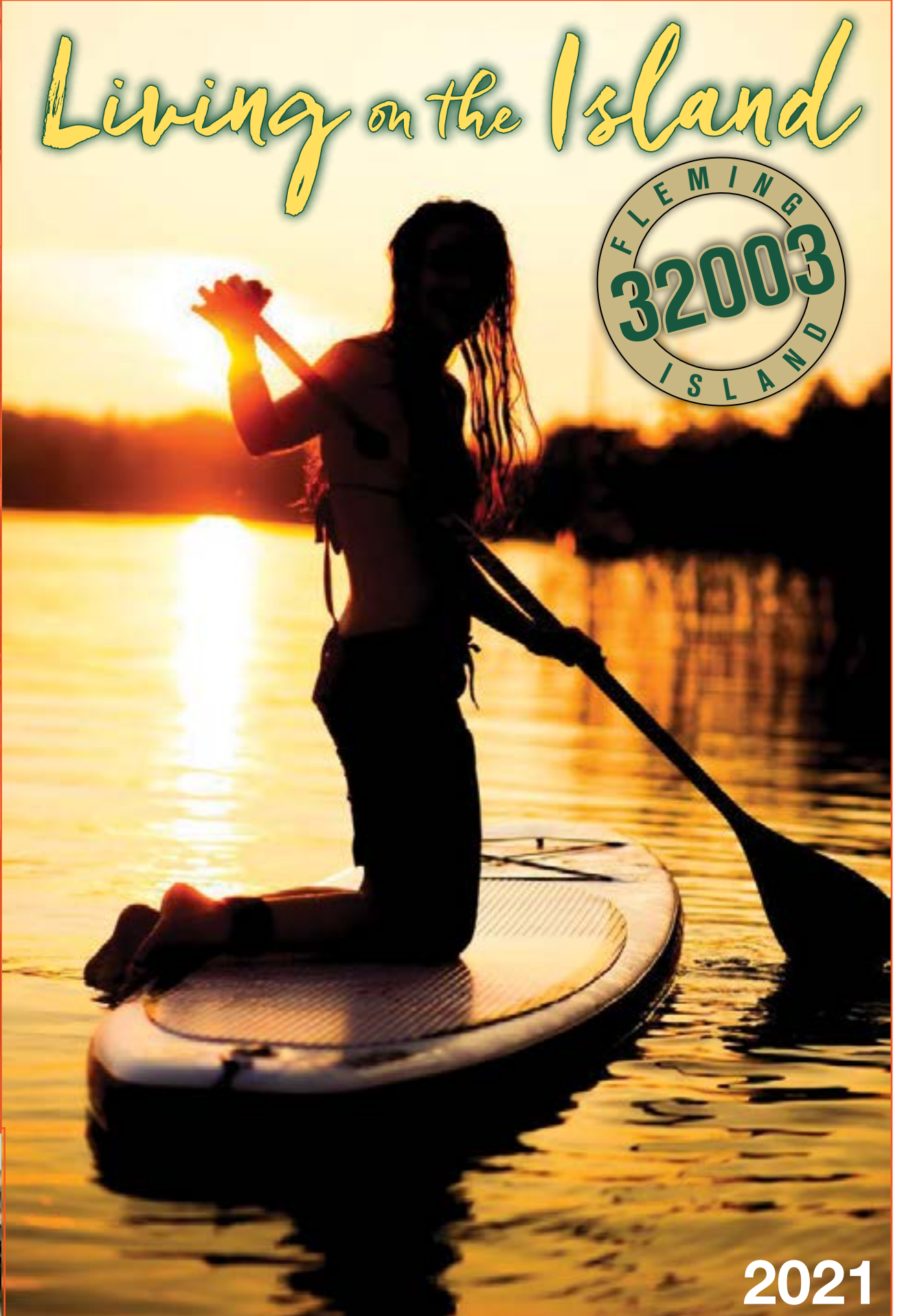




# Living on the Island



2021



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2021



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Every effort is made to avoid errors, misspellings and omissions. If, however, an error comes to your attention, please accept our sincere apologies and notify us. Thank you.

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Exciting Business Growth In  
Fleming Island

Baptist Medical Center Clay County  
Final two beams installed during public ceremony



FAI workers lift the last two signed beams to the sixth floor of Baptist Medical Center Clay County.

By Don Coble don@opca.com

FLEMING ISLAND – Once the speeches and prayer were completed, a group of 100 hospital, civic and local officials turned their attention to crane that towered over six stories of raw steel that make up the future of Baptist Medical Center Clay County. With a subtle wave, the diesel engine grunted as it came to life before effortlessly hoisting the final two beams to the roof.

With that, the county’s newest hospital entered its next stage of construction ahead of a planned opening in a year.

“Today is a celebration. We’ve reached the top,” said Baptist Health Board Chairman Richard Sisisky at the Sept. 30 reception. “The sixth floor is framed out.

You will continue to see, and no doubt hear, a lot of the construction as we move forward to finish with our construction in the fall of 2022.

Clay Eye Fleming Island Office Opens



**Clay Eye** now offers comprehensive eye care in their newest office in Fleming Island. This 15,000 square foot facility was designed with the comfort and convenience for patients in mind. It hosts 20 exam rooms, state-of-the-art equipment and has over 1,000 eyeglasses on display.

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**New Office location is  
1855 East West Parkway in Fleming Island.  
Office Hours: Mon – Fri 8am – 5pm. Sat 8am – 3pm.  
They can be reached at 904-272-2020 or online at  
www.clayeye.com**





## Paddle Share Comes to Camp Chowenwaw Park in Clay County!

Green Cove Springs, Florida – PADL is introducing a new way to rent paddleboards right from your smartphone, and will be launching its first of five new stations this week at Clay County’s very own Camp Chowenwaw on Friday July 2nd. PADL is similar to bike shares popular around the country, such as Citi Bike, where technology has enabled a new aspect of convenience and flexibility in the rental process. To get started you download the PADL app, rent, and unlock a paddle board directly from your smartphone.

The station is conveniently located near the kayak launch for easy access from sunrise to sunset. Camp Chowenwaw, and all of Clay County, present itself as a great spot to paddle. The beautiful 150-acre recreation site on Black Creek, located in Green Cove Springs near its confluence with the St. Johns River has wonderful sunrises, calm waters, and tons of aquatic life. These location features make it great to not only cruise, but also to do yoga on the boards, fish from the boards, and even do a little diving if that’s your thing. If one adventure isn’t enough, PADL has partnered with Clay County to roll out up to 5 more stations across the region enabling riders to discover and enjoy all the hidden gems the county has to offer!

How it works: Users simply download the PADL app on their smartphones and create an account. Then they can locate a nearby station using the app’s interactive map. To unlock, riders select the board from the app and follow the prompts. To return the board, you place the paddle and the board back on the station, and end the rental from within the app. All safety gear is provided on the station, and the app summarizes the trip after the ride is completed.

PADL’s Clay County station is located at Camp Chowenwaw on Black Creek, located in Green Cove Springs, 1517 Ball Road, Green Cove Springs, FL 32043 with more to follow soon.

**Discover and enjoy all the  
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For more information download the PADL app for iOS and Android or visit <https://www.padl.co>, and follow PADL on Facebook and Instagram.

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Clay County Forester Jon Johnson contributed to this article.

**FLEMING ISLAND, Fla** – Clay County’s Black Creek Park is located at 7890 US Highway 17 in Fleming Island. The Park covers just over 71 acres and contains a variety of ecosystems including pine flatwoods and wetlands. Species found in the uplands include a variety of hardwood and some softwoods trees. The primary canopy is composed of water oak, laurel oak, pignut hickory, sweetgum, and red maples, along with scattered slash and loblolly pines. The midstory consist of American elm, Carolina laurel cherry, blue beech, and various hawthorn species and black cherry. There is scattered sable palm in the uplands and into the swamps. American witch-hazel can be found in bloom during the fall months along with toothpetal false reinorchid (*Habenaria floribunda*). American beautyberry fruits are in full color with their bunches of purple berries standing out among the fall foliage.

Common animals found at Black Creek Park include grey squirrel, opossum, raccoon, various cavity roosting bats, and southern flying squirrels. Migratory songbirds can be found throughout the year bringing a variety of colors and songs to the area. Bird watchers will see Acadian flycatcher, black and white warbler, yellow throated warbler, American redstart, hooded warbler, blackburnian warbler, red shouldered hawk, and barred owls. Zebra longwing, great purple hairstreak, and various swallowtail butterflies can all be found throughout the forested portions of the park.

The river front cypress swamp communities contain bald cypress, scattered pond cypress, tupelo, Carolina ash, and various other understory tree species. Parsley leaf hawthorn and blue beech are two interesting species found in this ecosystem, as they have lumpy and contorted trucks. Wading birds can be found roosting in the cypresses along the tree line.



Alligators and various turtles can be seen sunning along the shores. Water snakes (*Nerodia* spp.), cottonmouths (*Agkistrodon conanti*), garter snakes, ribbon snakes, and swamp snakes, along with Florida and spiny softshell turtles can be found in the wetlands. Dragonflies and damselflies can be found perching on the wetland plants.

A bird watching or tree and plant identification guide would be a great companion for a nature hike along the trails.

Black Creek Park’s amenities include a covered pavilion, restrooms, paved parking, and 12 miles of trails. The eight-mile paved pedestrian and bicycle trail can be accessed from the parking lot and runs south along U.S. Highway 17. As one of Clay County’s most popular trails, you’ll enjoy seeing old friends or making new ones as you travel along the paved path that welcomes hikers, cyclists, and those out walking their dog.

Cyclists and hikers will enjoy the recently expanded Black Creek Mountain Bike Trail system. The trail heads are located at the parking lot near the map kiosk. The three trails in the system are labeled as easy, but can challenge even experienced riders with sharp turns, elevation changes, and tree roots. The trails are completely shaded and form loops that start and end at the parking lot. The Creek View trail is 2.5 miles long and has breathtaking views of Black Creek. The 9 Lives trail is one mile long, and the Palmetto’s Revenge Trail is also one mile long. All three mountain bike trails were designed and are maintained by the Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association in Jacksonville (Sorba-Jax).

For more information about Black Creek Park, please visit <https://www.claycountygov.com/community/parks-and-recreation>.

###

Clay County, FL is located southwest of Jacksonville and nestled along the beautiful St. Johns River. More than 219,000 residents enjoy a quality of life here that meets their desired pace and unique interests. Clay County has a business community that is 4,400 strong. Industries leading in information technology, manufacturing, healthcare and life sciences, aviation and defense, and logistics and distribution are here to serve you. Clay County welcomes you to enjoy the exquisite natural beauty, unique history, and small town feel only found here.





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## Clay Eye Fleming Island Office Opens

*Amazing State of the Art Facility now open on East West Parkway in Fleming Island*

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Lawrence Levine, MD-Pediatrics/Eye Muscle Specialist  
Russell Pecoraro, MD-Retina Specialist  
Donald Downer, MD-Cornea Specialist  
John Bullock, MD-Oculoplastic Specialist  
C.M. Harris, MD-General Ophthalmology



**New Office location is 1855 East West Parkway in Fleming Island.  
Office hours are Monday – Friday 8:00am – 5:00pm. Saturday 8:00am – 3:00pm.  
They can be reached at 904-272-2020 or online at [www.clayeye.com](http://www.clayeye.com)**



# Grace House Counseling Center

In the almost 20 months since the COVID-19 virus first hit the United States in February 2020, we have endured fears, disruptions to schedules, and economic loss. The pandemic has changed not only our vocabulary, but our lifestyles. Activities such as quarantining in place, Zooming in, teleworking, teleschooling, telehealth, and telecounseling are part of our daily life and work.

For a growing number of Americans, including many who live on Fleming Island and in Clay County, the challenges of facing the pandemic and all its implications to individual and family goals have been overwhelming. The Mayo Clinic, for example, reports that surveys show a significant increase in the number of U.S. adults with symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, compared with surveys before the pandemic.

Mayo also reports that some people increase their use of alcohol or drugs, possibly thinking that can help them cope with their fears about the pandemic. However, a Mayo information page on the Web warns that “In reality, using these substances can worsen anxiety and depression.” A clear and present danger for using self-help remedies for relieve of mental stress and depression is addition of an addiction problem to a mental health disorder.

While most individuals will recover from their anxiety and depressive symptoms with time, many others may develop chronic issues severe enough to meet the criteria for a mental illness. Among the most common reported diagnoses are an increase in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, or a major depressive disorder. Mayo and other health care organizations are in unison in urging individuals with these symptoms to contact a mental health care provider for care.

On Fleming Island, the largest private mental health care facility is Grace House Counseling Center. Grace House is Christian based and home to 14 state-licensed or state-registered mental health providers. These therapists daily treat dozens of individuals and families with a host of mental health-related issues, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

The center, which opened in Orange Park in 2000, is located just off U.S. 17 behind the Camarda Financial

Building. The center also has affiliate locations in North Jacksonville and Yulee. The site at 4375 U.S. 17, Suite 103, is discreet, convenient, and open five days a week. Grace House providers accept a variety of insurances as well as offering affordable self-pay rates. The center also has a supervised college mental health counseling intern who can see needy clients pro bono.

Prospective clients may schedule an appointment by contacting the center at (904) 269-0886. For more information about Grace House and its therapists, please visit the Center Website at [gracehousecounseling.com](http://gracehousecounseling.com).



**Grace House Staff and Counselors pictured left to right:** Sarah Stachowiak, Connie Thomas (Counselor), Kelsey Pease, Jean Pease (Counselor), and Deborah Nelson.

**Not Pictured: Staff:** Grace Rowell; **Counselors:** Larry Nichols, Ross Diloreto, Teresa Ellsworth, Margaret Rose Glenn, Courtney Huey, Shelly Hughes, Pamela Lewis, George Mendes, Ricardo Snyder, Julie Elmore

## Five Fleming Island High students selected as National Merit semifinalists

FLEMING ISLAND – The National Merit Scholarship Corporation has recognized five Fleming Island High seniors as semifinalists in the 2022 National Merit Scholarship competition. Libby Pittman, Ila Gapinski, William MacMillan, Gabrielle Carson and Jenna McHardy all will move onto the next level of the nationwide competition.

These students have distinguished themselves among 1.5 million students from more than 21,000 high schools. The PSAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, taken during the junior year, serves as the initial screen of program entrants. Among the 1.5 million entrants in the program, only 16,000 are recognized as finalists, and only 7,500 became Merit Scholarship winners. Representing less than 1 percent of each state's high school seniors, semifinalists are the highest-scoring program entrants in each state.

To become a finalist, a semifinalist must have an outstanding academic record throughout high school, must be endorsed and recommended by the high school principal, and must earn an SAT or ACT score that confirms the student's earlier performance on the qualifying test. The semifinalist and a high school official must submit a detailed scholarship application, which includes the student's self-descriptive essay and information about the semifinalist's participation and leaders. Three types of National Merit Scholarships will be offered in the spring of 2022. Every finalist will compete for one of 2,500 National Merit \$2,500 scholarships that will be awarded on a state representational basis. About 1,000 corporate-sponsored Merit Scholarship awards will be provided by approximately 240 corporations and business organizations for finalists who meet their specified criteria, such as children of the grantor's employees or residents of communities where sponsor plants or offices are located. In addition, about 200 colleges and universities are expected to finance some 4,100 college-sponsored Merit Scholarship awards for Finalists who will attend the sponsor institution. National Merit Scholarship winners of 2022 will be announced in four nationwide news releases beginning in April and concluding in July. These scholarship recipients will join more than 308,000 other distinguished young people who have earned the Merit Scholar title.

From the 50,000 highest scores, 16,000 students become semifinalists. The other 34,000 high performers are named commended students. Fleming Island High School also had seven students named National Merit Commended Scholars. They are Jenna Bello, Gabrielle Heuler, Cardelia Hilton, Janae Jordan, Anglea Lee, Jonathan Richardson and Aqib Syed.



From left, Libby Pittman, Ila Gapinski, William MacMillan, Gabrielle Carson and Jenna McHardy are semifinalists for the National Merit Scholarship competition. Winners will be announced between April and July.

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# Coming in 2022 to the Fleming Island Library

**FLEMING ISLAND, Fla –** The Fleming Island Library will be home to several new features in the coming year, including:

**Makerspaces –** The Digital Conversion Lab and Photography Lab will be opening in 2022 for patrons interested in creating and editing digital media. Patrons will be able to take high-quality digital

photos, record podcasts, and edit music and video using the library’s equipment and software. Patrons interested in converting older media formats into digital files can use the equipment to preserve home videos and family photos. Once the makerspaces are opened, a dedicated team will host orientations for users of varying levels.

**Co-Working Spaces –** Two new spaces dedicated to starting and growing small businesses have been added to the Fleming Island library. These reservable spaces include a computer, whiteboard, and other amenities to support startups by providing space for entrepreneurs to work, meet, and use the library’s dedicated small business collection. Classes and webinars will be available to learn new software, get better at the software you already use, learn the latest marketing techniques, and much more. The library also plans to partner with local organizations to offer free workshops for entrepreneurs and business owners.

While we excitedly await the completion of these projects, patrons can stop by the library to check out a Chromebook or a Playaway Launchpad, pick up a make-at-home craft kit, or try the new self-checkout kiosks at any library branch. Can’t make it while the library is open? No problem! Self-service lockers are available 24/7 for contactless pickup of reserved items. Patrons

can browse the library catalog from home for books, DVDs, music CDs, and much more at [insignia.claycountygov.com](http://insignia.claycountygov.com). You can select up to 15 items to place on hold and, if desired, will have the option to select “pick up from locker” to retrieve the items.

Stay connected with your Clay County Public Libraries. Subscribe to the library newsletters or view the Clay County Public Library Calendar at [claycountygov.libcal.com](http://claycountygov.libcal.com). You can also follow Clay County Public Libraries on Facebook at @ClayCtyLibrary and on Twitter @ClayLibrary.

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\*Graduation rate percentage for 2019-2020 school year.



# NEPTUNE PARK: THE STORY BEHIND THE NAME

Story by Archives Specialist Vishi Garig, a Service of Clerk of Court and Comptroller Tara S. Green



While on a routine training flight on June 14, 1951, a Navy Squadron VP 741 P2V2 Neptune suffered an in-flight explosion and fire. In an attempt to make an emergency landing at Fleming Island Outlying Landing Field (OLF), the plane slammed into the towering pine trees off the end of the runway. A tragic day in our county's history.

Lt. J.G. Ralph Jones recounted the crash in an oral history taken by his granddaughter. He remembered that he first felt the initial explosion and then saw that the

belly of the plane was on fire. He told the pilot, Lt. Commander L.B. Worley, "We have a serious fire back aft. Get on the ground.... quick!"

Jones initially thought Worley would ditch in the nearby St. Johns River but instead chose to try the airfield. Worley most likely planned to "drag the runway", i.e., he intended to fly over to get a look at the runway then turn back and land. "I could see trees going past the sides of the plane. I said, Oh - we are going to make it. All of a sudden, he added power.

I thought what in the world is going on?"

Jones recounted that he jumped up to grab the throttles to pull back on the power when he saw there were trees directly ahead. The plane was too high to land at 10 feet above the ground as the runway was running out fast. Worley "firewalled" the throttles in an attempt to pull up and go around. The plane reached about 500 feet then turned left. At that moment, the plane exploded and flipped over on its back. The plane, or what was left

of it, was hurtling to the earth at 250 mph, upside down and at a 45-degree angle to the trees.

"I knew I was dead, so I just sat there and read the instruments. My next thought was, "What's going on? Jones then thought, "Oh my God, we have crashed and I have lived through it."

Jones told others how he could taste blood and mud. He was gravely injured, both arms with multiple fractures, two skull fractures, a broken jaw, seven broken ribs, a broken leg, a punctured lung, crushed kidney and

a ruptured bladder. He was in deep shock. He realized that he was laying in burning forest near the plane. He couldn't walk so he pulled and pushed himself away from the fuselage using his one good leg. He could hear voices yelling, "Hey, somebody is still alive up there!"

Just then, the plane exploded again. Jones was burned now, too. At that time, there were four survivors. Two of them died at the hospital and the third, Airman Apprentice John Barnett, walked away with only scratches

and bruises. While Jones spent more than a year in the hospital, he used the time well, earning a Master's Degree from University of Florida.

Killed in the crash were Lt. Commander Lester C. Kee, Milton Trower Aviation Mechanic 3rd Class, Commander L.B. Worley, Aviation Mechanic 1st Class Clair Meek Walizer, Aviation Radioman 3rd Class James Alexander Logwood Jr., Aviation Ordnance Airman Turner Eugene Jones, and Airman William Fred Stewart.

Eventually, the Fleming Island OLF was closed and became a drag strip called Thunderbolt. By the 1990s, the drag strip was abandoned. Shortly afterward, Fleming Island was widely developed for residential, commercial and recreational use. Thunderbolt Elementary was built near the site.

The recent construction of Neptune Park began in February 2019 and was completed in March of 2020. Park amenities include three ball fields with clay infields, covered dugouts, backstops, fenc-

es, bleachers, concession stand and restrooms.

On June 17, 2021, the Clay County Board of County Commissioners dedicated Neptune Park to the memory the crew of a VP 741 Navy P2V2 Neptune aircraft that crashed at that location. This new athletic field and park is located off Thunderbolt Road in Fleming Island, Florida.

The recollections of Lt. J.G. Jones can be found at page 20 at <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00006477/00001>, UF Digital Collections.



Squadron patch.



The monument at Neptune Park.



1953 One of the two survivors of the crash, John Dabbs Barnett. Photo taken at NAS Jax. Barnett went right back to work after the crash. He spotted a landing gear malfunction and saved a plane. Barnett passed away in 1999.





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Fleming Island athletes challenging at all levels (pages 20-22)

By Randy Lefko  
Sports Editor for Clay Today

In a banner year of sports that followed a down year of COVID restrictions, the Fleming Island High School athletic program can be proud of the response of former athletes that are spread across the country still excelling.

One of the top grads for the Golden Eagle football program, linebacker Ryan Smenda, Jr., is a stalwart player now, a junior, for the still unbeaten Wake Forest University football team, currently ranked 16th national among NCAA Division I programs.

Smenda fast and agile athleticism, built from a state champion wrestling career at Fleming Island, has been big part of the Demon Deacons success as the leading tackler last year.

Also on the alumni roster of athletes still excelling is Coast Guard Academy senior wrestler Paul Detwiler, who has dominated his NCAA Division III weightclass, 184 as a junior, where he finished as the national runnerup after



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an unbeaten season. Detwiler has stormed the country battling wrestlers, but has had bad luck in his first two trips to the national tournament with an illness halting his first shot at a national title and COVID ending a top-ranked season last season. Detwiler was an undefeated state champion with Smenda and Briar Jackson under coach P.J. Cobbert at Fleming Island High School.

At Fordham University, Fleming Island football running back Trey Sneed is a standout senior running back with football honors for the Rams.

On the track, 2019 110 high hurdles state champion Glenn Rodgers kept his speed up as a freshman, now sophomore, at Southeastern University in south Florida with an All-American finish in the 60 meter hurdles. Rodgers became the first All-American track athlete from Fleming Island High School.

One runner who may have an opportunity to equal Rodgers status is cross country runner Marisa Kortright, who was part of a district, region championship team that finished sixth at the state championships last year, is now a fast-improving freshman runner at nationally-ranked Florida Southern

College in Lakeland. Kortright has run personal best already at FSC with the conference championships to be run October 23 with Kortright to be a key part of the team’s effort.

One other cross country graduate, Sydney Nelson, now a student at University of Florida and a member of the Gator Triathlon Club, recently completed the grueling Augusta 70.3 Half Ironman Triathlon that included a 1.2 mile swim, a 56 mile bike and a 13.1 mile run. The Augusta race was Nelson second Half Ironman event since taking up the sport on the request of a Florida classmate also on the triathlon team.

“It started out with sprint triathlons because I did not swim or bike at that point, but have progressed with training with the club,” said Nelson after her Augusta event.

Also on the cross country front, Andrew Miller a state track and cross country finisher for Fleming Island, is now a top running senior at Elon University and recently finished 96th overall, second for the team at the NCAA Pre-Nationals race in Tallahassee last week with a 26:00 time for the 8K distance. Miller, a three time all-conference selection with a ninth overall finish last year, and the Elon team will have the conference championship race on October 30 in Boston. Miller had a best of 31:55.8 for the 10Km distance.

Also on the wrestling front, another state champion for Cobbert, Chad Nix, who suffered an injury for his freshman season is now a redshirt freshman. Campbell, in 2021, has a group of five wrestlers ranked in preseason

polls while the five holds 10 NCAA championship appearances that tell the story of the program’s success.

One football player for coach Damenyum Springs, utility athlete T.K. Kocak, a multiple position athlete while at Fleming Island, has been excelling for the U.S. Naval Academy Prep School (NAPS) football team as preparation to possible play with the NCAA strong U.S. Naval Academy football team.

In his season opener, Kocack and the NAPS team blew up a 32-6 win over the Jersey Gators with Kocak getting a 22 yard touchdown run on the first scoring drive for NAVY. The team ran for over 300 yards on the ground.

From the Fleming Island swimming team, Nick Hackett, a state champion for coach Jordan Bright and the owner of the second fastest 100 butterfly in the nation in his senior season, was expected to compete for the University of Florida but has suffered a series of shoulder injuries to keep him out of the pool. Hackett’s potential was untapped at the college level and he, reportedly, continues to study at Florida while coaching. Hackett did have early success at Florida with best times in the 100 fly, 200 fly and 200 freestyle.

One other notable alum story is the retiring of the football jersey of football standout Ian Silberman. Silberman was an outstanding offensive lineman for the Golden Eagles that had a strong career at the University of Florida, Boston College and the National Football League before returning to be the offensive line coach with coach Springs at Fleming Island High



Fleming Island wide receiver / quarterback darion Domineck takes up for game against class 6A runner-up lake minneola. Fleming Island scored 6-0 upset in early part of season and is now fighting for a regional playoff spot with two games left on the regular season schedule.



Fleming Island freshman golfer Alyzabeth Morgan won the district golf championships on her first try and will be advancing to regions and a possible state tournament birth.



Fleming Island high cross country and track stand out Andrew Miller finished up his senior season at Elon University in North Carolina with an all-conference finish.



Fleming island's most recent State wrestling championship Chad Nix, center, stands with Fleming Island assistant coach Heath Whid-don, left, and head coach PJ Cobbert. Nix is wrestling for Campbell University.



Fleming Island high linebacker and wrestling standout Ryan Smenda Jr now a junior middle linebacker at undefeated Wake Forest University football won a State title in wrestling for Fleming Island and also went to region championship football twice under coach the Damenyum Springs



Fleming Island 2021 senior swimmer Christine Johnson is last remaining member of two-time 200 medley relay team gold medal team.



Fleming Island swimmer Alec Bilyeu is yet another fast sprinter for Coach Jordan bright and the Fleming Island swim team.

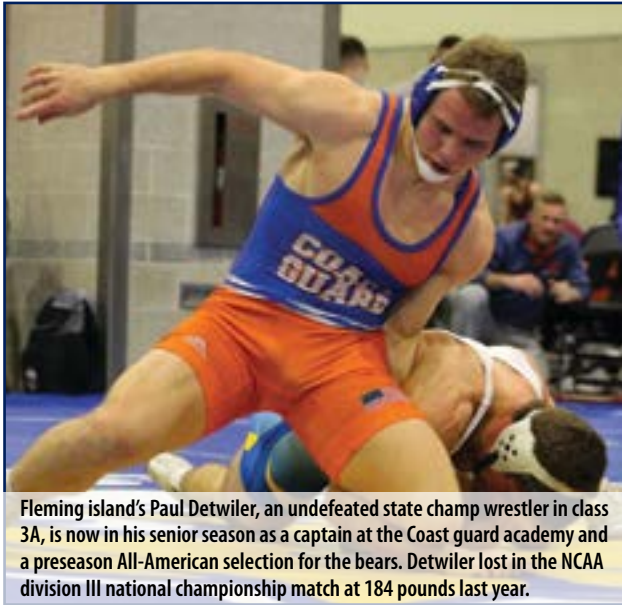


Fleming Island high State hurdle champion Glenn Rodgers, who won the Class 4A 110 high hurdles in his senior season is now an All-American track hurdler at Southeastern University.



Fleming Island cross country Ace Emma Millson, now a freshman at the University of North Florida, was one of most courageous athletes in Clay County after returning from a season-ending injury in her junior year to finish with a state meet berth in Cross country.





School. Also returning to coach with Springs are Johnathan Jean for the defensive line; a standout at Catawba College, and former wide receiver Gio Portabanco, part of the original Fleming Island High first season in 2003, not 1995 as reported in a prior article. LOL.

For the 2021 athletes, the fall seasons for football, golf, cross country and volleyball are just now entering the district championship part of the seasons with volleyball up first and the Golden Eagles having the unenviable task of taking on nationally-ranked Ponte Vedra High School in the district semifinals. The Golden Eagles, who improved steadily over the season under first year coach Jamie Reed, fought gallantly against the top-rated Ponte Vedra team; number one in Florida and also in Class 6A.

Reed was a long-time assistant coach under Amy Walker for the volleyball team.

In golf, the girls team has had a great season with an undefeated streak lasting well into the season behind freshman phenom Alyzabeth Morgan who has commanded one of the top ratings in all Florida.

For the boys golf team, a top  
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10 state finish last year is the followup goal with returners Andrew Davis and Colton Swartz now having to battle with new teams in a new district to get a second shot at the state tournament.

The Golden Eagles boys and girls golf now must drive and putt against the likes of former state champion programs from Ponte Vedra (2A team champions

2017, 18, 19, 20), Nease (4 team titles, 5 individual champions) and Bartram Trail (5 individual champions).

In cross country, with a graduation class that included Emma Millson and Kortright, the Golden Eagles have a young team with a strong pack run tactical approach led by Allie Knotts and Grace Adams as the girls expect to battle also in a new district for a second district and region title. At last year's region race, Knotts was the fifth finisher that secured a first region title for the team.

For football, coach Springs has had a slew of injuries to his team and has to adjust the lineup and tactics to be in a slim position to gain another region playoff berth. Springs' highlight for 2021 was a 6-0 rain-soaked win over Class 6A runnerup Lake Minneola earlier in the season. The Golden Eagles have a tough path to a playoff spot with a win on Friday against Atlantic Coast (October 22) the first step.

In swimming, where coach Bright has become the king of repeat relay champions; boys 200 free relay (3A, 2015, 16, 17) and girls 200 medley relay (2X; 2019,

2020), attempting to keep the streak alive in 2021 with just one member of last year's gold medal team; Christine Johnson.

For the winter sports, Cobbert is known for filling his wrestling room with talent and that seems to be evident as he looks forward to another strong run to chase new teams in Class 2A this year. Cobbert chased multiple times

state champion South Dade for the last five years and now will target Class 2A repeat champion Lake Gibson who was third last year.

The district 2-2A lineup for Cobbert includes 2A stalwarts Chiles, Leon, Columbia and Lincoln with the Golden Eagles now facing off in the county with Middleburg, Orange Park and Ridgeview.



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# Rolling on the river

## CCSO Marine Unit keeps waterways ship-shape

By Don Coble [don@opca.com](mailto:don@opca.com)

FLEMING ISLAND – Despite the heavy cloud cover and ominous forecast, some river revelers already were drinking koozie-covered cold beers as they waded along a sandbar near the shoreline of the St. Johns River or laid stretched across the bow of a boat waiting for the sun to finally break the dreary start to a Saturday morning.

And it was just 9:15 a.m.

With 39 miles of river and creek shorelines to patrol, Clay County Sheriff's Office deputy Bill Maher knew it was going to be a busy day. Water is the lifeblood of the county's recreation. For most, it's the perfect place to fish, boat and make waves – literally. For a few, however, it's a place where common sense can be easily misplaced. And as Maher has seen too many times, water can be unforgiving.

"Most people just want to have a good time," he said. "When they do something wrong, we're there. I'm not trying to ruin somebody's day. I'm trying to keep them safe – and everyone around them safe."

Which also includes manatees and alligators.

Maher said both animals currently are in their mating seasons. That's why he pays particular attention to no-wake zones where manatees are known to spawn – especially around Doctors Lake. Protected zones are stretching through the shallows for 300 yards from the shoreline to the channel to keep the animals safe. Boaters who race through those zones will be pulled over – even on the water – by one of the county's two marine unit boats.

One family from Jacksonville rented a boat and was on Doctors Lake when Maher turned on his blue flashing lights. Although it's marked by buoys, as novice boaters, they weren't aware they were just caught in one of the county's most important speed traps.

The family seemed genuinely surprised – and remorseful – so Maher gave them a warning. He also told them if they get caught again, they would get a ticket.

Ten minutes later, he made another stop for a boater going too fast in the low-wake zone. This time, the couple had just bought the boat and were making their third run. They too weren't aware of the restrictions. When noticed the buoys and promised to be more aware, Maher wrote them a warning, too.

Maher has a different approach when he's on the water. He said he believes educating boaters is every bit as important as enforcing county and state laws. It is a message that's well-received along the St. Johns River, Black Creek, Swimming Pen Creek, Governors Creek and Doctors Lake. Residents often wave from the shore. Boaters generally wave as they pass. They know Maher could be holed up in a small cove on the creek waiting for a reckless driver, but they all know he's simply trying to keep a semblance of order that benefits everyone.

And he's always on the lookout for children not wearing a lifejacket as

prescribed by law. And there no leeway for anyone driving recklessly or impaired, he said.

As the morning haze finally burned off, the waterways become more alive with activity. Children on top of large tubes and floats were being pulled by boats. Jet skiers and boaters congregated at an area known as "power line beach." Partygoers were meeting at what's become a popular hangout for hundreds of boaters off Moccasin Slough in the St. Johns. Locals call it Pineapple Point, and the party zone actually has its own Facebook page. During boater's skip day last September, more than 1,000 people swarmed Pineapple Point.

*Continued on page 27*

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**Bar Manager Cody Rae and James Davis, Course Representative**



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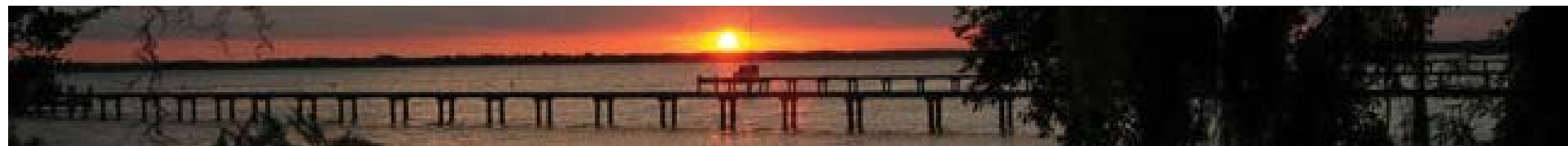
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# Rolling on the river *(continued from page 23)*



"The water's so shallow there I really can't get my boat to them," Maher said. "But I don't get any trouble from them anyway. They come out and play in the water. Most of them bring their kids so they can get out and swim, too. This is why so many people love the water."

Maher has a new 27-foot boat that was awarded to CCSO from a shared asset program grant through the Florida Sheriff's Association. He is the only deputy with a full-time assignment with the Marine Unit, but he works closely with similar units based in Jacksonville and St. Johns County.

"Our border goes to the middle of the river near the Shands [Bridge] and St. Johns' border goes to the middle, too," Maher said. "But if someone's in trouble, we don't argue about territory."

Maher's boat has been equipped with special sonar that helps him see the topography of the bottom of a river or creek. His boat has been instrumental in the recovery of victims since he's able to identify their shapes without using divers.



"One of the strangest things I see on the bottom are shopping carts," he said. "I haven't figured that one out."

As summer continues and the country awakens from its COVID-19 slumber, the waterways will become more active. Everyday Maher only issues several verbal and written warnings is a good day because it means everyone had a good time and came home safely.

Only to wake up the next morning and do it all over again.

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## One throw at a time

### VALHALLA INDOOR AXE THROWING PROVIDES ENTERTAINING, COMPETITIVE ‘SAVAGE’ RELEASE



By Don Coble  
don@opcfla.com

FLEMING ISLAND – Kandi Castonguay didn’t take a warm-up throw or stretched exercises before she quickly grabbed a small axe and hurled it toward a wooden target.

*Whack!*

Bullseye.

In one exhilarating, adrenaline-fueled burst, the operations manager at Island Dentistry unleashed her “savage” passion by tossing a razor-sharp hatchet, end over end, deep into a solid chunk of wood.

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“This is good family fun,” Castonguay said.

Michele and Dan Davis opened Valhalla Indoor Axe Throwing at the Eagle Pass Executive Suites to provide a unique outlet for entertainment and competition. The facility is a member of the International Axe Throwing Federation, and it soon will be home to an all-woman’s marathon Valkyrie League. The first tournament is Aug. 14 where teams will play eight league games in a single night. Valhalla already has competitors registered from Texas, North Carolina and New Jersey. Castonguay also plans to compete.

“We threw for the first time in Canada,” Castonguay said. “Our family loved it. There’s a nice comfort zone, a healthy atmosphere. What I like about it is there’s not a strength component to it. It’s muscle memory. You can have a slight frame and still be competitive.”

.....  
*“Something like this is  
long overdue”*  
.....

*“From the very first day we threw  
an axe, we were hooked”*  
.....

Office and medical staff from Island Dentistry booked Valhalla last week for an afternoon office party. Castonguay returned with her family two days later for an hour-long session.

“Something like this is long overdue,” she said. “Until this came along, the only family leagues were things like bowling and kids’ games.”

Axe throwing was a tool used by Viking warriors. Valhalla is the heaven in Norse mythology where slain heroes in battle go to be honored.



The Davises challenge newcomers and veterans alike to “Release Your Savage” the moment you pick up an axe.

Michele Davis said she threw her first axe while she was visiting family up north. Like most, she instantly was impressed.

“We were looking for something to do,” she said. “From the very first day we threw an axe, we were hooked. Actually, Dan’s got some Viking blood.”

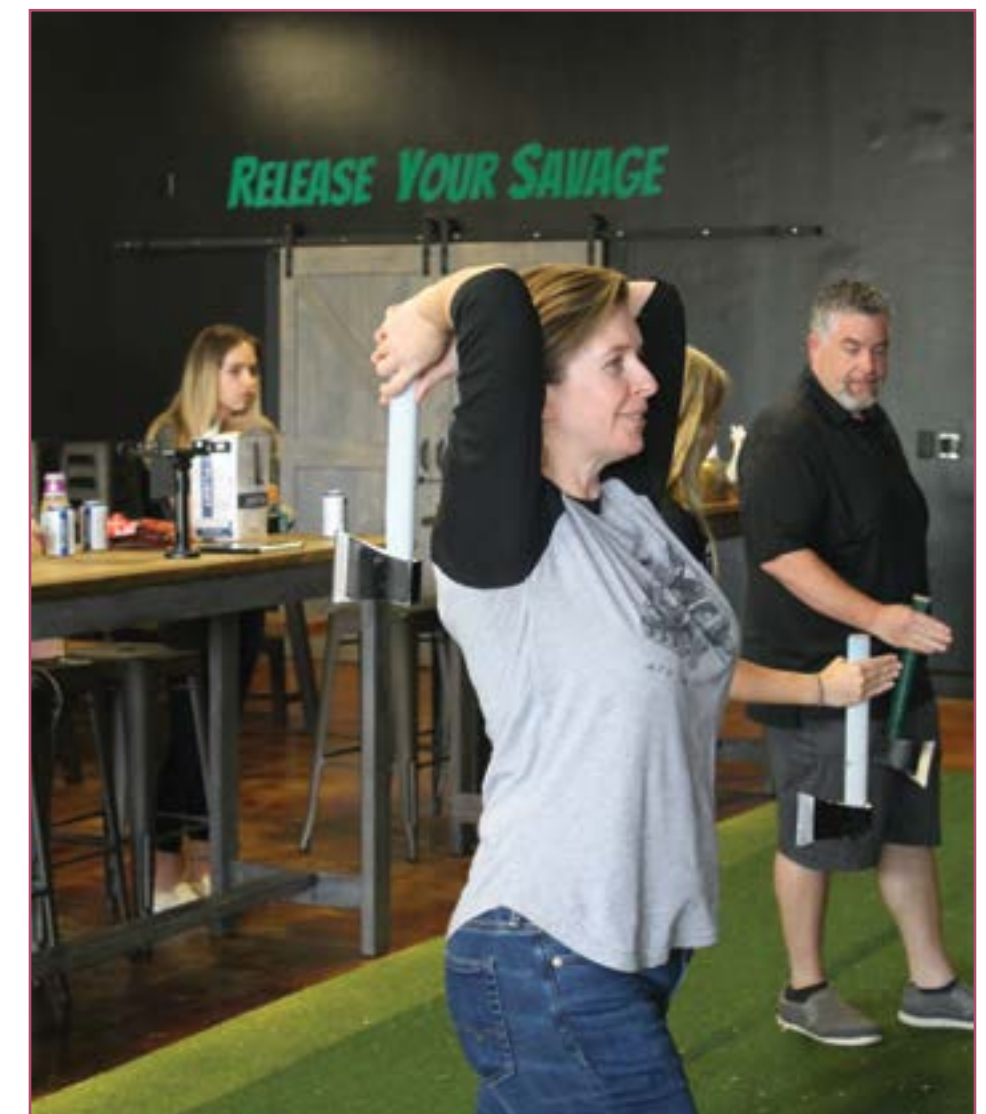
The couple moved to Clay County and decided to turn their passion into a business. All eight throwing lanes are generally filled.

Valhalla allows competitors to bring their own drinks, including alcohol. Throwers are provided axes and instruction on throwing with two hands, as well as single hand and under-hand.

Michele Davis said Valhalla is offering a deal that allows four players for the price of three during April.

Although walk-ins are welcomed, throwers are encouraged to make a reservation, Michele Davis said.

Valhalla is located at 4479 U.S. Highway 17 on Fleming Island. For more information, visit vahallasavage.com or call (904) 375-8442.



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