didn't let on. With his disability, football was a no-go in high school. As far as basketball, "I was a pretty good shooter, but I had no quickness," Vitale says.

Vitale earned a business administration degree from Seton Hall University — 15 miles south of home — and took a job in the accounting office of a plumb-



Vitale's home office showcases a curated trove of awards, signed balls and mementos — reminders of a career built on heart, hustle and a whole lot of history.

ing company in Paterson. "I hated it from my first day," he says. Soon after, he switched careers, taking a position as a teacher and coach at Mark Twain elementary school in Garfield. A year later, East Rutherford High, his alma mater, recruited him to coach varsity basketball. Colleagues started calling him Dick, and it stuck.

One night, while he was hanging out with some friends at the Blue Swan Inn in Rochelle Park, he approached a woman named Lorraine McGrath. "I guess you'd call it a singles place," Lorraine Vitale says, sitting on a couch in their capacious living room. "I was there with my girlfriend." He asked her to dance. She turned him down. He asked some more and finally got a yes. They went on a date the following week.

The couple married in 1971 and raised two daughters — Terri Vitale Sforzo and Sherri Vitale Krug — both of whom live with their families just a short drive from Mom and Dad.

HOT STREAK

East Rutherford High's basketball facility consisted of a crackerbox gym so small that it couldn't accommodate home games. Even so, one season

Vitale led his team to a 35-0 record. "I guarantee you there haven't been many undefeated teams that played all their games on the road," he effuses.

Vitale reveled in his high school success, but itched to join the college coaching ranks. After a series of rejections, he landed a job as an assistant at Rutgers. Vitale's income dropped from \$12,000 to \$11,000. He was never so happy to forfeit a thousand bucks. New head coach Dick Lloyd put him in charge of recruiting, and Vitale quickly upgraded the program's talent. Word of his success at Rutgers got around, and in 1973, University of Detroit (now Detroit Mercy) hired him as head coach. Vitale steadily built the program's success, culminating in 1977 with an odds-defying run to the Sweet 16 in the NCAA tournament, which ended with a loss to powerhouse Michigan. Scotty Connal, who produced the game for NBC, took note of Vitale's energy and charisma.

Ultimately, the stress of coaching took its toll on Vitale's health, causing him to suffer from bleeding ulcers and other maladies. The following year he stepped away from the job and became the school's athletic director. One day,

AWARDS & HONORS

Dick Vitale has more plaques on his wall than you can count. He must keep his tux clean, pressed and ready. Here's a list of some of his awards and honors.

- Dean Smith Award by the U.S. Basketball Writers Association (2025)
- Broadcasting+Cable Hall of Fame (2024)
- Knute Rockne Inspiration Award (2023)
- Jimmy V Award for Perseverance (The ESPYs, 2022)
- NCAA Gerald R. Ford Award (2020)
- Italian American Sports Hall of Fame (2020)
- Sports Emmy Lifetime Achievement Award (2019)
- New Jersey Hall of Fame (2016)
- American Cancer Society Man of the Year (2014)
- Heart of Gold Award — Pediatric Cancer Foundation (2014)
- National Sports Media Association Hall of Fame (2013)
- Italian American Sports Media Hall of Fame (2013)
- Little League Museum Hall of Excellence (2012)
- Lee Roy Selmon Lifetime Achievement Award (Tampa Bay Sports Commission, 2011)
- Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame (2008)
- College Basketball Hall of Fame (2008)
- Ethics & Sportsmanship in Sports Media Award (2003)
- Sarasota Boys and Girls Clubs Hall of Fame (2001)
- Florida Association of Community Corrections President's Humanitarian Award (2002)
- Curt Gowdy Media Award—Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame (1998)
- Honorary degree, University of Notre Dame (1997)

Continued on Page 92



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Continued from Page 90

Vitale recalls, he was sitting in his “old dumpy office” when his secretary told him he had a visitor. It was Bill Davidson, owner of the NBA’s Detroit Pistons. He offered Vitale the team’s head coaching position, which came with a multiyear contract at a six-figure salary and new Cadillacs every 6,000 miles for both him and Lorraine. He accepted.

“It wasn’t right for me,” Vitale says, “and I’m gonna tell you why.”

A BAD MISS

Coaching an NBA team has always been a tough racket. Top players usually make more than the head coaches, which creates a touchy power dynamic. Players get injured and traded, fans are fickle. The list goes on. Suffice to say the job comes with ceaseless pressure. “You think you’re a genius and you’re gonna fix everything,” Vitale says. “You’re not.”

Of all the stresses that weighed on Vitale during his tenure with the Pistons, the one that stood above all was the most basic: losing. In his first year, he led an injury-riddled team to a record of 30-52. Davidson continued to support him, recognizing that the team was not yet set up to win, Vitale says. Even so, the hyper-emotional head coach poured his heart out to the owner, bemoaning the losses. “It was killing me inside because everything I ever touched in my life had been win, win, win,” Vitale says.

His baggage weighed on the family. “You could be planning Christmas dinner and he’d lose a game,” Lorraine says. “And then forget about Christmas dinner or presents or Santa Claus or anything.”

In the early part of Vitale’s second season with the Pistons, he continued to share with the owner how tortured he was over the losses. Twelve games in — with a record of 4-8 — Davidson fired him. “He said, ‘Dick, you loved your spirit, your energy,’” Vitale remembers, “‘but you can’t have that [can’t-win] mentality. That’s not who we thought we hired.’”

A devastated, jobless Vitale moped around the house. Lorraine scolded him. “You’re a guy who fights,” he recalls her saying, “‘You lost your eye as a kid, you’ve overcome all the challenges. You’re letting this eat you up alive.’”



Vitale proudly holds his Sports Club of Tampa Bay Hall of Fame plaque, one of dozens honoring his impact on sports and philanthropy.

A REBOUND

A few weeks after his dismissal from the Pistons, Vitale got a call from Connal, the TV exec he’d met during the Sweet 16, who had moved over to a startup cable network called ESPN. Connal invited the newly unemployed coach to be a color commentator for college basketball games. Vitale scoffed at the idea, but Lorraine pushed him to give it a try. On Dec. 5, 1979, ESPN aired its first college game — with Dick Vitale on the call. He made \$350 and had fun doing it. But his game needed work — he was, unsurprisingly, too verbose — so ESPN got its color man some coaching.

Vitale reckons that it took a couple of years to lose the itch to coach hoops again and fully embrace his new gig. A key factor: “I had no more worries about winning and losing.”

After both of the Vitale girls attended the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, in

1986 the family moved from Michigan to Bradenton, then to Sarasota and ultimately to Lakewood Ranch.

TOP OF HIS GAME

Vitale went on to be one of the pre-eminent TV sportscasters of his or any other generation and earned the fame and fortune that goes with it. His catch-phrases — headlined by “it’s awesome, baby!” — elbowed their way into the sports lexicon.

Play-by-play announcer Dan Schulman estimates that he called about 500 games with Vitale. “It was buckle up, because you never know where it’s gonna go,” he says. “And I was happy to wind him up and happy to let him go.”

Although Vitale may have come off to TV viewers as a loose cannon firing random shots across the bow, he was always meticulously prepared

.....

“
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it’s been a
life full of
boundless
love —
given and
received.

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Continued on Page 94

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Continued from Page 92

and delivered insightful commentary in his inimitable way. “I think he just understood better than anybody else and earlier than most that this is an entertainment business,” Schulman says. “He leaned into that, but not at the exclusion of preparation or information.”

It was not all love. A lot of hoops-watchers hated what they considered Vitale’s over-the-top shtick. And many of those haters were prominent sportswriters who wrote scathing pieces about him. Those slams stung badly. “People on the outside might see him and think he’s immune to criticism,” daughter Sherri says. “But, especially early in his career, it really got inside him.”

A LOSING STREAK, THEN WINS

All told, it’s been a fairy-tale career, and a blessed life — except when it wasn’t. In the mid-2000s, Vitale had surgery to remove lesions from his vocal cords. They were non-cancerous, a relief, but six weeks of vocal rest were

not. During that time, he had to scrawl out thoughts on a little grease board.

Vitale healed up, and soon he was Dickie V again. Matters took an ominous turn in 2021, when the tireless cancer warrior got hit with three diagnoses in succession — melanoma, lymphoma and, scariest of all, vocal cord cancer, which sentenced him to another extended period of silence. “I felt trapped,” Vitale says. In June 2024, more bad news: a diagnosis of lymph node cancer. Then in December of last year, Vitale announced he was cancer-free. On Jan. 25, he was in Winston-Salem, N.C., calling the Duke-Wake Forest game.

Dick Vitale has a few years to go to reach his personal and professional goals. Don’t bet against him. And if you see him at First Watch or in another restaurant, feel free to say hi.

.....
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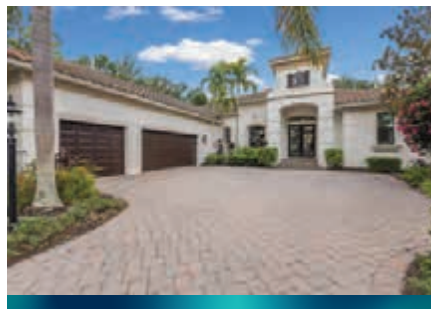
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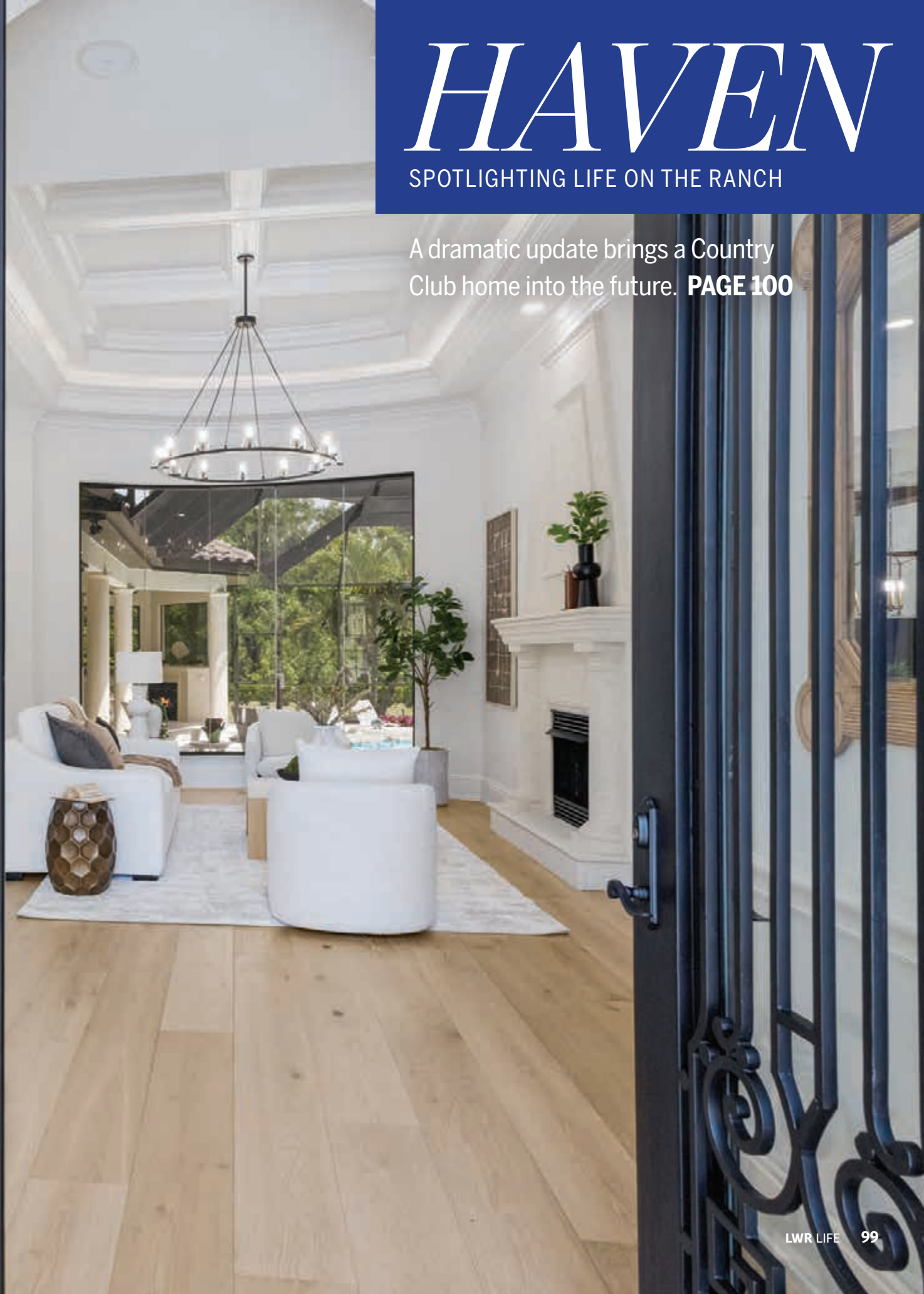
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HAVEN

SPOTLIGHTING LIFE ON THE RANCH

A dramatic update brings a Country Club home into the future. **PAGE 100**



Photos courtesy
of Renee R.
Preininger and
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Grand entrance:
An impressive
doorway frames
the home's
living area, with
views to the
pool beyond.



STAGED FOR



With Realtor Renee Preininger's expert eye, a well-loved family home gets a stylish refresh — proving that smart updates and staging can make all the difference for resale.

BY ROBERT PLUNKET | CONTRIBUTOR

SUCCESS

The kitchen and family room have been reborn in a contemporary style, showcasing a new coastal look.



It's a bittersweet moment so many homeowners eventually face. The kids are finally grown and out on their own. The beloved family home seems a little too big now, and you're exploring what your next chapter will be. But what do you do? Remodel, refresh and rethink before you put it on the market? Or sell it as is, a little dated perhaps, and let the next owner do the work?

Realtor Renee Preininger firmly believes in the first option. The main reason is financial. "A home that is move-in ready can compete with new construction," she says. Particularly in a market like Florida, where "buyers who purchase unrenovated homes pay below the market value."

But for a person like Preininger, there's another reason. It's an exciting challenge. After 20 years as co-owner of the Lakewood Ranch-based Sarasota Trust Realty, she has many les-

sons to impart. She and her husband, Marc, hired a general contractor to do the work, but their participation was hands-on. "We knew exactly what changes we wanted and chose everything right down to the color on the wall."

High school sweethearts originally from New Jersey, the Preiningers had been living in their home in the Lakewood Ranch Country Club for 20 years.

Continued on Page 104



Top: The home's exterior features classic Palladian architecture, with a new paver driveway and barrel roof. Above, the original Tuscan-inspired interiors now have a brighter, more contemporary look.

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Continued from Page 102

It was a customized Lee Wetherington model and was so well laid out that no major design changes were needed. They wisely resisted the temptation to make the plan more open as much of the home's charm is due to its more intimate spaces.

It's a big house, with 4,118 square feet under air, four bedrooms and four-and-a-half baths. There's an impressive motor court in front, with a double garage on each side and a large bonus room toward the rear of the home that could be a playroom, an office, an art studio or gym.

First to go were the Tuscan-style pillars that dominated the entrance foyer. In fact, virtually all the Tuscan elements have been removed, and a new feeling has emerged. The home now evokes a modern Santa Barbara coastal style — less hard-edged than some contemporary interpretations and instead is warm and inviting. Crisp white interiors are softened by earthy



The possibilities of the home's expansive bonus room are endless. It opens to the outdoor living area, adding extra space for games and recreation. That's a shuffleboard game table against the rear wall.

Continued on Page 106

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Continued from Page 104

brown accents that lend a sense of grounding and comfort.

"All the design decisions are important," Preininger says. "You want the home to have a consistent, curated flow."

But the three most important things for buyers? "The kitchen is probably number one. The curb appeal makes the first impression, so it's important too. Then comes a beautiful primary bedroom and bath."

The all-important kitchen is virtually brand new. The Preiningers installed top-of-the-line Thermador appliances, including a professional grade 6-burner gas cooktop and griddle. There are also new sinks and faucets, a reverse osmosis water filtration system and double gas ovens — all set within a chic new space featuring quartz countertops, matching backsplashes, two deep Kraus sinks with coordinating faucets, and a waterfall-edged island. Nearby is an informal dining area.



The brand-new kitchen offers a vast array of special features, including a professional-grade six-burner gas cooktop with griddle, double ovens, a wine fridge and two deep Kraus sinks with coordinating faucets.

Continued on Page 108

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Lori Sax

Renee and Marc Preininger, with Zoe, left, and Louie.

Continued from Page 106

The exterior of the Country Club home was also brought up to date. The classic Palladian design elements are still there — the arched windows, the impressive glass and iron front door — but the barrel tile roof is new, along with the paver circular drive, exterior paint and elegant landscaping.

The home's renovations highlight its premium location.

"We chose a half-acre lot that backed up to the nature preserve for privacy, beauty and security," Preininger says. It was a happy choice not just for their two daughters but for the family pets as well. "If you own a golden retriever and a Labrador retriever, you know that playing fetch every day is very important." A special feature makes the dogs' life even more enjoyable. There's a doggie door accessed from the bonus room to the backyard. It's kept locked, but an electronic sensor on the dogs' collar opens it when they approach. Then it's out to the 5,000-square-foot backyard for countless hours of fun.

But it's the new interior that steals the show. Wide plank European white oak engineered hardwood flooring

“
*Renee
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that a
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tion.*

Continued on Page 110

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Dr. Vilar earned her medical degree at Saba University School of Medicine in the Caribbean Netherlands and completed an internal medicine residency at Manatee Memorial Hospital in Bradenton.

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Top: The spa-like primary suite features disappearing sliders to the pool, plus a cozy, light-filled seating area. Above: The totally rebuilt primary bath showcases marble floors in the sprawling walk-in shower, complete with multiple showerheads and custom marble niches. Sliders open to a private patio.

Continued from Page 108

flows through the home, uniting each space into a harmonious whole. Each guest bedroom has its own bath, appointed with Calacatta quartz and opulent porcelain tile. Most impressive is the all-important primary bedroom and bath. Located in its own wing, the luxurious retreat overlooks the pool and backyard. Sliding glass doors disappear, and an intimate seating area provides a great spot for reading. The bath has a new life of its own. Marble floors and marble niches give it an up-to-date elegance, and the sprawling walk-in shower (there's also a soaking tub) has multiple showerheads, both rain and handheld. There's even a special one to bathe the dogs.

Careful attention has also been paid to the lavish outdoor living area. The pool screen is new, along with the waterline tile in an up-to-date blue that complements the new interior. Nearby is an elaborate outdoor kitchen, with granite countertops, a new gas grill —

Continued on Page 112



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Continued from Page 110

even a fireplace. There's another dining area out here, and the bonus room is adjacent (it's 30 feet long), making a great indoor-outdoor entertainment space.

Preininger is a firm believer in staging a high-end home when it is put on the market. "Staging enables a buyer to visualize how they will use the home," she says. More importantly, it "evokes emotion." An empty house may seem sterile. Adding appropriate furnishings bring it to life and paints a picture that says, "this is home."

And you don't have to do it yourself. "Staging companies have various options in terms of rental price and length of time."

The Preininger home is emblematic of the transformation many Lakewood Ranch homes are currently undergoing, adapting splendidly to new trends and looks. And you may want to file away Preininger's renovation tips for future use. Her home just sold at full list price, making it the highest selling price per square foot in Lakewood Ranch Country Club history.



The home's outdoor living area is great for family entertaining. You'll find a complete kitchen with a gas grill. The resurfaced pool features new waterline tile and shell stone pavers. The pool cage has been rescreened and repainted.

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JULY 4 AT WATERSIDE PLACE



Lakewood Ranch's Milana Nanna, 14, takes a shot at ringing the bell in the one of the carnival games



University Park's John Blackwell gives his 3-year-old son Jack a little help throwing the ax in a carnival game



Lakewood Ranch Communities' Grace Flowers, Nicole Hackel and Taylor Riffle led the effort to present Star-Spangled Spectacular to the community July 4 at Waterside Place.



Kensington Carter and Cary-Lee Carter just moved to Esplanade Azario from Canada and were feeling patriotic.

Photos by Jay Heater

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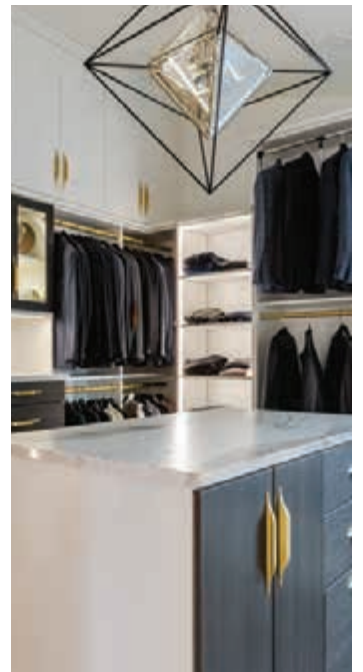
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MOVIE IN THE PARK

JULY 11 AT WATERSIDE PLACE



Photos by Madison Bierl

Above: Parrish residents Kira and Kinsley Schneider enjoy "Trolls Band Together."

Right: Sarasota resident Daniel Duvanov, 14, finds a spot to satisfy his love of sports at Movie in the Park July 11.



Lakewood Ranch resident Stephanie Chen brought her daughters Aurora Chen, 3, and Stella Chen, 6 along with family friend Lola Nguyen, 7, to Waterside Park for a "girls night out."



Lakewood Ranch resident Nicole Bellan and her daughter Hannah Bellan, 2, go down the inflatable slide together



Lakewood Ranch resident Rylee Romero, 4



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Meeks, who was brought to Barks and Brews July 8 by Nate's Animal Rescue, is 2 months old and up for adoption.



Photos by Lesley Dwyer
Bradenton's Susan Staton, Lucy the Pekingese and Carla Smith



Above:
Jhaynih Badio, 2, and Jayden Badio, 10, are visiting Barks and Brews from Boston with their dog Shilo.
Left: Braden Woods' David and Linda Foxlow sit with their 3-year-old golden retriever Macy.

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art and about

A Sizzling Season Selection

A new season is coming up, and while the weather may be unpredictable, the cultural forecast is reliably strong. From bold exhibitions to boundary-pushing performances, the months ahead promise something for every kind of art-lover. Here's what's catching our eye — and what you might want to note in your calendar.

BY SU BYRON
MANAGING EDITOR

SLICK, SENSUOUS AND UNAPOLOGETICALLY MODERN

Sarasota Art Museum's "Art Deco: The Golden Age of Illustration" whisks you back 100 years to 1925 — the dawn of Art Deco. Step inside, and you're instantly surrounded by sleek, seductive posters that defined the look of a generation. Think ocean liners, cigarette holders, flappers and sugar daddies. Deco legends like A.M. Cassandre and Edward McKnight Kauffer created these stylized dreams. Curated by Rangsook Yoon, the exhibition showcases 100



Courtesy of Poster House
"Mar del Plata" by Scotti (1930) is one of the lithographs on display at Sarasota Art Museum, Aug. 31-March 29.

dazzling Jazz Age posters from the Crouse Collection, along with Deco-designed objects, including sculpture, cocktail shakers, furniture and more. The result? A heady, high-style plunge into a world where elegance ruled and everything gleamed. Don't just see it — step into it. *August 31-March 29. Visit SarasotaArtMuseum.org.*

A MOVING TRIBUTE TO A FEARLESS HUMAN SPIRIT

Joan of Arc was burned at the stake in 1431, but she never faded from history. For centuries, playwrights, directors, writers and choreographers have kept her story alive. Sarasota Contemporary Dance Artistic Director Leymis Bolaños Wilmott and composer Mark Danciger's collaborative creation, "Jehanne," is an evening-length work inspired by the legendary French heroine. Longstanding company member Melissa Rummel takes on the lead role, embodying Joan's unshakable spirit through movement. With Danciger's original live music and SCD's emotionally charged choreography, this is a stirring tribute to a fearless human spirit. *January 15-18 at FSU Center for The Performing Arts. Visit SarasotaContemporaryDance.org.*

RECLAIMING ABSTRACTION

When you think of abstract artists, mid-century masters like Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock probably come to mind. But Native American visual artists were creating abstractions centuries before Pollock hit the cover of Life magazine. To see what they're creating today, check out "Ancestral Edge: Abstrac-



Photo by Sorcha Augustine

Sarasota Contemporary Dance company members are led by Melissa Rummel, who plays the role of Joan of Arc in "Jehanne," Jan. 15-18.

Continued on Page 122

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Continued from Page 120

tion and Symbolism” at The Ringling. This site-specific exhibition showcases abstract art by nine indigenous female artists. It’s all new work, by critically recognized talents. Their abstract artistry spans a range of mediums. Their motifs and designs draw on deep ancestral knowledge — but also their lived experiences in today’s indigenous communities. These Native American artists stay in touch with their past. But they don’t want to live there. *September 13-April 12. Visit Ringling.org.*

MUSIC BY THE NUMBERS

EnsembleNEWSRQ’s penultimate spring concert is all about the numbers — and these ones add up. The centerpiece? Steve Reich’s groundbreaking “Music for 18 Musicians,” composed for (you guessed it) 18 musicians. The concert takes place on April 24, exactly 50 years after the work premiered — and on Reich’s 90th birthday. It also happens to be EnsembleNEWSRQ’s 10th anniversary season and our nation’s 250th anniversary of the signing

of the Declaration of Independence. The result? A rhythmic, resonant tribute to a living legend and to the enduring pulse of American music. *At Sarasota Opera House. Visit EnSRQ.org.*

LA MUSICA LAUNCHES WORLD PREMIERE WITH ECOLOGICAL FOCUS

“The Magical Carnival” is the world premiere of Michael Stephen Brown’s whimsical, deeply evocative composition, presented by La Musica Chamber Music. Described by the composer as “a zoological fantasy of endangered wonders,” this new work takes inspiration from Saint-Saëns’ “Carnival of the Animals” and leads listeners on a sonic journey through 14 threatened habitats across the globe. It’s scored for two pianos, flute, clarinet, percussion and strings, and La Musica co-commissioned the piece with chamber music groups from across the country and partnered with Mote SEA to support its Sarasota debut. (Three of the species reside at Mote.) *April 9 at Sarasota Opera House. Visit LaMusicaFestival.org.*



Courtesy of the artist and Tandem Press
“The Gifted (Day)” by Dyani White Hawk (Sičángǔ Lakota) is a screen print included in “Ancestral Edge: Abstraction and Symbolism” at The Ringling.



Courtesy photo

La Musica presents the world premiere of “The Magical Carnival” by composer Michael Stephen Brown on April 9.



Photo by Matthew Holler

Samantha Bennett and George Nickson, artistic directors of EnsembleNEWSRQ, lead the ensemble’s spring performance of Steve Reich’s “Music for 18 Musicians.”

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table talk

Rita Lewis of Linger Lodge

Rita Lewis shares the magic behind one of Florida's most storied and beloved riverfront restaurants.

BY MARTY FUGATE | CONTRIBUTOR

Tucked along the moss-draped banks of the Braden River, Linger Lodge has been dishing out Old Florida flavor and folklore since the mid-'60s. Known for its Southern fare and hospitality, its décor brimming with taxidermied critters, vintage beer cans and other antique marvels, the Lodge is part restaurant, part roadside attraction and all local legend.

Rita Lewis started in the kitchen, rose to general manager and bought the place in 2022. For her, keeping this riverside icon alive is a labor of love. She's embraced its eccentric charm and continues to welcome new generations of curious diners. Lewis recently spoke with us about the stories, surprises and soul behind this one-of-a-kind destination.

Linger Lodge's approach to food is...

Balancing our adventurous menu items with mouth-watering Southern comfort food. We're known for alligator bites and frog legs and Cracker classics like fried green tomatoes and hush puppies. We also serve all kinds of seafood and smoke our own meat with a 100% wood



smoker. My husband and I brought that into the picture a few years ago.

Our must-try dishes include ...

Our alligator bites; they deliciously capture our wild spirit. We also have a River Platter that includes alligator, frog legs and catfish and a River Sampler with fried green tomatoes, alligator and frog legs.

First-time visitors are always surprised by ...

Everything! Most newcomers look around in awe like they've just stepped into a museum. You can't see every-

thing in one visit. There are taxidermied animals everywhere — squirrels playing basketball, jackalopes and a 13-foot gator. We also have a massive honor wall of police, fire and military patches that folks have donated over the years. It's especially touching when a guest shows their grandkids a patch they gave us decades ago.

The story behind our décor is ...

... really Frank Gamsky's vision. The Lodge began as a two-story log cabin fish camp in 1945. After he bought the

Photos by Lori Sax

Rita Lewis, owner of Linger Lodge, has worked nearly every role in the house. Today, she's the heart and soul of the operation.

Inset: One of many wide-eyed creatures watching over the dining room at Linger Lodge. The restaurant's collection of taxidermy is a legend in itself.

Continued on Page 126

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6620 19th Street E., Unit 113 Sarasota, FL 34243

Continued from Page 125

place in 1968, he turned it into the quirky, taxidermy-filled restaurant everyone knows today.

My favorite campfire-style dessert is ...

Our River Bottom Pie. It's been around again since Frank owned the Lodge. It's got Oreo cookie crumbs on the bottom and coffee ice cream, fudge, whipped cream, chocolate syrup and a cherry on top. It's a decadent delight!

The riverside setting transforms the dining experience because ...

Everything's so picturesque and calm — and it's just incredibly relaxing. Somebody made us a wooden plaque with the words "Linger Longer." I think that says it all. With the Braden River flowing by people tend to stay for a long time and soak in that peacefulness.

We've welcomed amazing guests including ...

A team from the Travel Channel. They filmed all day long for a show called "Tastes Like Chicken" — because of the alligator, of course. You can still find the episode online.

The heart of the Linger Lodge dining experience is ...

The feeling of being truly welcomed, like you've visited your family or an old friend. We know our regulars by name and give them a hug when they come in. It's a real personal connection. When you dine at Linger Lodge, you're home.

IF YOU GO

Linger Lodge

7116 85th St. Court E.,
Bradenton
941-755-2757
LingerLodge.com



Bayou meets backwoods: Linger Lodge's étouffée is a hearty, New Orleans-style stew brimming with andouille sausage, shrimp, chicken, crawfish and mussels, served with grilled toast and perfectly paired with a cold libation and a view of the rambling river.

Below: Linger Lodge's mussels are served in a savory broth, finished with fresh herbs and a squeeze of lemon — ideal for sopping up with a side of grilled toast.





AGAVE BANDIDO

Bold, vibrant, and unapologetically fun. Agave Bandido brings a South Florida flair to modern Mexican dining. This tequila bar and restaurant blends edgy inspired art and decor with a one-of-a-kind drink and food menu.

Whether you're planning a dinner date, hosting a business lunch, or just heading out for a night with friends, Agave Bandido delivers with high energy, unforgettable dishes, and hand-crafted margaritas.

Don't miss out on: Taco Tuesday's feature of 50% off Tacos all day, Ladies Drink Free at the bar on Thursdays from 8-10pm, and a can't-miss weekday happy hour from 4pm to 6pm featuring \$6 cocktails and \$4 beers.

Feeling adventurous? Head upstairs to discover their hidden gem: Maya SpeakTiki, tucked behind a tequila bottle cabinet. It's one of the area's best-kept secrets-if you know, you know.

1550 Lakefront Drive, Lakewood Ranch, FL
941-260-8866 | www.agavebandido.com



ANNA MARIA OYSTER BAR

Our UTC location brings serious flavor and fun, featuring a 40-seat indoor and outdoor raw bar anchored by our crown jewel, the shucking station, where boutique oysters are freshly shucked to order from the best family-owned farms. From tropical Tiki Drinks and our craft cocktail lineup to a wine list full of crowd favorites and hidden gems, there is something for every connoisseur. Our bold menu features fresh dishes like Cajun Cobia, Sushi Stack, Churrasco Skirt Steak, and Crab Mac & Cheese.

The space is a stunner, and the deals are just as exciting. Enjoy Happy Hour daily from 3 to 6 pm and from 9 pm to close on Fridays and Saturdays. BOGO half-off starters are available every day from 2 to 4 pm. Add in Five Star Fun and daily deals, and you have your new favorite spot on the Ranch. Come see what the buzz is about!

5405 University Pkwy #110
941-491-2662 | OysterBar.net



C'EST LA VIE

Locally owned and operated by Christophe and Geraldine Coutelle, this award-winning local favorite opened in 1997. Experience an authentic French café for breakfast, lunch, coffee, house-made French dessert, or a glass of wine! (The Downtown Sarasota location is open seasonally for dinner, check the website). Featuring monthly wine-pairing dinners on select evenings, C'est La Vie is also available for creating party platters and customized cakes and desserts!

9118 Town Center Pkwy, Lakewood Ranch
941.961.0111 • Open Tue-Sat 7:30a-5p, Sun 8a-4p

1553 Main St, Sarasota • 941.906.9575
Open Mon-Tues 7:30a-6p, Wed 7:30a-9p,
Thurs-Sat 7:30a-9:30p, Sun 8:30a-9p
cestlaviesarasota.com

DINING OUT



ED'S TAVERN

Lakewood Ranch's Premier Sports Bar and Restaurant with two locations! We are a perfect blend of local neighborhood sports bar and a family friendly restaurant. Both locations have a full-service bar including 26 ice cold draft selections plus over 31 flat screen TVs. Daily Events and specials. Check out the lineup at EdsTavernFL.com.

Happy Hour Every Day 4pm-7pm.
Live Music Friday + Saturday nights.
Kitchen Open Late!

New Location:
1305 108th St E, Bradenton
941-329-1010

10719 Rodeo Drive, LWR



FLORENCE AND THE SPICE BOYS

Never ordinary, always extraordinary, and with a nod to Middle Eastern Street Food, people have been raving about Florence and the Spice Boys since their food truck rolled up in 2019. And, now with two locations, foodies can easily experience visually stunning dishes that pack a punch of flavor. The menu features smaller plates great for sharing along with craft cocktails and mocktails. Fan favorite: the tumeric fried chicken sandwich with Okonomi sauce and Kewpie mayo. New rotating artisanal specials offered every month. Catering available.

4990 South Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL 34231

Second Location in UTC Now Open!

257 N. Cattlemen Rd. Unit 90
(941) 923-9920



FORKED AT WATERSIDE

Discover the taste of Forked at Waterside in Lakewood Ranch where every bite is a forkful of flavor. Conveniently located in Waterside Place, at Forked, we have a fun neighborhood feel with an urban, upscale vibe. All of our food is prepared with the freshest and highest quality ingredients. We offer a generous menu selection consisting of traditional American, Hispanic and a French flare. Some tasty menu options include omelets, skillet, tamales, fluffy pancakes, stuffed French toast, sweet and savory crepes, burgers, salads and of course our famous chicken and waffles. Indulge in our innovative cocktails as we have an amazing full bar selection to offer as well! Be sure to check our Social Media for information.

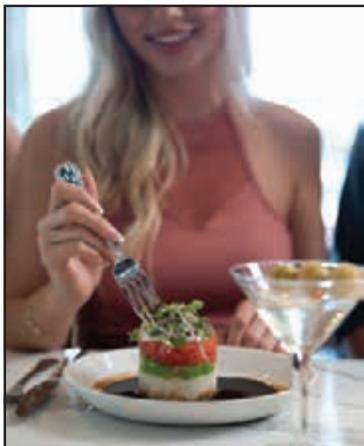
Mon-Thurs 8am-2pm & Fri-Sun 8am-3pm

**hours are subject to change*

7600 Island Cove Terrace #100
Sarasota, Florida 34240

(941) 355-3672 | ForkedEats.com

[f](#) [i](#) [t](#) [@](#) [FORKEDEATS](#)



GROVE - RESTAURANT, PATIO & BALLROOM

Discover chef-driven Contemporary American cuisine at GROVE. Enjoy house-made dishes crafted from fresh, seasonal ingredients in a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Located in the heart of Lakewood Ranch, GROVE offers a variety of spaces - including a patio, dining room, modern bar, private rooms, and a grand ballroom - making it a premier destination for private dining and events.

Whether you're planning an intimate dinner or a large-scale event, GROVE offers the perfect fusion of sophistication and hospitality.

10670 Boardwalk Loop, Lakewood Ranch
941.893.4321 | www.GroveLWR.com

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446860-1

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www.Station400.com

DINING OUT

PARTING GLANCE

Photo by Gordon Silver
Mom and one of her fawns share the
love in Del Webb.



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