

# LWR LIFE

LAKWOOD RANCH AREA'S COMMUNITY, NATURE, STYLE  
SUMMER 2026

A woman with long braided hair, wearing a grey tank top and a dark skirt, stands on a dark carpeted walkway in front of a large aquarium tank. She is pointing her right hand towards a large shark swimming in the water. The tank is filled with clear blue water, and the background features a rocky reef structure with various colorful corals and smaller fish. Sunlight rays filter through the water from the top, creating a bright and vibrant atmosphere. The shark is the central focus, swimming horizontally across the middle of the frame. Another shark is visible in the upper right corner, swimming towards the left. The overall scene is a peaceful and educational moment at an aquarium.

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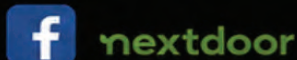
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# LWR LIFE

LAKEWOOD RANCH AREA'S COMMUNITY, NATURE, STYLE

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# Go east, young man



Mark Wemple

This rendering of Waterside Place from 2018 shows the vision for that area, which has been a major Ranch attraction since it opened in 2021.

People of a certain age might be familiar with the allusion in the headline, the original saying coming from Horace Greeley, circa 1865.

The saying is actually, “Go West, young man,” which came from this snippet of a column Greeley, a newspaperman, wrote in the New-York Daily

Tribune:

*Washington (D.C.) is not a place to live in. The rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting and the morals are deplorable. Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country.*

As a person who grew up in Colorado, and who has been to Greeley, named after ol’ Horace himself, this saying was always more of a punch line than a serious thought. But now, with the benefit of a few more decades and sense, I get it. Greeley understood from his trip out to Colorado what made it special: wide open

spaces, opportunities for something new and a freedom that doesn’t exist in crowded, urban environments.

This, no doubt, echoes the sentiments of Lakewood Ranch’s residents. Especially the early ones who had more cows than people as neighbors and found themselves traipsing into Sarasota when they wanted to go out to dinner or see a movie or shop.

That, as Departments Editor Mark Gordon points out in his story “Eastbound and Up” on page 38, has changed. The balance has shifted, and instead of the people of Lakewood Ranch traveling to the things they need and want, the things they need and want are now coming to the people of Lakewood Ranch.

As I have watched this over the past 22 years, I imagine it like a giant magnet, pulling everything toward it as the population center grows out east.

The Mall at University Town Center was a big shift. That tilted the center of

gravity in a big way for the Sarasota-Manatee metro area. Then Waterside pulled some more, along with more development just east of Interstate 75.

And did you know the Fruitville Library is Sarasota County’s busiest in terms of items returned? It, too, is expanding, along with the centers of Sarasota and Manatee County governments, which both are relocating out east from their respective downtowns.

With more expansion planned for Lakewood Ranch eastward, the pull will be even stronger. Soon, Ranchers will find themselves at the center of just about everything.

Just like Greeley knew, people are attracted to where the opportunities are, where the value is, where there’s a chance to “grow up with the country.”

In our case, it’s just in the opposite direction. They are definitely headed out east.

*Kat Wingert  
Executive Editor*



The most important goal for both of us was returning to an active retirement. We've been able to continue enjoying a wonderful lifestyle, cruising and playing golf. As a retired physician, I can confidently say that the orthopedic care we've received is on par with the finest institutions in the world.

-Dr. Kenneth Bruner

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# BUZZ

NEWS, HAPPENINGS AND PEOPLE

Want to be where the people are?  
You have to go east. **PAGE 38**

Jay Heater

The Mote Science Education Aquarium (SEA) opened in October in the University Town Center area. It's one of many organizations establishing a presence eastward to serve the growing population there.



Courtesy image

BayCare Hospital Manatee is a \$563 million project.

# Healthy Outlook

Health care systems are expanding in and around Lakewood Ranch — for both the short- and long-term.

BY LOUIS LLOVIO  
CONTRIBUTOR

**T**he medical services field in and surrounding Lakewood Ranch is growing so fast you can almost smell the disinfectant in the air.

Across the community and into Manatee County, some of Florida's largest health care providers are in the process of building out a network of facilities to serve the growing population.

These groups say their research has found a need for services ranging from ambulatory to prenatal to cancer care. To meet this need they have added, or will add, tens of thousands of square

feet, hundreds of beds and dozens of specialities dedicated to treating patients. That growth includes hiring physicians, nurses, staff and more personnel.

Just how big is this building boom?

- Clearwater-based BayCare plans to develop a pair of medical office buildings in support of its BayCare Hospital Manatee, a \$563 million project under construction along with a BayCare HealthHub on Moccasin Wallow Road. It will include 154 beds in private rooms and is expected to open in early 2028.
- Sarasota Memorial Health Care System opened an emergency room last year at 7250 University Parkway, at the corner of Lorraine Road, which is expected to serve

as many as 150 patients a day.

- Orlando Health, with nearly \$10 billion in revenue in 2025, is building a medical complex on 32 acres off State Road 70 at Crossland Trail in Lakewood Ranch. It paid \$12 million for the site in April 2022, Manatee County property records show. Orlando Health has declined to comment on its plans but both a developer backing a Lakewood Ranch medical office building and a commercial real estate listing have said it will be a hospital.
- A new, five-story patient tower opened at the Lakewood Ranch Medical Center March 24. The new tower, says interim CEO

*Continued on Page 32*

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Continued from Page 30

Philip Reber, “is a continued commitment to patient care and accommodations, which is what this community needs ... It’s about leveling up ... to a higher level of care.” The \$120 million project adds 60 beds to the hospital campus.

“There are lots of options in the Sarasota-Manatee market for health care. But as far as having those specialties or those facilities a short drive away, I think it’s important,” Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance President and CEO Brittany Lamont says.

## LONG LINES

As you can imagine, these major medical organizations aren’t making decisions on where to grow on a hunch. Far from it. Several of them came together in 2024 and into 2025 to conduct a Community Needs Health Assessment for Manatee County and Lakewood Ranch.

The survey was done by The All4HealthFL Collaborative, a coalition of agencies and health care systems. Among them were OrlandoHealth, BayCare Health Systems, Tampa General Hospital and Moffitt Cancer Center.

In doing its research, the collaborative spoke to residents and collected data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and FLHealthCharts. The collaborative also put out a survey asking residents questions about health care, housing and employment, as well as other needs, gaps and resources in the community.



Courtesy image

Dr. Christopher Bucciarelli with BayCare says expansion decisions have a lot of factors, chief among them population growth.

On March 31, 2025, 42 community organizations working in Manatee and members of The All4HealthFL Collaborative held a three-hour meeting that looked at the findings and discussed community needs as well as potential strategies.

What did this group discover about the area?

“The next three years will harbor a lot of unknowns, but what is known about Manatee County is that it is a growing community,” the report said. “With growth comes the need for more services, providers and infrastructure to accommodate the projected population growth and changes.”

It also found concerns about long wait times, difficulty finding providers, affordability concerns and limited convenient locations for care.

## INTO THE FUTURE

The type of information generated in the survey is what drives the decision making and strategy for medical groups, say officials with BayCare, which is expanding its ambulatory care services in the area as a direct result of what residents shared in the survey. (Ambulatory care includes medical services such as primary care, specialty care, imaging, laboratory services and other outpatient services.)

BayCare is already one of the biggest health care nonprofits in Florida, with 16 hospitals throughout Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and Polk counties and some \$7 billion in operating revenue.

Dr. Christopher Bucciarelli, BayCare’s vice president for ambulatory services as well as its chief medical officer, says the information garnered from talking to the public allows the health care system to improve overall care and bring specific service to an area that may lack them.

He points to a need for women’s health services.

“For us, making sure there’s a location for women to have their children and have their deliveries and feel safe in that environment are the things that we want to make sure to have,” he says.

“If there’s a need in a community, we want to bring that to the community because it’s so important to the life cycle of a family, right? That can be a key part of that. So, we also want to make sure that the additional services are being complementary as well.”



Photo by Jay Heater

Lakewood Ranch Medical Center interim CEO Philip Reber is replacing the cardboard cutout placeholder now that the 60-bed tower is open.

While guided by community needs, expanding is not simple.

Health care organizations have to be smart about how they grow, balancing immediate needs with long-term planning to ensure high-quality and compassionate care, Bucciarelli says.

That means BayCare is often looking 10 years down the line while simultaneously looking at what can be done in five years or less to make sure it is being fiscally responsible while addressing pressing needs.

“You can’t build everything all at once in one place,” he says. “And so (we look at), where is the biggest need that we’re able to provide that access?”

Luckily for Lakewood Ranch, that need is right around the corner.



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# Parrish Power

An organization dedicated to boosting the local economy was in a pickle late last year. Its CEO had retired. It was in a budget standstill with Manatee County. Lakewood Ranch executive Amanda Parrish was the right person, at the right time, to make things right.

BY MARK GORDON  
DEPARTMENTS EDITOR

When a few people on the board of the Bradenton Area Economic Development Corp. approached Amanda Parrish about the possibility of being interim CEO, her initial response was a hard no. “Absolutely not,” she thought at the time, late last year. “I didn’t know the first thing about economic development.”

But the more she looked into it, and the more she heard from board members about what they were looking for, the more she thought maybe this could work. The board has three goals, she was informed in the wake of the December retirement of Sharon Hillstrom, who had helmed the organization for 14 years. It sought an experienced leader to work alongside the three-person EDC team and potentially add to it if necessary; someone to spend time with longtime partners and supporters while also guiding the organization in potentially challenging contract talks with Manatee County officials and commissioners; and someone to lead a reinvestment of time and resources in internal systems and processes.

They weren’t seeking an economic development guru.

Parrish, 38, a Lakewood Ranch area resident for 12 years with her husband and their two daughters, checks those boxes. She’s been the chief operating officer of Fawley Bryant Architecture, based in the Lakewood Ranch corporate park, since 2020 and a leader at the firm since 2016. Now a partner as well, Parrish essentially oversees all non-architecture functions at FBA, which has 24 employees. She’s hired

*Continued on Page 36*



Photos by Mark Wemple  
Amanda Parrish was named interim CEO of the Bradenton Area Economic Development Corp. in January.



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Continued from Page 34

people; revamped, reworked and rethought company culture; and has consistently worked on internal systems.

EDC Board Chair Chris Cianfaglione is a big Parrish supporter. A vice president with engineering, planning and design firm Kimley Horn, Cianfaglione has known Parrish since she started at FBA. He says it was a “no-brainer” for the board to reach out to her about the interim CEO role, given her make-it-look-easy skillset in problem solving and multitasking.

“Being totally honest,” Cianfaglione says, “the (interim CEO) role description was written around Amanda because she’s exactly the leader we needed right now. She’s someone who gets it done, and who does it in a way that is collaborative and community-minded.”

Parrish decided to take on the interim EDC role — notably while keeping her other job at FBA. “We want to make this where the next CEO doesn’t have to come here and be in fix-it mode,” she says. “They can be in ‘let’s go and evolve’ mode.”

That strategy will soon be put to the test. That’s because the EDC announced April 30 it has named a new president and CEO. That new leader, Shirar O’Connor, comes to the role after 30 years in marketing, public relations and economic development positions, both in the U.S. and abroad. O’Connor is scheduled to begin her new role with the EDC June 1.

## HIGH LEVEL

Parrish has spent her five months in the interim role fulfilling her commitment to get it ready for the next leader.

A big part of that was answering a top-of-mind question many have for Parrish (usually right after when does she sleep?) The question is, simply, what does the EDC do?

The answer to that query, in part, came at an April 7 Manatee County commissioners meeting. Parrish, Cianfaglione and some EDC supporters went before the commissioners seeking approval of a new contract. The meeting came more than six months after commissioners, citing concerns over transparency and return on investment, opted not to renew a \$337,000 annual contract. Those funds represent about 30% of the organization’s



Amanda Parrish oversees all non-architecture functions at Fawley Bryant Architecture.

\$1.13 million budget for the fiscal year.

Parrish contends the ROI the commissioners seek comes in the EDC “recruiting and retaining target-sector industries that will create high-wage, high-skill jobs for our county residents.”

Commissioners liked what they heard from Parrish and the EDC, and support from people like Stephanie Garrison, the county’s director of government relations. Garrison says Parrish, in three-plus months as interim CEO, “was exactly what we needed” in terms of moving projects forward, transparency and collaboration. “She always follows up and asks for feedback,” Garrison says, “and that kind of humility is rare.”

Commissioners unanimously approved a new contract with the EDC at the April 7 meeting, at \$292,450 on annual basis, a 13% reduction from the previous one. Payment will be made quarterly and is tied to reporting on performance metrics. That includes receiving 10 qualified leads per quarter and converting them into five active projects. Its focus is on five target sectors: advanced manufacturing, aviation and aerospace, corporate operations, sports performance and technology.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Parrish is familiar with community involvement and working long hours to accomplish goals and tasks.

On the latter, Parrish’s mom was

a nurse who worked midnight shifts; her dad sold Snap-on tools and later founded a real estate brokerage. “They made a beautiful life together, and I saw that it was a result of all their hard work,” she says. “I just saw them hustle, hustle, hustle.”

On the community side, Parrish was president of the board of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance in 2021 — a term that saw the organization grapple with both Covid and hiring a new CEO, Brittany Lamont. Parrish has also been on the advisory board of the Lakewood Ranch YMCA.

In the first six weeks of performing both roles — Fawley Bryant and the EDC — Parrish learned a key life, and business, lesson: Don’t let decisions linger. “I don’t have time to be in my own head,” Parrish says. “I don’t have time to overthink every decision. You make a decision and you move on.”

Parrish was also impressed with the community support she received in the role. Bishop-Parker Foundation CEO Wendy Deming and Manatee School Superintendent Laurie Breslin were among the leaders who reached out to Parrish with a call or text in January, pledging to help in any way they can.

“I feel so supported by the community,” Parrish says.

Of course, the flip side of being so supported, she adds, is it has been “really humbling and makes you really want to do a good job so you don’t let anyone down.”

## AT A GLANCE: AMANDA PARRISH

### Born:

Mount Clemens, Michigan

### Family:

Husband, Scott, is an assistant principal at Tatum Ridge Elementary School in Sarasota. The couple has two daughters.

### Education:

Bachelor’s from Spring Arbor University in southern Michigan; Master’s in Organizational Leadership from Jacksonville University

### Fun fact:

Self-published a children’s book in 2018, “Meet Mutzie.”

### Fun Fact II:

Played college basketball

### Fun Fact III:

Has a twin brother



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# Eastbound and Up

The out-east story keeps adding new chapters, from county office buildings to a globally known furniture store.

BY MARK GORDON  
DEPARTMENTS EDITOR

Even after a decade, the march out east from downtown Sarasota (and in one case, downtown Bradenton) still has legs — with little signs of taking a break.

This shift in cultural assets, businesses and government entities — in addition to mindset — stems mostly from available, and often relatively cheaper land, with a few other factors at play. One of those factors, of course, is population growth. In four interviews with leaders of these organizations, they all mentioned chasing people as a key reason to move, or expand, out east.

The list of stuff that's moved, or announced plans to move, down Fruitville Road to the Lakewood Ranch area around Interstate 75 or in other cases around north Sarasota and the UTC area, is as diverse as it is distinguished and dynamic.

It includes an orchestra, an aquarium and two separate county government administration buildings. Going back to 2014, the list expands to include the Mall at University Town Center that drew a Saks Fifth Avenue store away from Sarasota and landed the region its first Apple, and later, Tesla store. And in April, furniture retailer IKEA announced it planned to open a store across the parking lot from the mall, another big win for “out east.”

But wait, there's more.

Sarasota County, in addition to readying its new \$74 million, four-story, 124,000-square-foot admin

*Continued on Page 40*



The Sarasota County Planning and Development Services “one stop” building opened April 14.



The Sarasota Orchestra bought a site on Fruitville Road for its Music Center in 2023.



Renovation work began at the Fruitville Library in late 2025.

Courtesy images



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building, on 1 Apex Road, just off Fruitville, has three active projects out east. That includes an expansion of the Fruitville Road library, which will add an additional 8,500 square feet; a new 30,000-square-foot historical center on former green space behind the library; and a new county planning and development services “one stop” building, which officials say will incorporate all five divisions of that department. Those three projects, according to county documents, will cost just over \$60 million in construction and design.

From the perspective of Sarasota County Commissioner Teresa Mast, the out-east story is akin to the uncertainty of adolescence. “Remember your teenage years,” asks Mast, “those awkward years of



Teresa Mast

when you grew up and had acne and weren’t sure of yourself? When you talk about growth and ‘out east,’ we’re trying to figure out who we want to be when we grow up.”

While uncertainty can breed anxiety — conversations and often complaints on roads, parking, growth, flooding and more suck up a lot of social media oxygen — Mast is also of the mindset that growth is coming, and the key is to handle it responsibly.

Mast was born in Michigan but moved to east Sarasota with her family as a young girl and has lived the past 50 years in the same general area, which is the district she represents on the commission. She recalls growing up riding a horse near a pond that’s now University Parkway, so the growth conversation is personal, and political.

With that in mind, Mast, a Republican elected to the commission in 2024, says infrastructure is her No. 1 focus, including expanding Fruitville Road to four lanes out east through Verna Road. That and being careful about which projects are approved and which ones are rejected. She cites master-planned communities like Lakewood Ranch and Wellen Park in south Sarasota County as a yes, most others a no. “It has to be a premier project,” she says, “for me to vote for it.”



Work on the Sarasota County Administration Center began in late 2023.

Courtesy Sarasota County

## GOING AND GOING

Some of the key projects that have shaped, and will continue to shape, the out-east story include:

■ **Manatee County** bought a two-story, 101,312-square-foot building at 9000 Town Center Parkway in Lakewood Ranch in September 2025 for \$23.5 million. The building, near University Parkway and Interstate 75, is in addition to the county’s downtown Bradenton administration office but also a signal the power structure is shifting east. The building can house 600 employees, and the county began moving personnel into it late last year. Manatee officials have said having a large presence out east is an answer to be closer to the swelling population.

■ **The Mote Science Education Aquarium (SEA)** in north Sarasota opened Oct. 8. The \$132 million complex is in the UTC district, behind the Mall at University Town Center, and is projected to host some 700,000 visitors a year. Like others, Mote

SEA Vice President for Communications and Strategic Initiatives Kevin Cooper says Mote going out east is a follow-the-people move, for that’s where the population is growing. Cooper says Mote also plans to make a significant investment in the aquarium’s former City Island location in Sarasota, where it still has a presence, in expanded science and research facilities.

■ **The Sarasota Orchestra Music Center**, which is projected as a new home for the organization on 5701 Fruitville Road, just west of Interstate 75 — 1.5 miles down from the Fruitville Library. The orchestra, which has been based downtown for decades, bought the 32-acre site for its new Music Center in early 2023 from an affiliate of Walmart for \$14 million. The orchestra is planning an all-encompassing campus across three buildings on the site:

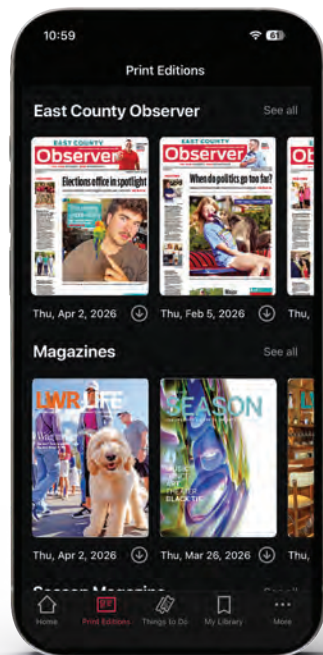
— an 1,800-seat concert hall, a 700-seat recital hall and an education wing, all connected by a courtyard. Much of the campus will be for parking and 12 acres of wetlands. The orchestra has been raising money for the project, estimated to cost between \$375 million and \$425 million, for at least two years.

■ **The Sarasota County** buildings are in various stages of progress. The Planning Department’s one-stop building opened April 14, and around that time the new administration building was getting close to earning its certificate of occupancy, says Carolyn Eastwood, the county’s director of capital projects. The county building had been downtown, at 1616 Ringling Blvd., for some 50 years. County officials, says Eastwood, under the direction of commissioners, looked for a site to build a new administration building that had both “ease of access and proximity to I-75,” also citing population growth.

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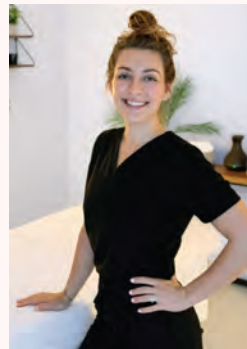


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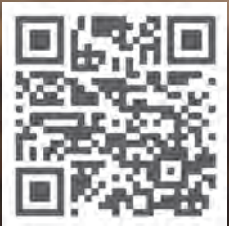
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**PAGE 52**



Photo by Jay Heater  
Sarasota 10-year-old Libby  
Bates enjoys the twisty  
ladder at the 2025 Star-  
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*class act*

# A Life of Service

Jeff Toale carries forward a family legacy while helping shape a more connected, compassionate Lakewood Ranch.

BY ERIC SNIDER | CONTRIBUTOR

Jeff Toale's philanthropic instincts started early. "Being around my parents and the clergy, I think the message of giving back to community was ingrained in me before I even realized it," he says.

The young Toale was a scion of the family that owned Toale Brothers Funeral Home & Crematory, a Sarasota institution dating back to 1918. Funeral directors must deal with people who are at their most vulnerable, often overwhelmed by grief, seeking a reassuring hand to help them through a grueling process. Caring, empathy and a gentle touch are absolute job requirements.

Jeff Toale watched, learned and absorbed those character traits as a youngster. These days he applies them in his role as vice president of business development for Robert Toale & Sons Funeral Homes. His primary role within the company is overseeing its Celebration of Life Center, which opened in Lakewood Ranch in 2022.

Although Toale, 45, was raised in Sarasota — and still lives there with his wife and four children — he has forged a deep bond with Lakewood Ranch, so much so that in 2023 he joined the board of the Lakewood



Photos by Lori Sax

Jeff Toale stands inside the Robert Toale & Sons Celebration of Life Center in Lakewood Ranch, where light-filled spaces and a contemporary design reflect a shift toward more personalized, meaningful memorial experiences.

*Continued on Page 46*



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Ranch Community Foundation and took over as president and board chair in June 2025.

Toale, his board and small staff — which consists of Executive Director Kate Mulligan and a part-timer — have ambitious plans afoot. For starters, “I think we dedicated \$125,000 back to the community last year,” Toale says, referring to grants the foundation makes to nonprofits. “We’ve announced that our goal for this year is \$250,000.”

Doubling an annual goal is not customary in the nonprofit world, but, as Toale explains, “We have to really challenge ourselves to expand what we’re doing here in Lakewood Ranch.” Last November’s Soirée at the Ranch, which celebrated the organization’s 25th anniversary and raised more than \$100,000, was an auspicious start.

This surge of renewed drive has been spurred by the organization’s break from the Manatee Community Foundation in 2021, after which it converted from a fund to a foundation. That change comes with legal and tax implications, of course, but in practical terms the nonprofit foundation is no longer just a fundraising organization that doles out money to other charities.

“We’re in the process of beginning to provide services as well as donating funds to nonprofits,” Toale says. As of early April, no programs had been unveiled. The foundation is also looking to incorporate volunteer programs. “We’re finding that people not only want to give money but want to give their time as well,” Toale adds.

The Toale family’s decades-old business also underwent a major transition not long ago. In 2018, Robert Toale — along with his wife, Debbie, and sons Jeff and Jason — split from Toale Brothers to form Robert Toale & Sons, which operates as part of the national Dignity Memorial network. “We had a different vision of where funeral services were going,” Jeff Toale explains.

As a result, Lakewood Ranch’s first funeral home is called the Robert Toale & Sons Celebration of Life Center. The branding reflects a new trend in funeral services, where they no longer have to be dreary affairs in dimly lit rooms with open caskets. A celebration of life means something different



Guided by empathy and a commitment to service, Jeff Toale carries forward his family’s legacy while deepening his impact across the Lakewood Ranch community.

for everyone who walks through the door, Toale says, and his company customizes experiences to meet the needs of each client. Much of the time, prospective customers are too grief-stricken to even know the kind of celebration they want, and that’s where Toale & Sons steps in to help them craft a plan.

To further separate itself from dusty funeral homes, the 6,700-square-foot facility is well-lit, with 25-foot ceilings and a color scheme built around white and cream. “We’ve had people walk in and say, ‘We’re in the wrong spot, we were looking for a funeral home,’” Toale says.

His full-time job and charitable pursuits dovetail nicely, but they keep him busy. Toale estimates that he puts in five to eight hours a week toward the foundation. (He’s also on the board of Samaritan Counseling Services of the Gulf Coast.) And his position at Robert Toale & Sons is not a nine-to-five.

It includes nights and weekends, and occasionally calls in the middle of the night requiring him to set funeral operations in motion.

That round-the-clock aspect was one of the reasons Robert Toale dissuaded his sons from joining the family business. “He didn’t want us to feel obligated, but to expand and see what else may be of interest to us,” Jeff Toale says. Although Jeff has a finance degree and Jason a degree in IT, and both worked briefly in those fields, they gave in to the pull of the funeral profession. The siblings started in entry-level positions and worked their way up, thus learning every aspect of the business. (Jason is vice president of operations.)

Working in the funeral industry has instilled in Jeff Toale a myriad of valuable life lessons. Here’s one of them: “I’m certainly reminded more often than most people to go home and hug your family,” he says, “to tell your family that you love them.”

“  
*I’m certainly reminded more often than most people to go home and hug your family, to tell your family that you love them.*

JEFF TOALE

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*charity snapshot*

# Chart a New Course

The Manatee River Youth Sailing Program is rebuilding — focused on access, community and the future of youth sailing.

BY EMILY LEINFUSS | CONTRIBUTOR

After decades on a steady course, the Manatee River Youth Sailing Program is navigating a season of change. The 87-year-old nonprofit now faces a period of transition, as the loss of long-standing private funding, a leadership shift at the coaching level and the lingering effects of Covid converge — reshaping how it operates, supports its sailors and sustains its future.

Founded in 1938 by the Manatee River Boat Club, the program has always been rooted in a simple mission: to teach young people to sail in an environment of fun, sportsmanship and community. While locations and structures have changed over time, one constant remained: for most of its history, funding came from a private foundation created specifically to sustain it.

That changed in 2023, when the program's longtime benefactor died, ending more than 70 years of private support. The timing compounded existing challenges, including the resignation of the head sailing coach and the ongoing effort to fully rebound from the pandemic. The program had \$1.3 million in assets in its most recent fiscal year, public tax filings show.

"Prior to two years ago, we had private support from our own foundation,"

*Continued on Page 50*



Photos by Mark Wemple

Head Sailing Coach Macy Parke and Manatee River Youth Sailing Program Executive Director Emily Crotty believe the future is bright for the organization.

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Continued from Page 48

says MRYSP Executive Director Emily Crotty. “So, right now we are essentially rebuilding our program while navigating the transition to a public charity.”

Despite the headwinds, Crotty and current Head Sailing Coach Macy Parke remain confident in the program’s future.

“Our mission hasn’t changed,” Crotty says. “We are supporting and promoting sport sailing for youth that is fun, that encourages sportsmanship and teamwork on the water and teaches respect for the marine environment.”

### FORWARD THINKING

That mission plays out on the water every day. Serving youth ages 6 to 16 from Bradenton, Palmetto and Lakewood Ranch, the program introduces beginners with a training cube and advances them through boats like Club 420s and Sunfish. For now, however, a long-time aspect of the program — racing — is on hold as the organization focuses on rebuilding and expanding access.

“All of our kids learn the basics of boating,” says Parke. “We start them with an introduction in the classroom called the ‘wind clock,’ which teaches how to trim the sails in the direction of the wind. We also walk them through how to set the boats up and rig them. Only then do they go out on the water.”

From there, the learning becomes more personal — and more impactful.

Out on the water, there’s no script. Sailors learn to read the wind, make decisions and adjust in real time. The result is more than skill-building; it’s confidence, independence and trust in their own judgment, notes Parke.

“Sailing teaches a lot of teamwork and sportsmanship, but also independence,” she adds. “The kids gain confidence because they’re the ones in control of the boat.”

That confidence often comes full circle, with experienced sailors stepping into informal leadership roles — mentoring younger participants and reinforcing the strong sense of community that has long defined the program.



The Manatee River Youth Sailing Program serves kids ages 6 to 16.

### SQUARE KNOT

Behind the scenes, the effort to sustain and grow the program is just as active. In response to the loss of private funding, MRYSP is building a more diversified financial future, including working with Bradenton nonprofit fundraising and grant consultant Leanne Rodriguez of She Gets Grants to identify new opportunities and support its transition to a public charity.

At the same time, the MRYSP board — made up of experienced sailors and professionals primarily connected to the local marine industry — is taking on a more hands-on role. “Our board is also in transition. They’ve never had to do fundraising or community outreach for us before,” says Crotty. “But they’re stepping up to meet the moment.”

Community outreach has become essential — not only to secure funding, but also to reshape public understanding. Although the program operates on the Bradenton Yacht Club property, it is not a private entity.

“We own the building and have a land lease with them,” Crotty explains,

“but we are not part of the yacht club.”

That building — the Bishop Sailing Center, completed in 2017 — was designed specifically to support the program’s needs. It includes classroom and instructional space, an office area upstairs and ample room below for boat storage, rigging and hands-on learning. With an open layout, roll-up doors for direct water access and a dedicated beach launch area, the center is built to handle both daily training and the elements — housing more than 50 boats inside, with additional storage outside.

Expanding access to youth in the community is also a priority. “We want to reach kids who might not otherwise have the opportunity to sail,” says Crotty, who is both realistic and optimistic about the challenges — and opportunities.

“It’s not going to happen overnight,” she says about the work ahead. “We’re going back to basics, building ourselves back up in the community and expanding access so more kids have the opportunity to sail.”

### ON THE WATER: SUMMER + WEEKDAY PROGRAMS

Listening closely to parent feedback, the Manatee River Youth Sailing Program has reshaped its offerings to better fit how families live — and how kids learn.

### SUMMER SAILING CAMPS

Two flexible formats:

- Two-week, half-day sessions (Mondays–Fridays, 9 a.m.–noon)
- One-week, full-day sessions (Mondays–Fridays, 9 a.m.–4 p.m.)

The 2026 season launches June 10 and wraps with a full-day session July 27–31 — offering both consistency and flexibility without losing the hands-on sailing experience at the core of the program. And while sailing is central, summer days also include beach outings, environmental cleanups and hands-on opportunities to connect with the local marine ecosystem — reinforcing the program’s emphasis on stewardship.

### WEEKDAY YOUTH SAILING

Afternoon sessions on the Manatee River focus on sailing fundamentals, rigging and safety, guided by trained instructors. Lessons also incorporate STEM concepts, giving kids a deeper understanding of how sailing works—on and off the water.

### THROUGH THE YEARS: MANATEE RIVER YOUTH SAILING PROGRAM

#### 1938

Program founded by the Manatee River Boat Club to teach children sailing

#### 1953

Pram shelter dedicated at Palmetto Pier

#### 1970s

“Pram barn” relocated to the east side of the Bradenton Yacht Club

#### 2017

Bishop Sailing Center opens at the Bradenton Yacht Club in March

Lakewood Ranch's

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# calendar summer 2026

## JUNE

### JUNE 3 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.

■ Visit [LakewoodRanch.com](http://LakewoodRanch.com).

### WINEMAKING IN LAKEWOOD RANCH

Learn how to grow and harvest grapes in Florida and about the wine production process from Fiorelli Winery & Vineyard co-owner/operator Kristin Hokanson. The free event begins at 6 p.m. at Lakewood Ranch Library, 16410 Rangeland Parkway, Meeting Room A.

■ Visit [MyManatee.org](http://MyManatee.org).

### JUNE 5 MUSIC ON MAIN

This monthly event is on Lakewood Ranch's Main Street from 6-9 p.m. Enjoy a free concert, food vendors, beer trucks and kids activities. Schmitz Brothers Band will perform classic rock, blues and country, and the event benefits Suncoast AHEPA Chapter 463. Continues Aug. 7.

■ Visit [LakewoodRanch.com](http://LakewoodRanch.com).

### JUNE 6 DAD'S DAY BLOCK PARTY

From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. visit the Grand Court at the Mall at UTC, 140 University Town Center Drive, Sarasota, to treat your dad. This year's theme is "Create Your Own Superhero & Bring Your Super Dad!" Enjoy vendors and giveaways while meeting athletes. Admission is free.

■ Visit [FloridaPenguinProductions.com](http://FloridaPenguinProductions.com).

### JUNE 7 THE MARKET

Far from the typical farmers market, The Market at Lakewood Ranch is a curated gathering of the best flavors in the region and more. Visitors can purchase produce, meat, poultry, seafood, breads, pasta and other



Madison Bierl

Lakewood Ranch resident Hannah Bellan, 2, goes down an inflatable slide at Movie in the Park.

prepared foods from more than 100 vendors from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Waterside Place, 1561 Lakefront Drive, Lakewood Ranch. The event runs every Sunday.

■ Visit [TheMarketLWR.com](http://TheMarketLWR.com).

### JUNE 11-14 USROWING YOUTH NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

USRowing will host its Youth National Championship regatta from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota, where spectators can watch a top-level rowing competition.

■ Visit [NathanBendersonPark.org](http://NathanBendersonPark.org).

### JUNE 12 SIGHTS + SOUNDS: LAKEWOOD RANCH BIG BAND

The area's newest high-energy big band, Lakewood Ranch Big Band, brings a night of dance, swing, jazz and pop. The free performance begins at 6:30 p.m. at Waterside Park, 1560 Lakefront Drive, Lakewood Ranch. Seating is limited.

■ Visit [LakewoodRanch.com](http://LakewoodRanch.com).

### MOVIE IN THE PARK

The family-friendly free movie night runs the second Friday of each month at Waterside Park, 7301 Island Cove Terrace, Lakewood Ranch. "Lilo and Stich (Live Action)" will begin approximately at 8 p.m. and is sponsored by Grace Community Church, which will provide one free snow cone from Kona Ice to the first 325 attendees. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Bring a blanket or lawn chairs. Concessions will be available from We B'Poppin Popcorn and Kettle Corn. Inflatables will be available for the kids beginning at 7 p.m.

■ Visit [WatersidePlace.com](http://WatersidePlace.com).

### JUNE 13 CARS & COFFEE

Join automotive enthusiasts from 8-10 a.m. in the West District at UTC, by Ford's Garage, 295 N. Cattlemen Road, Sarasota, for a show of exotic, sports and classic cars. All makes and models are welcome. Admission and spectator parking are free; show car

*Continued on Page 54*



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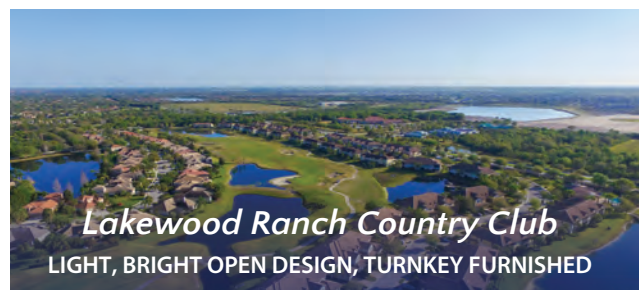
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Continued from Page 52

parking is \$10, and motorcycle parking is \$5. Continues July 11 and Aug. 8.  
■ Visit SarasotaCarsAndCoffee.com.

### **JUNE 18 NIGHT MARKET**

Shop local vendors offering produce, handcrafted goods, cocktails and more from 6:30-9:30 p.m. on The Green in the West District at UTC. Continues July 16 and Aug. 20.  
■ Visit UTCsarasota.com.

### **JUNE 26 MOVIES UNDER THE STARS: 'WONKA'**

Enjoy an evening of pure imagination on The Green at UTC. Pre-show fun with Wonka and an Oompa Loompa begins at 7 p.m., and the showing of "Wonka" begins after sunset, around 8 p.m. Seating is limited; it's recommended to bring blankets and lawn chairs.  
■ Visit UTCsarasota.com.

### **JUNE 27 TROPICAL SUMMER CONCERT WITH ALOHA UKULELE**

Lakewood Ranch Communities Activities club Aloha Ukulele brings breezy tunes and island vibes to Braden River Branch Library, 4915 53rd Ave. E., Bradenton. The free concert begins at noon in Meeting Room 205.  
■ Visit MyManatee.org.



Photo by Madison Bierl

Aloha Ukulele president Alice Baumann leads the LWRCA club in song.

## **JULY**

### **JULY 3-4 SUNCOAST LARGEST FOOD TRUCK FESTIVAL**

From 4-9 p.m. Friday and noon to 9 p.m. Sunday in the parking lot of The Mall at University Town Center, 140 University Town Drive, Sarasota, celebrate Independence Day at the Suncoast's largest food truck festival. More than 40 food vendors, crafters and local businesses will be on site. Admission and parking are free. Friday night will end in fireworks.  
■ Visit FloridaPenguinProductions.com.

### **FIREWORKS ON THE LAKE**

Take part in this fireworks show with festivities beginning at 5 p.m. at Nathan Benderson Park. The fireworks will begin over the lake when the sun goes down, around 9 p.m. General admission is free; VIP viewing includes food, beverages and premium parking, is \$105 for adults and \$65 for ages 12 and under. Parking is \$30-\$60.  
■ Visit FireworksOnTheLake.com.

### **JULY 4 STAR-SPANGLED SPECTACULAR**

Lakewood Ranch is pulling out the stops for Independence Day this year with its second Star-Spangled Spectacular. A 7 p.m. performance from variety artist Noah Royak, an 8 p.m. show by Circus Arts Conservatory and a 9



Photo by Jay Heater

p.m. drone show are the highlights of a special, free holiday event at Waterside Place. All parking is free, and a trolley will run continuously from 5:30-10 p.m.  
■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

### **JULY 10 SIGHTS + SOUNDS: POPS ORCHESTRA JAZZ COMBO**

This five-piece jazz combo brings an evening of dynamic, soulful jazz melodies and timeless American Songbook classics. The free performance begins at 6 p.m. at Waterside Park, 1560 Lakefront Drive, Sarasota. Seating is limited.  
■ Visit LakewoodRanch.com.

### **MOVIE IN THE PARK**

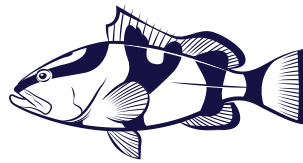
The family-friendly free movie night runs the second Friday of each month at Waterside Park, 7301 Island Cove Terrace, Lakewood Ranch. "Tangled" will begin approximately at 8 p.m. and is sponsored by Grace Community Church, which will serve one free popsicle from Florida Pops to the first 260 attendees. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Bring a blanket or lawn chairs. Concessions will be available from We B' Poppin Popcorn and Kettle Corn. Inflatables will be available for the kids beginning at 7 p.m.  
■ Visit WatersidePlace.com.

### **JULY 15 SUMMER LEARNING: SARASOTA JUNGLE GARDENS PRESENTS AMAZING ADAPTATIONS!**

Learn about animals' special adaptations that help them survive, with Sarasota Jungle Gardens. The free event begins at 2 p.m. in the auditorium at Lakewood Ranch Library, 16410 Rangeland Parkway.  
■ Visit MyManatee.org.

Speed juggler Nilson Escoba of the Circus Arts Conservatory performed at the 2025 Star-Spangled Spectacular at Waterside Place.

Continued on Page 56



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Continued from Page 54

**JULY 18  
CORNHOLE &  
COCKTAILS FESTIVAL**

Manatee Sunrise Kiwanis Club hosts its annual Cornhole and Cocktails Festival at Palmetto's Manatee County Fairgrounds, 1402 14th Ave. W., Palmetto. From 2-7 p.m., enjoy an indoor cornhole tournament; samples from breweries, wineries and distilleries; and restaurants' food and cocktail samples. General admission is \$55.20.

■ Visit [ManateeSunriseKiwanis.com](http://ManateeSunriseKiwanis.com).

**JULY 18 TO AUG. 1  
A TASTE OF MAIN STREET  
AND WATERSIDE PLACE**

Participating restaurants on Lakewood Main Street and Waterside Place offer exclusive prix-fixe menus with wine pairings, specialty cocktails and one-of-a-kind dishes. A two-course brunch or lunch is \$25, and a three-course dinner is \$35 or \$45.

■ Visit [LakewoodRanch.com](http://LakewoodRanch.com).

**AUGUST**

**AUG. 8  
BACK-TO-SCHOOL BASH**

Prep for the new school year with Florida Penguin Productions. The expo is 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at The Mall at University Town Center, 140 University Town Drive, Sarasota. Stock up on supplies, register for a free backpack, and enjoy an interactive scavenger hunt. Admission is free.

■ Visit [FloridaPenguinProductions.com](http://FloridaPenguinProductions.com).

**AUG. 14  
MOVIE IN THE PARK**

The family-friendly free movie night runs the second Friday of each month at Waterside Park, 7301 Island Cove Terrace, Lakewood Ranch. "The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie" will begin approximately at 8 p.m. and is sponsored by Grace Community Church. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Bring a blanket or lawn chairs. Concessions will be available from We B'Poppin Popcorn and Kettle Corn. Inflatables will be available for the kids beginning at 7 p.m.

■ Visit [WatersidePlace.com](http://WatersidePlace.com).



Photo by Madison Bieri

**AUG. 22-23  
REPTICON**

See reptiles up close at live animal encounters and seminars on the hour every day. The reptile and exotic animal expo is 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday at Bradenton Convention Center, 1 Haben Blvd., Palmetto. Admission is \$10-\$15 for adults, \$6 for ages 5-12 and free for ages 4 and under.

■ Visit [Repticon.com](http://Repticon.com).

Sarasota residents Rickie Riddle VI, Paitynn Riddle and Rickie Riddle V each receive a free backpack at the 2025 Back-to-School Bash at The Mall at UTC.

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BY EMILY LEINFUSS | CONTRIBUTOR

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Continued on Page 62

Continued from Page 61

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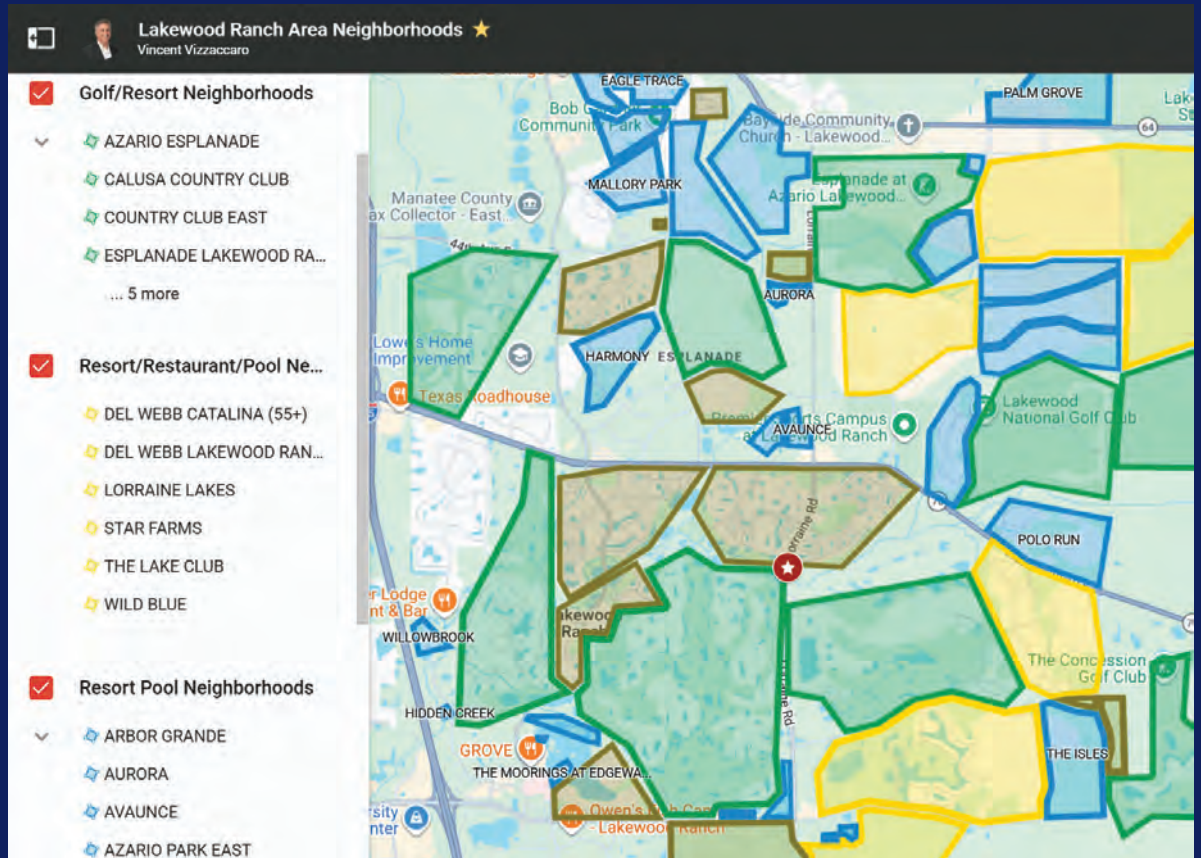
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# IN THE CLOUDS

Lakewood Ranch restaurant owner, be it on the ground or in the sky, emphasizes hard work — and helping others.

BY MARK GORDON | DEPARTMENTS EDITOR

Lakewood Ranch restaurant owner Zach Zeller and his wife, Jessica, have an all-time great first date story. It goes heavy on alligators and airplanes, with a dose of aw shucks meant-to-be.

It started in Daytona about 15 years ago. That's where Zeller, a licensed pilot, rented a plane.

He flew to the private side of Sarasota Bradenton International Airport, where local resident Jessica McKelvie, his date, awaited. They had connected over matchmaking website eHarmony, and this was their first date. "Some of her friends were joking with her," recalls Zeller, "like 'why would you get on some guy's plane?'"

"But she thought it was just like if he picked me up in a car," Zeller recalls his then unknown bride-to-be countered.

After the stop at SRQ, the two flew on to the Everglades, where Zeller had an airboat for the day and they went out for a ride among the gators. "We just had a blast," Zeller says, "and we both knew it was just meant to be."

Today the couple, married 12 years, has an elementary school-aged

daughter. They live in Panther Ridge, just off State Road 70 in east Manatee County, near both The Concession and several extended family members. Jessica Zeller is a nurse practitioner at a pediatric practice in Parrish. Zach Zeller, meanwhile, co-owns three popular Lakewood Ranch Main Street eateries: The Peculiar Pub, Twisted Pit BBQ and Percoco's Pizza & Pasta. Zeller splits his time between the restaurants, with, he says, no typical day other than putting out proverbial fires.

Zeller, too, is a bit of a paradox. At 42, he owns three restaurants. Flies planes. Built a multimillion-dollar business in his 30s and sold it in a stroke of terrific timing months before the pandemic. With that intel, and the first date story, it would be easy to think Zeller carries a big ego, that he's the kind of "brah" who throws around his successes.

That would be wrong.

Zeller is, instead, Midwest nice, almost to a fault, say people who know him well. For one, he's volunteered to fly dozens of flights for people in

*Continued on Page 68*



Mark Wemple  
Zach Zeller co-owns  
three restaurants in  
Lakewood Ranch.



Continued from Page 66

need, from hurricane recovery zones in Jamaica and Puerto Rico to medical flights for Angel Flight Southeast. Also, spend 90 minutes asking Zeller about his life, and he will often humbly defer to others — save for one thing he does have a bit of an ego about: talking about how he's never been hesitant to outwork anyone.

"I'm 57 years old," says one of his best friends and fly buddies, Indianapolis-based electrical engineering design firm executive Brian Inskeep, "and I know a lot of people. Zach is one of the best people I've ever met."

## BET ON ZACH

Zeller grew up in Indiana, the son of a U.S. Air Force aircraft mechanic.

His first job, when he was 14, was with an Ace Hardware store, and then next an AutoZone. "I loved to work," he says, quickly adding there was a wallet-filling purpose, too. "I needed to be able to do the things that I wanted to do. I loved cars."

Road machines soon gave way to flying machines. Zeller took his first flying lesson at 16. He was hooked. "I started trading my paycheck for flying lessons."

Asked why, after 25 years in the cockpit, Zeller maintains a love for flying, he smiles and leans back. "I get to go out to an airport, jump on a plane and then the sky is literally the limit. It's Zen. You are not thinking about anything that's going on but flying the plane safely."

Planes cost more than cars, so Zeller pursued a business where he could make bigger money. His first idea: flipping houses. On the advice of his dad, he bought the worst home he could find in the best neighborhood where he lived at the time. That was in Terre Haute, Indiana. He bought a property for \$38,000, he says, fixed it up and sold it for a tidy profit.

He used that profit to buy into an air charter business in French Lick, Indiana, flying people back and forth to a casino. He was paid in a percentage of what his passengers spent on gambling.

By the time Zeller was 22, some of those well-heeled passengers had gotten to know him, and they helped him

Continued on Page 70



Courtesy image

## SKY HIGH

Zach Zeller says "flying has always been my passion." Helping people in need through flying planes isn't far behind. The list of missions and places he's flown include:

■ **Puerto Rico** in September 2017 after Hurricane Maria devastated the U.S. territory. He flew all over the island with supplies, he says, and took people back and forth to the Dominican Republic, volunteering for about a month. "It was a life-changing experience," he says. "I saw some things I think most people have never seen." (One example: A dead cow on top of a light pole. Another example: babies without diapers for days.)

■ **Jamaica** after Hurricane Melissa in October. "I just really knew I had to help," he says, after that Category 5 storm ripped through the island. He spent three weeks in a loop, going from Sarasota to Miami to Montego Bay, then back to Miami and back to Sarasota to reload with supplies. Flying gave him a unique perspective of the storm's impact. "It was so surreal," he says. "The east side of the island looked normal, but the west side was totally devastated."

Zach Zeller flew planes filled with supplies back and forth between Sarasota and Jamaica, with stops in Miami, after Hurricane Melissa.

■ He's volunteered for **Angel Flight Southeast**, a Leesburg-based organization of some 700 pilots who utilize their own aircraft, fuel and time to provide free air transportation to medical facilities for people in need. Zeller was named Angel Flight's Pilot of the Year for the Central Florida West region in 2017. Angel Flight says he flew nearly 60 missions that year on behalf of an affiliate organization. Zeller maintains his work with Angel Flight today, flying, he says, one or two missions a month.

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Continued from Page 68

buy a plane so he could launch his own charter business. That business did well, then came to a halt in the 2008-2009 recession, when, says Zeller, the “flying industry basically collapsed.”

### STICK THE LANDING

Zeller knew he had to shift to something else. His next idea? Mobile oil changes.

It sounded good on paper, he thought: go to the customer to take care of a necessary, but tedious, car maintenance task. Good concept, difficult execution. He named the business Your Location Lubrication — a name, says Inskip, they came up with while brainstorming on, where else, a plane ride. “We were flying from Indianapo-

Continued on Page 72

Mark Wemple

Zach Zeller says he didn't know much about the restaurant industry when he bought Peculiar Pub, “but I know a lot about working with people ... and I know a lot about customers.”



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Continued from Page 70

lis to Kenosha, Wisconsin to go to an Italian market,” Inskeep says.

Plane rides, incidentally, are where Zeller often comes up with his best ideas. “I’ve heard a lot of his stupid ideas over and over and over on plane rides all over the country,” Inskeep quips, “but that’s just the way his brain works. He just sticks with it and sticks with it. He can’t stop his brain from thinking about these things.”

The first version of Your Location Lubrication was in Indianapolis, but, says Zeller, was “really complicated driving all around the city and very unprofitable.”

Zeller moved to Orlando, thinking a tourism hotbed has a lot of potential oil change customers in the rental car sector. That part was true. Proving the concept, though, took a lot of time, hustle and recovering from mistakes, he learned. “I was doing everything in the business. The marketing, driving the van, doing the oil changes,” he says. “Every day, I went out in my van. Some days it felt like 24 hours a day we were



Courtesy image

doing oil changes.”

The effort paid off. “Zach has grit,” Inskeep says, “and he has no quit.”

YLL landed Enterprise Rent-A-Car as a client. That was a tipping point. It grew into a multimillion-dollar company with several hundred employees and locations nationwide from Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine. The company made the Inc. magazine 5000 list five times for fast

growth and then, in 2019, Zeller settled on an exit strategy: He sold YLL to North Carolina-based on-demand vehicle detailer Get Spiffy. The deal closed four months before Covid shut the world down. “I count my blessings every day that I was fortunate enough to get out when we did,” says Zeller.

Zach Zeller flew multiple missions to Jamaica after Hurricane Melissa.

Continued on Page 74

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## FULL PLATE

That deal is what brought Zeller to the Lakewood Ranch area. He and Jessica lived in Hillsborough County for a bit, then settled into Panther Ridge.

Zeller met Evan Percoco in Lakewood Ranch and the pair became friends. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Percoco worked at the restaurants until recently, when he stepped away for a break, says Zeller; they remain business partners.

Under the name EZ Restaurant Group, they opened a barbecue pop-up at Crowder Plaza in Lakewood Ranch during the pandemic. Then, in 2023 they bought Peculiar Pub on Lakewood Ranch Main Street, with both saying they believed the retail-dining-entertainment block had untapped potential. They added the two other places in 2024 and have been in tweak-and-adapt mode the past 18 months.

One misstep, Zeller says, has been Twisted Pit BBQ. The down-home, counter service, picnic-style concept has underperformed, Zeller says —

so much so plans were underway in mid-May to shutter Twisted Pit and move Peculiar Pub into that spot, taking the EZ portfolio down to two Main Street locations. Zeller says they will add a billiards table and other games to the new Peculiar Pub.

“We really missed the mark on it,” he says of Twisted Pit. “We didn’t realize how big a risk it was.”

“Lakewood Ranch,” he adds, “doesn’t want to stand in line. They don’t want to sit on picnic benches. Lakewood Ranch doesn’t want plastic cups, and they don’t want to be served on trays.”

Zeller estimates he and his partners have spent some \$4 million on buying and updating the Main Street restaurants. He’s confident the investment will pay off given how much Lakewood Ranch is growing. That, and his ability to find success a variety of ways.

“I didn’t know anything about the restaurant business,” he says, when he got into this, “but I know a lot about working with people and dealing with people. And I know a lot about customers.”



File photo from Lori Sax 2024

Zach Zeller and Evan Percoco have been in businesses together for more than five years.



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# Home Grown

In Lakewood Ranch, ideas sparked at kitchen tables and backyard gatherings are taking root — and growing into something more.

BY ERIC SNIDER | CONTRIBUTOR

Lakewood Ranch is a lovely place to live, but it's unlikely to become the next Silicon Valley. It's not a startup hub or tech incubator or hotbed of venture capital. But there is entrepreneurship percolating beneath the rooftops. Small businesses are being hatched, ambitions unleashed, dreams realized.

"I think of us as having a hidden entrepreneur community," says Brittany Lamont, president/CEO of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance. "There's a lot of small business activity, not just in brick-and-mortar but from people you may never see."

Allow us to introduce you to three small businesses — two of them less than a year old and one looking to expand into a wider market.



Photos by Lori Sax

From left: **Katelyn Diaz** serves up smiles at Sip n Brew, the coffee trailer she launched with her parents shortly after graduating from Lakewood Ranch High. Partners **Scott Wacha**, left, and **Brandon Whitman** hold their Moo-Jitsu spice blends, a backyard-idea-turned-growing-business rooted in family, flavor and a bit of humor. **Jason Huh**, founder of STEEL Supplements, showcases Sodi Pop and Omni — two of the company's expanding beverage lines aimed at a broader audience.



# STEEL Supplements (Sodi Pop)

When Jason Huh's parents divorced after his eighth grade year, his mother, Katherine Best, moved him from Sarasota to what was then the wilds of Lakewood Ranch. That was in 1998, when the master-planned community was 3 years old. "There was hardly anything but a lot of land and cow pastures, and a Mobil gas station," he says.

It was not an easy transition for an energetic, social kid who had studied taekwondo, played league soccer and been first-chair violinist in the Sarasota Middle School orchestra. It wasn't all bad, though. Jason found a way to turn inward. "Lakewood Ranch was so peaceful, and it helped me clear my mind," he says. "It kind of served as an incubator for a lot of ideas, and without Lakewood Ranch, I don't think any of this would exist."

The "this" Huh speaks of is STEEL, a company he launched on his own in 2016 and of which remains the sole owner. Its products include a wide array of muscle-building supplements, energy drinks and — as of July 2025 — Sodi Pop, a "better-for-you" soft drink.

The new soda is available at Detwiler's Farm Market and about 150 gas station convenience stores throughout Florida, Huh says.

His father, Won Huh, was a former Mr. Korea bodybuilding champ and a prominent fitness trainer in Sarasota. Jason didn't pick up weightlifting in earnest until his junior year at Lakewood Ranch High School, but he quickly became obsessed and dropped music and other sports. In 2004, a year after graduating, he won a national teen bodybuilding championship, which spurred him to go all in — Mr. Olympia or bust.

During this period, he opened his first business, Elite Nutrition and Smoothie, in downtown Sarasota, which remains a STEEL storefront. Huh pushed and pulled and flexed and posed until he earned his professional bodybuilding card in 2010. A year later he married, and by 2013 he and Jessica had two daughters. Huh's fervor for the sport began to fade. He became less enamored with its hyper-macho, insular nature and had grown weary of the arduous training and strict diet regi-



mens. Jason Huh had mellowed out.

He retired from pro bodybuilding in 2013 and turned his attention toward family and running Elite Nutrition. After what he calls his "walkabout year," Huh started a T-shirt business aimed at the weightlifting crowd. Its quick success prompted him to start a supplements line that swelled to myriad products. Then came Revit energy drinks, also targeted at weightlifters.

Business was robust, but Huh found himself getting antsy. Nearly all of his sales were direct-to-consumer, and he wanted to connect with a larger audience. So STEEL rolled out a less extreme energy drink called Omni, its name ("all" in Latin) signaling a move toward the mass market. "I wanted to serve a different platform where I could get into the community, do hand-to-hand marketing, get to talk to people," he says.

Omni has 200 milligrams of caffeine — a can of Coke has 34 — so it's off limits to the Huh kids. That gave him an idea: Sodi Pop, which essentially kept Omni's names (Stoked, Beach Day, Island Gold, etc.) and fruity flavors while

removing the caffeine.

Huh says that Sodi Pop has a way to go before it's successful. The beverage sector is hyper-competitive, and to scale up, his soft drink will have to gain shelf space in larger stores. For now, Huh is focused on establishing a foothold in the local, regional and state markets.

He's pleased that his kids (ages 18, 13, 10 and 4) and their friends can pop cans and sip away. Sodi Pop has no sugar, artificial flavors, dyes or other additives. It's naturally flavored, uses Sucralose as a sweetener and contains vitamins C, B12 and ginger.

And then there's this full-circle development: Sodi Pop is available in the vending machine at Lakewood Ranch High.

Never one to let the grass grow under him, Huh rolled out yet another product in March. Liquid Maximus Vitae is water sourced from a "protected alpine aquifer" in Austria. It comes in 16-ounce cans.

All STEEL products are available through [SteelSupplements.com](http://SteelSupplements.com).

Jason Huh and his family — Angelina, Winston, wife Jessica and Leo — raise a can of Sodi Pop, the brand's better-for-you soft drink designed with families in mind.

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# Moo-Jitsu

It started with a silly question from a kid, which gave rise to a silly idea for a business, which after some brainstorming and research didn't seem so silly anymore. Last September, seven members of the Whitman and Wacha families founded Combat Spice Co. to market their craft spice creations under the brand Moo-Jitsu.

The business started as a fun side hustle that would involve the kids — all of them under 10 — but some positive early response has Brandon Whitman and Scott Wacha, Moo-Jitsu's primary drivers, thinking bigger. "We both work in recruiting," says Wacha. "And we know that the job market is shrinking. If we're able to build this company into something really big, then all of our kids could one day have an opportunity to walk into a job."

One potential beneficiary is Olivia Whitman, 9, who on the ride back from a jiu-jitsu tournament saw some cows swimming in a pond. "I didn't know cows could swim," she mused to her dad, then asked, "Can cows do jiu-jitsu?"

"Probably," Brandon replied.

Out of the mouths of babes.

The Whitmans, who live in Lakewood Ranch, and the Wachas, Bradenton residents, are close friends who gather for weekend barbecues. The two dads have long enjoyed toying with different spice combinations. When they decided to launch the business, Whitman (CEO) and Wacha (CFO) took their base recipes to a company in Colorado for an intense, three-day R&D session to refine their blends. Using 2,000 available ingredients, including many the partners did not have access to, they emerged with four types: O-Moo-Plata Green, Ki-Moo-Ra Black, Rear-Naked Gold and Arm Bar Red.

Each has a cute backstory that combines bovine and jiu-jitsu themes. And each contains a long list of ingredients that unite for a distinct flavor profile. The Colorado company blends the spices and bottles, labels and ships them to Wacha's house.

Moo-Jitsu spices are not just meant for backyard barbecues. "Between the four blends, they can be used for everyday cooking, on salads, even on

popcorn," Whitman says. "They're low sodium so you can use them liberally."

During an interview in early March, Whitman said the company had sold 3,000 bottles and already placed a second order with its provider. The four spices are selling about equally. "There are no duds, so that gives me confidence we can go back and create new blends," he added.

Rather than pushing to get their products onto store shelves, the Moo-Jitsu crew sets up at outdoor events, including the Tuesday farmers' market at Benderson Park. To lure passersby, they fire up the grill and cook meat sprinkled with their spice blends. That attracts noses. The team hands out samples, which often leads to sales.

Olivia Whitman and Wes Wacha,

both 9, span out, armed with samples, and draw folks to the table, which can lead to a sale. "At first, Olivia asked me, 'How much money do I get?'" Brandon recalls with a chuckle. "They thought, 'I just sold a \$12 box, I should get \$12.' We had to show them the math, the cost of goods, how much we paid, how much we're making, how none of us [adults] are taking a salary but are investing it right back into the business. And Olivia goes, 'So where's my money?' And I said, 'Well, we'll have to work out a side agreement.'"

When Wes asked his father for his cut, Wacha told him, "You want dinner tonight?"

Moo-jitsu products are available through [MooJitsu.co](http://MooJitsu.co).

Scott Wacha, back left, and partner Brandon Whitman, back right, with their children Lily, Anna and Wes Wacha and Diego and Olivia Whitman, showcase the family spirit behind Moo-Jitsu, the homegrown spice brand they launched together.

**Inset:** Moo-Jitsu's signature blends — Arm Bar Red, O-Moo-Plata Green, Rear-Naked Gold and Ki-Moo-Ra Black — reflect the brand's playful mix of barbecue culture and jiu-jitsu inspiration.





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# Sip n Brew

By her mid-teens, Katelyn Diaz knew she wanted to start a company one day, so after graduating from Lakewood Ranch High last year, she enrolled at State College of Florida to take online business classes. But she couldn't hold back her entrepreneurial urge. "I didn't want to wait until I graduated," she says.

The 19-year-old huddled with her parents — Adrian and Rachel Diaz — and came up with an idea they felt would find a niche in Lakewood Ranch: a coffee trailer. They coined it Sip n Brew.

Since last August, the colorful, custom-made vehicle has been all around the Lakewood Ranch area — at Nathan Benderson Park, at youth baseball and flag football games, at Sarasota Polo Club matches, at private events and elsewhere. Sip n Brew has even gone pro. It's the exclusive coffee vendor at Sarasota Paradise soccer matches (which began in March and run until October).

In addition to hot coffee, Sip n Brew offers cold brews, various teas (hot and cold), four types of lemonade and a few snacks.

Mom and Dad covered most of the startup costs but required Katelyn to pony up some bucks from her savings. To start their startup, Rachel took a year off from her teaching job and Adrian figured out how to carve out time from his corporate job in IT. The R&D phase was fun. For about a month, mom and daughter spent mornings in the kitchen of their Polo Run home sampling different coffee beans to create Sip n Brew's flavor profiles. They chose Banyan Coffee in Palmetto as their provider.

Each partner focuses on a few areas of the business, with some overlap. Adrian handles the financial and business development — he landed the Paradise deal — as well as setting up the trailer and usually driving it to that day's location. Rachel covers inventory and community outreach. Katelyn creates the graphics, runs the brand's robust social media channels, makes a lot of the drinks, packs the coolers and sells the beverages from the trailer. Rachel joins her when needed.



So how's business?

In early March, Katelyn said it was "pretty good" — in an optimistic tone. A successful day brings in around \$650, she says. The Diazes hope to soon add a second trailer and, if all goes well, eventually open a brick-and-mortar location — starting in Lakewood Ranch.

Thus far, the Sip n Brew venture is working out. "Sometimes it can be a struggle with a family business," Katelyn says. "But it's brought us closer together — figuring things out, how to even start a business in the first place. But we're having fun."

Adrian's assessment of his daughter's first foray into entrepreneurship is a simple one. "Super proud," he says.

Katelyn Diaz posts Sip n Brew's weekly schedule on SipnBrew.com.



**Above:** A family venture: Rachel, Adrian and Katelyn Diaz bring their shared vision to life through Sip n Brew, now a familiar sight across Lakewood Ranch.

**Left:** A Sip n Brew signature: iced coffee topped with whipped cream and caramel, one of the many refreshing options on the trailer's menu.

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# Beat *the* Heat

BY SU BYRON | MANAGING EDITOR

When the summer heat turns relentless, even the simplest plans can feel like too much. But Lakewood Ranch and its surroundings offer plenty of ways to step inside, cool down and make the most of the season. From hands-on art and immersive aquariums to indoor adventures, wellness retreats and movie escapes, these spots turn a sweltering afternoon into something to look forward to. Here are a few favorite ways to beat the heat — without missing a single summer moment.

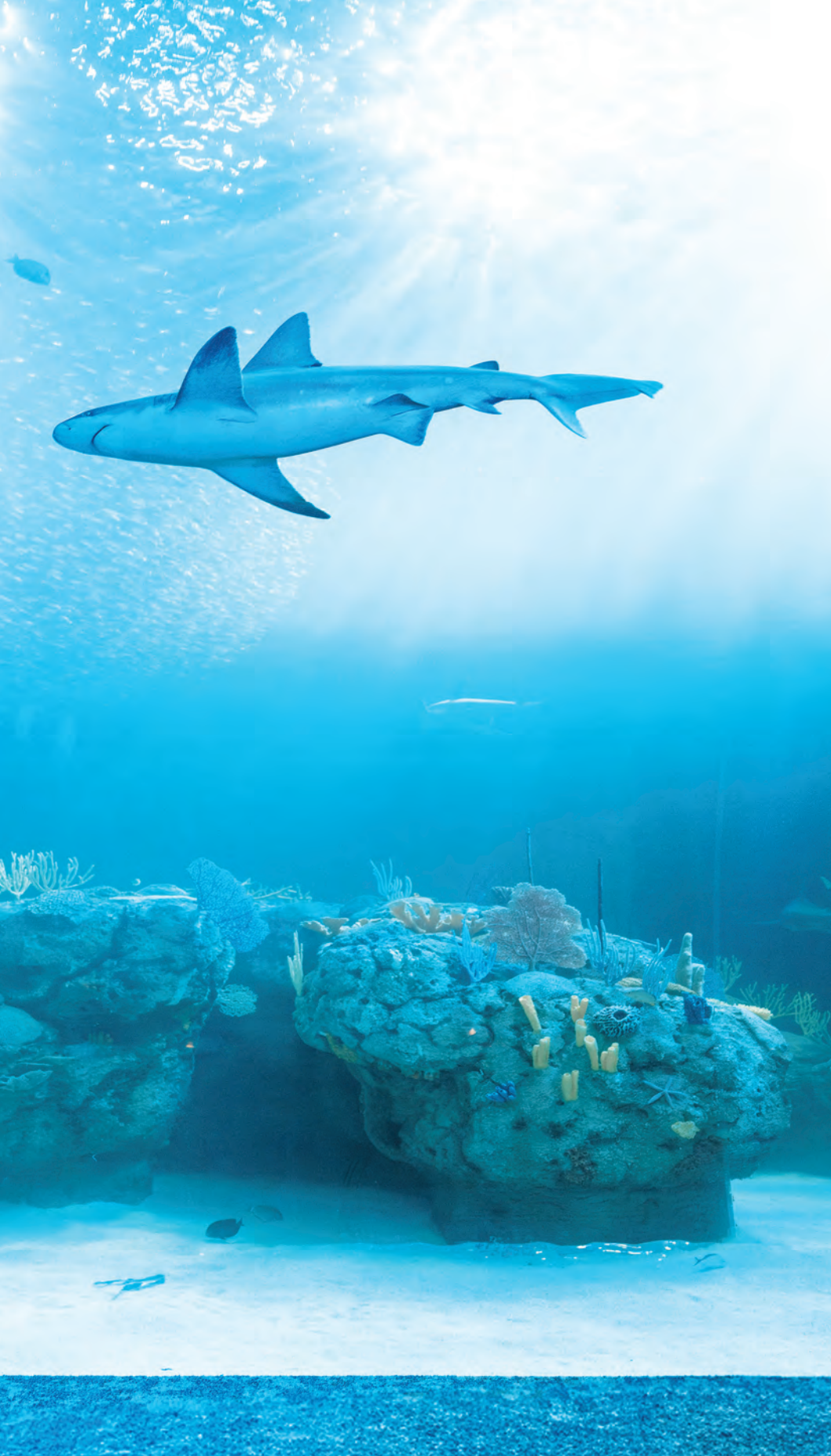
*Continued on Page 86*

## Close Encounters with the Deep

**Mote SEA** offers a cool oceanic escape that's driven by curiosity. Inside this state-of-the-art space, guests move from glowing jellyfish to playful otters, from gentle manatees to curious penguins, all the while discovering the science and care behind every exhibit. It's part aquarium, part research hub and entirely absorbing — the kind of place where an hour can easily turn into an afternoon.



A visitor points in wonder inside Mote SEA's expansive habitat, where sharks, rays and reef life glide



Photos by Hayley Rutger

through a luminous underwater world. **Top-left:** Humboldt penguins gather along the rocks.

## COOL THINGS TO KNOW

### ■ Some of Mote SEA's **hungriest residents**

are also its gentlest. The manatees collectively consume about 100 pounds of produce every day — a steady diet of lettuce, cabbage and leafy greens that keeps them healthy and happily grazing.

■ Behind the scenes, the smallest meals require the biggest precision. Each day, staff raise around **1 million baby brine shrimp**, enriched with nutrients and carefully prepared to feed delicate species like jellyfish.

■ One of the most captivating exhibits is also one of the most unexpected. **“Living on the Edge,”** a smaller habitat on the second floor, draws visitors in with its surprising mix of eels, seahorses and brilliantly colored fish — including one that swims vertically.

■ Short on time? Head straight to the **“Florida Waters Gallery,”** where many of Mote SEA's most charismatic residents share the spotlight — from playful otters and gentle manatees to a gopher tortoise and an impressively prehistoric alligator snapping turtle.

■ The **Humboldt penguins have a knack for stealing the show.** They often waddle up to the pop-up viewing window, peering face-to-face with guests.

■ Among the most memorable residents are **otter sisters Stella and Fynn**, whose constant motion, playful energy and unmistakable sibling bond make them favorites.

■ Life at the aquarium is anything but passive.

**Animals receive daily enrichment** designed to keep them mentally and physically engaged — from puzzle feeders and scatter feeding to interactive training sessions that build trust and encourage natural behaviors.

■ Some residents form genuine connections with their caretakers.

**Humboldt penguins** are known to recognize familiar faces, sometimes greeting staff with behaviors usually reserved for their bonded partners.

■ There's **more science** behind the scenes than most visitors realize. Veterinarians and biologists collaborate daily on everything from routine health checks to ultrasounds for sharks and rays — even weighing a giant Pacific octopus.

■ When it's time for a break, cooling off is part of the experience. **Jeremiah's Italian Ice** offers a refreshing treat on the third floor, while **Brewed Monday** serves up iced coffee and quick pick-me-ups on the first.

■ Summer brings even more ways to explore. **Seasonal camps and field programs** run throughout June and July, offering hands-on learning experiences for curious young minds.

■ **Planning ahead** makes all the difference. Summer is one of Mote SEA's busiest seasons, and timed ticketing helps keep visits comfortable — but popular days often sell out, so reserving in advance is key. *Visit Mote.org.*



A young artist concentrates on the details at Arts A Blaze, where simple brushstrokes turn everyday ceramics into one-of-a-kind creations.

## Paint a Mug

When the summer heat turns relentless, **Arts A Blaze** offers air-conditioned creativity. This walk-in pottery painting studio invites kids (and grown-ups) to slow down, pick up a brush and make something entirely their own. Shelves are lined with ready-to-paint ceramics — from mugs and plates to whimsical creatures — and the process is refreshingly simple: choose your piece, select your colors and let imagination take over. Under the thoughtful guidance of owner Joann Kavanaugh and her team, even first-timers feel like artists. It's the kind of place where a few quiet hours indoors turn into something lasting — a hand-painted keepsake and a memory of a summer afternoon well spent. Visit [ArtsABlazeStudio.com](http://ArtsABlazeStudio.com).

### COOL THINGS TO KNOW

- Arts A Blaze has been a Lakewood Ranch staple for more than a decade, welcoming creators of all ages — no experience required.
- It's a true walk-in studio, so you can drop in and start creating anytime.
- The price of each piece includes studio time, paints, glazing and kiln firing.
- Camps, clubs and themed workshops keep kids creating all year long.

## Walk the Mall

On days when even a short stroll turns into a sweat session, **The Mall at University Town Center** offers a cool alternative. The Mall Walker Club, sponsored by Lakewood Ranch Medical Center, invites early risers to lace up and log their steps in a bright, climate-controlled setting before the doors officially open. It's free, flexible and entirely at your own pace. Doors open early for walkers throughout the week, making it easy to build a routine that fits. No sunscreen required. Register at [LakewoodRanchMedicalCenter.com](http://LakewoodRanchMedicalCenter.com).

### COOL THINGS TO KNOW

- One full loop around The Mall at University Town Center is roughly half a mile to three-quarters of a mile, making it easy to track your distance — just a few laps can add up to a solid morning workout.
- Early access hours give walkers a head start on the day, with wide, air-conditioned corridors that stay comfortable even in peak summer heat.
- Mall Walker Club members can earn rewards for logging miles, adding a little extra motivation to your routine.



Morning walkers step out together at The Mall at University Town Center, where air-conditioned comfort turns daily exercise into an easy routine.



Courtesy photos

In July, tweens and teens can unplug and connect with themselves during a summer yoga camp at The Wellness Space.

## Serene Refuge

As the pace of summer heats up, **The Wellness Space** offers something rare: a place to simply pause. Tucked above Waterside Place, this serene studio invites you into a slower rhythm — one shaped by breath, movement and quiet reflection. Sunlit rooms host yoga, meditation and breathwork classes, while one-on-one coaching and sound healing sessions offer a more personalized path inward. Created by globally experienced practitioners with a vision for connection, the space blends science-backed practices with an intuitive, deeply human approach to well-being. Whether you drop in for a class or linger with tea in the relaxation lounge, it's a gentle reminder that sometimes the best way to beat the heat is to soften, slow down and recharge from within.

### COOL THINGS TO KNOW

- Hosted by Emma Dasco, The Wellness Space offers a two-week **Summer Yoga Camp** for tweens and teens in July. Through yoga, meditation and creative exploration, teens unplug, build confidence and reconnect with themselves. Call 941-900-8064.

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# Jump off the Walls!

**Urban Air Adventure Park** delivers a full-on indoor adventure zone where families can climb, zip, race and explore across more than a dozen attractions. From the moment you walk in, the pace shifts. Kids take off toward trampolines and climbing walls, while others head for the ropes course or laser tag arena. It's immersive, active and designed for all ages, with just as much appeal for teens and adults as for younger kids. Best of all, it's entirely indoors — a place where hours can fly by without a second thought about the heat outside.



Photos by Lori Sax

**Right:** Luka Mikanovic takes to the Sky Rider, an indoor zip line that glides above the action at Urban Air Adventure Park. **Inset:** Owners Michael and Tracey Tucci stand among the arcade attractions at Urban Air Adventure Park.



A vibrant, futuristic promotional graphic for "Laser Light Nights" at The Bishop Museum. The background is a dark space with a glowing grid floor and colorful light trails. At the top center is a large, stylized letter 'B' logo. Below it, the text "LASER LIGHT NIGHTS" is written in large, colorful, block letters. To the left, a price tag icon shows "\$15". To the right, the text "THE BISHOP Museum of Science and Nature" is displayed next to a smaller 'B' logo. At the bottom, the dates "MAY 21-SEPTEMBER 5" are prominently featured, followed by the tagline "YOUR SUMMER JUST LEVELED UP" and the address "201 10TH STREET WEST | DOWNTOWN BRADENTON". Social media icons for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are on the bottom left, and a QR code is on the bottom right.



## COOL THINGS TO KNOW

- Urban Air features more than 15 attractions, including a warrior course, climbing walls, ropes course, laser tag, virtual reality, adventure slides and even mini go-karts.
- One of the biggest surprises for first-time visitors is the Sky Rider — an indoor zip line that lets guests glide above the park for a completely different perspective.
- It's designed for all ages. Younger children gravitate toward trampolines and soft play areas, while older kids and teens head for more challenging elements like the ropes course and warrior course.
- Parents don't have to sit this one out. Many join in on the action, while others take advantage of seating areas to relax or catch up on work.
- Planning ahead helps. Weekday visits and earlier arrival times tend to be less crowded, especially during the busy summer months.
- When it's time to refuel, the on-site café offers snacks, meals and cold drinks — a welcome break. *Visit [Urbanair.com/florida-sarasota](http://Urbanair.com/florida-sarasota)*



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# Say Ahhh....

Sometimes the best escape is the one that asks nothing of you at all. A few unhurried hours at **Sirius Day Spa Salon & Med Spa** offers exactly that kind of reset. Step inside and the pace softens. Treatments range from restorative massages and customized facials to med spa services, all delivered in a calm, thoughtfully designed setting. It's less about indulgence and more about recalibration — a chance to cool down, tune out and emerge feeling like yourself again. Whether you linger for the day or slip in for a midday pause, it's a reminder that beating the heat can be as simple as slowing down. Visit [SiriusDaySpas.com](http://SiriusDaySpas.com)

## PRO TIPS

Karley Ward, aesthetician manager at Sirius Day Spa Salon & Med Spa, shares her go-to strategies for keeping skin calm, hydrated and glowing through the hottest months:

■ **Chill out:** Keep facial mists or gel masks in the fridge for an instant cooling, anti-inflammatory boost

■ **Hydrate smart:** Use lightweight formulas with hyaluronic acid to draw in moisture without heaviness

## ■ Soothe and protect:

Look for calming ingredients like aloe, allantoin, cucumber and green tea — and add vitamin C to help defend against environmental damage and brighten skin

## ■ Keep pores clear:

Use gentle AHA/BHA exfoliants to prevent sweat-related breakouts, but limit use to avoid irritation

## ■ Rethink your routine:

Swap heavy creams for gel-based moisturizers and make daily SPF non-negotiable



Stock photo  
Cool down, tune out and get pampered at Sirius Day Spa Salon & Med Spa.

# Pop n' Putt

**PopStroke** in the UTC district puts a playful twist on beating the heat. While the putting courses are outdoors, added fans and cooling misters help take the edge off, making it easier to enjoy a round even in the summer months. When it's time for a break, head inside to the full-service restaurant or cool down at the on-site ice cream parlor, where milkshakes and scoops offer a well-earned reward. It's part game, part hangout — and just enough relief to keep the fun going. Visit [PopStroke.com](http://PopStroke.com).



Courtesy image

At PopStroke in the UTC district, fans and misters help keep the outdoor mini golf courses comfortable, while indoor dining and an ice cream parlor offer a cool break between rounds.

# Reel Escapes

There's something deeply satisfying about slipping into a cool, dark theater and letting the outside world fade away. At **Lakewood Ranch Cinemas**, the experience goes beyond the typical movie outing. Here, the lineup blends independent films, international features and familiar favorites, creating a space where cinema fans can linger a little longer. Settle in, popcorn in hand, and time begins to loosen its grip — the heat, the errands and the noise of the day quietly fall away. It's one of the simplest pleasures of summer. Visit [FilmSociety.org](http://FilmSociety.org).

# Sweet Chills

Step beyond the mall and the wider UTC district becomes a destination for cool treats. From **Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams** and **Häagen-Dazs** to **Cold Stone Creamery**, **Menchie's Frozen Yogurt** and fruit-filled creations at **Raining Berries**, there's no shortage of ways to chill out. Whether it's a quick scoop or a leisurely dessert stop, it's the perfect way to end a sun-soaked day.



# Mall Rats

When the heat is relentless, **The Mall at University Town Center** offers a welcome indoor reset for families. The play area on the lower level near the Dillard's entrance gives younger kids space to climb, explore and burn off energy — all in cool, air-conditioned comfort. It's an easy, low-effort stop that turns a quick errand into a chance to play. Visit [UTC Sarasota.com](http://UTC Sarasota.com)

**Left:** From classic scoops to frozen yogurt and fruit-filled treats, the UTC district surrounding the mall offers plenty of refreshing stops to cool off on a hot day.



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# HAVEN

SPOTLIGHTING LIFE ON THE RANCH

The Florida lifestyle is glorified in a lavish new home in Waterside. **PAGE 96**

Photos Courtesy of  
John Cannon Homes  
A spectacular sunset  
from the indoor/outdoor  
living area.

BY ROBERT  
PLUNKET  
CONTRIBUTOR

# BOLDLY



The home's exterior is a carefully balanced geometric composition.

# MODERN

A spectacular model home in Waterside heralds a new look for the Ranch.





High ceilings and glass walls fill the living area with natural light.

**I**n Lakewood Ranch, traditional architecture still sets the tone — gables, arches and stone accents shaping much of the landscape. The styles may vary, but one thing has been largely missing: modern design. It’s a surprising gap, considering Sarasota’s reputation as a center for modern architecture.

That’s beginning to change.

Now we’re seeing a new type of home at the Ranch — boldly modern, with its sights set firmly on the future. The star of the moment is the Oulina model by John Cannon. Located in the Kingfisher Estates section of Waterside, it’s been prominently featured in many online videos, and rightly so. This is a home with a great personality. Modern architecture can be a little stark and austere. This home

certainly isn’t.

The Oulina is big, over 4,700 square feet under air and has an almost monumental scale. From the outside it’s an intriguingly asymmetrical arrangement of geometrical shapes with a massively scaled entryway. If it suggests a waterfront mansion on Siesta Key, that’s part of the point. It has local roots.

Jack Cannon, the vice president of Cannon Homes, founded by his father, John, back in 1987, explains that the time had come. “Lakewood Ranch is evolving,” he told me. “We saw an opportunity to introduce a more contemporary architectural style, one that reflects how people want to live today.”

And how is that? Jack is specific.



Photo by Lori Sax

*Continued on Page 100* Jack Cannon



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Continued from Page 98

“Clean lines, open spaces, indoor-outdoor connectivity and a strong emphasis on natural light.” The result might best be called Lakewood Ranch Modern, which is boldly contemporary but respectful of the community. The design was developed in-house by architects Barry Pattison, Cara Mead and Jaime Scarpitta.

After a tour of the house, the best word to describe it is “curated,” and beautifully so. Jack says this was their intention, “with every detail from the architecture to the interior finishes working together.” Clive Daniel, the high-end furniture retailer and design studio, was charged with the staging, and the collaboration has produced a model home that has everything a state-of-the-art Florida home should have — plus a surprise that left me speechless.

I’ll get to that surprise in a moment.

First, a look at the main living spaces. The surprise wasn’t in the grand living area, an enormous space with 12-foot ceilings and an all-glass view



A state-of-the-art kitchen offers several different dining possibilities.

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A putting green by the pool includes a miniature sand trap.

out to Kingfisher Lake. It's the ultimate open concept and, on this scale, it seems almost loft-like. The seating area features modern furniture but less angular than you might expect and set rather low so that your eye travels out to the view. The accent color, appropriately enough, is Tiffany blue. The focal point is the dramatic fireplace wall, a modern art piece, composed of quartz, tile and wood and set off by a large photo of a woman exhaling smoke. (It is the fireplace wall, after all.)

The elegant kitchen area has large windows, which is a signature Cannon touch. Multiple dining areas invite everything from intimate dinners to larger gatherings. Adjacent is a room that totally breaks the mold — a sort of den/hangout/playroom with two glass walls that slide back, making it truly indoor/outdoor. Here the predominant color is orange and the furniture gets very informal and even a little wacky. But no, that chair shaped like a sunflower isn't the big surprise, either.

And it's not the putting green, com-

*Continued on Page 102*

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plete with sand trap, that is located a step or so down from the pool. Nor is it the resort-style pool, with an infinity edge that visually merges with the lake, with a spa and sun shelf that complete the setting.

Continuing on to the primary suite, you encounter a series of mini surprises. There's the dedicated exercise room, whose glass walls — they look out to the pool and to the bedroom — can, at the flip of a switch, become opaque, making the space totally private. This is done with a technique known as “smart glass.”

The primary bath is a showstopper in itself. The soaking tub is set on an elevated platform looking out to an enclosed garden, complete with outdoor shower. The indoor shower also has a view — with glass enclosed on all four sides. You can bathe and shower with a view out to the lake. Or not. Just flip the switch.

The most playful part of the primary suite is the closet. Here the designers have taken an expensive boutique at Saks as their inspiration, and the room-size space is peppered with boxes and bags from designers like Chanel and Dior, with special cases for jewelry display. The effect is over-the-top in a fun, witty way.

But the big surprise is hidden away in the most unlikely place. Toward the front of the house is the study, a light and airy space with windows on three sides and a 20-foot ceiling. Against one wall is an impressive wall of bookshelves and chic storage. But look around. Off to the side, your eye is drawn up to what seems, at first, impossible. A little reading nook has been tucked into a corner — a second-story mini loft. You can see the bookcase and the comfy armchair. But how do you get there? True, there is a decorative ladder that only adds to the whimsical mystery.

What's going on here?

It's part of what many observers have said about the house. The Oulina has a fun, entertaining atmosphere that points the way to a new look in the Ranch. And for Jack Cannon, a local boy who grew up in the business, it's a personal achievement — a collaborative effort that he is proud to have been a part of.

No surprises there.



The primary bedroom is light and airy, with a view out to the lake.



A standalone soaking tub in the primary bath overlooks the garden.



The primary closet takes inspiration from a designer boutique.



Surprise! A whimsical reading nook adds a playful note to the home's study.

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# art and about

# Where Summer Sparks Creativity

These summer camps for children and teens open the door to self-expression, skill-building and the joy of discovery.



BY SU BYRON  
MANAGING  
EDITOR

## MOTE MARINE LABORATORY & AQUARIUM

Mote Marine's dynamic summer camps offer hands-on, age-appropriate adventures rooted in real-world science and coastal exploration. City Island Adventure Camp invites younger campers to roam Mote's waterfront campus, where mangroves, marine life and open-air discovery spark curiosity at every turn. Mote SEA STEM Camp challenges older students to think like scientists, with lab experiments, research activities and behind-the-scenes access to working aquariums and marine research. For those ready to go beyond the classroom, the Summer Field Explorations takes learning into the wild, with offsite excursions that may include kayaking, snorkeling and up-close study of local ecosystems. *Visit Mote.org.*

## SARASOTA ORCHESTRA

Sarasota Orchestra's Summer Music Camp, a two-week immersive experience, welcomes students of all skill levels into a vibrant, collaborative setting. With dedicated tracks for strings, band and percussion, campers take part in ensemble rehearsals, technique classes and skill-building sessions. Beginners can try an instrument for the first time, while more experienced students refine their abilities — all with individualized attention from skilled instructors. The result is more than music-making; it's the thrill of playing together and discovering what's possible. *Visit SarasotaOrchestra.org.*

## MUSIC COMPOUND

Turn up the volume this summer at Music Compound's Summer Camp, where young musicians jump in, plug in and play. Running June through July, these camps welcome students in grades 1-12 for an energetic mix of hands-on instruction and live performance. Younger campers get their start with Intro to Music, Kidz Rock Band, Musical Theater and Drum Circle, while older students dial it up with Modern Band, Songwriting, DJ & Music Production and Jazz Band. Whether picking up an instrument for the first time or fine-tuning their sound, campers explore, collaborate and build confidence in a setting that feels more like a studio than a classroom. Each week ends with a live performance for family and friends. *Visit MusicCompound.com.*

## ART CENTER SARASOTA

Art Center Sarasota's Summer Art Camp sessions invite young artists to experiment boldly in various forms of media. Each themed week — from "Let's Get Messy!" to "Mad Art Scientists" and "Story Worlds" — offers a fresh creative adventure, guided by professional teaching artists who encourage exploration, risk-taking and self-expression. Campers, grouped by age, build skills while discovering their own artistic voice in a supportive, high-energy environment. The week culminates in a mini exhibition for family and friends. *Visit ArtSarasota.org.*

*Continued on Page 106*



Courtesy photos  
A camper explores hands-on marine science during Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium's Mote SEA STEM Camp.



Young musicians bring the sounds of summer to life during Sarasota Orchestra's immersive music camp.



Students in grades 1-5 receive instruction on guitars and keyboards at Music Compound's Summer Camp.



Young artists proudly share their creations during Art Center Sarasota's Summer Art Camp



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Continued from Page 104

### SARASOTA YOUTH OPERA

The Sarasota Youth Opera Summer Camp invites aspiring performers, ages 8 and up, into the rich, collaborative world of opera, where music, movement and storytelling unfold in tandem. Guided by professional artists and production staff, campers move seamlessly between disciplines — from vocal training and acting to costumes, props and the subtle artistry behind the scenes. New this season, the Sarasota Opera Vocal Academy offers a concentrated experience for pre-college singers, refining technique and preparing the next generation of vocal artists. Whether just beginning or already devoted to the craft, students find not only their voice, but the power behind it. [Visit SarasotaOpera.org](http://VisitSarasotaOpera.org).

### SARASOTA ART MUSEUM

At Sarasota Art Museum, the Summer Camp program transforms the museum into a working studio, where young artists, ages 7 to 13, move fluidly between painting, ceramics, mixed media and, new this year, digital art. Each themed



Joy and expression fill the stage at Sarasota Opera's Summer Camp, as young performers bring music and storytelling to life.

week invites exploration — from graphic storytelling and kinetic sculpture to nature-inspired works and larger-than-life creations — guided by teaching artists who encourage curiosity and bold thinking. Within the museum's galleries and studios, campers engage not only with materials, but with the broader language of contemporary art. The experience culminates in a Friday exhibition, where students install and share their work, stepping into the role of artist in every sense. [Visit SarasotaArtMuseum.org](http://VisitSarasotaArtMuseum.org).

### FLORIDA STUDIO THEATRE

At Florida Studio Theatre's Summer Camp, young performers dive into act-

ing, improv, musical theater. Designed for ages 5 to 17, these dynamic sessions are led by professional teaching artists who guide campers through storytelling, character development and ensemble work in a supportive, high-energy environment. From playful introductions for younger students to more advanced training for teens, each program encourages confidence, collaboration and creative risk-taking. Many sessions culminate in original performances on FST's stages — giving campers the chance to step into the spotlight and share their work with family and friends. [Visit FloridaStudioTheatre.org](http://VisitFloridaStudioTheatre.org).



Campers and teaching artists gather outside Florida Studio Theatre as part of the organization's Summer Camp program.



A young artist explores stop-motion creativity during Sarasota Art Museum's Summer Camp, where digital tools expand traditional artmaking.

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## table talk

# Collin Blakeman of Florence & the Spice Boys

Chef Collin Blakeman explains why Middle Eastern cuisine is the spice of life.

BY MARTY FUGATE | CONTRIBUTOR

**F**lorence & the Spice Boys began as a roving kitchen in 2019, its bold, spice-driven identity shaped by Steven Schmitt's culinary epiphanies in Tel Aviv and environs. What started as a food truck evolved into a restaurant rooted in Middle Eastern fusion flavors, with global influences woven throughout the menu. Founded by Steven Schmitt, Florence Schmitt and Carl Kolber, they opened their first brick-and-mortar restaurant in Sarasota's The Landings in 2022. The concept found its next chapter in 2023 when Collin Blakeman, who worked under Michelin-star chef Thomas Keller at The French Laundry in Napa Valley, joined as a partner during plans for expansion at UTC. Today, with locations at UTC and The Landings, the kitchen continues to evolve, balancing vibrant, spice-forward dishes with a refined culinary sensibility. Blakeman recently shared a few spicy stories about the restaurant's origins, flavors and ambitions.

### The story behind our name is ...

The original food truck was just the Spice Boys, because it was just Steven and Carl. But Steven's wife, Florence, had such a gift for hospitality that she joined the operation. So, when they opened the first brick-and-mortar restaurant, they added her name — and Florence & the Spice Boys was born.



Photos by Lori Sax

### Our culinary style is ...

Modern Israeli and Middle Eastern with a ton of Mediterranean influence — and a little Asian inspiration. Steven and I love ingredients from all over the world. We're not strict traditionalists, so you might see Japanese okonomiyaki sauce on our menu. That creative freedom keeps things interesting.

### I love working with bold flavors like ...

... tahini, zhoug and amba. Zhoug is a garlicky, spicy cilantro sauce and amba is a pickled mango sauce that's almost like a mustard. Their flavors are bright, bold and punchy, and they show up in a lot of our dishes.



**Above:** Chef Collin Blakeman, an alum of The French Laundry, blends precision with spice-driven creativity at Florence & the Spice Boys.

**Left:** Silky hummus topped with herbs, chickpeas and olive oil — one of the restaurant's vibrant, flavor-forward staples.

*Continued on Page 110*

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Continued from Page 108

**We develop new dishes by ...**

Just starting with an idea. Steven and I both love to travel and eat out, so inspiration can come from another restaurant, a post on social media or just a flavor combo that excites us. Lately we've been experimenting with new kebab ideas.

**The one dish first-time visitors shouldn't miss is ...**

Our Jerusalem beef pita, which is also called an arayes. It's seasoned ground beef stuffed inside a pita and roasted, then served with our amba cream made from pickled mango. It's kind of like an Israeli burger, and it's one of my favorite menu items.

**The Florence and the Spice Boys dining experience should feel like ...**

Being a guest in our home. Both locations are designed to feel welcoming and personal. At UTC we've got oriental rugs, artwork, quirky sculptures and even menus from restaurants we've visited around the country. We want people to walk in, relax and create a memory here.

**We keep our menu fresh by ...**

Constantly exploring new kebabs and flavors. One of the things we're working on right now is a Thai lemongrass chicken kebab that we're hoping to introduce at both locations.

**My time at The French Laundry taught me ...**

Consistency and the importance of improving every day. You come in trying to be a little better than you were yesterday. That's the philosophy we bring to Spice Boys: keep evolving, keep experimenting and never get stuck.

**If I could teleport anywhere in the world to eat right now ...**

I'd go straight to Bangkok and hit the night markets. Honestly, I wouldn't even pick one restaurant. I'd just walk from cart to cart and eat street food all night.

**IF YOU GO**

**Florence & the Spice Boys**  
University Town Center, Sarasota  
FlorenceAndTheSpiceBoys.com.



**Left:** Co-founder Steven Schmitt draws on global travels to shape the restaurant's spice-driven identity.

**Below:** A colorful spread of kebabs, house-made sauces and sides showcases the restaurant's bold, cross-cultural approach to Mediterranean cuisine.



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DINING OUT

A close-up photograph of a squirrel's face as it peeks out from a circular hole in a tree trunk. The squirrel has greyish-brown fur with darker stripes on its back and chest. Its large, dark eyes are wide open, and its whiskers are prominent. The tree bark is rough and textured, with some white lichen or moss visible. The lighting is natural, highlighting the squirrel's features against the dark interior of the hole.

# *PARTING GLANCE*

Joseph Cueto captured this shot of a friend playing peekaboo near Heritage Harbour Park.

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