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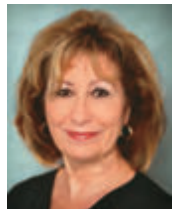
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## From the Publisher



# Local leaders and entrepreneurs are what make Lake City thrive

**W**hen you gaze around Lake City – and just about any area of North Florida – it's pretty easy to spot an entrepreneur. People going for it, doing their own thing, chasing their individual dream, are all around us.

We are living in exciting times of growth and prosperity in our community and regular people are making this happen. These people have hopes and dreams and great stories to tell. We're honored to share a few of them in this issue of Currents – our Leadership and Entrepreneurs issue.

Without question, the world needs more free enterprise in the form of small business that makes sense in a small-town arena. It's refreshing to hear the stories of local people who speak about their goals and express an interest in investing and staking their claim right here among us. These are our favorite people with which to do business.

These are just a few of the local entrepreneurs of which we are blessed. Through much committee discussion, we selected a few to profile. There are many others worthy of being featured, so don't take omission here as slight. It's not.

The bottom line of these business features is clear: You don't have to live in a metropolitan area or Silicon Valley or have Wall Street venture capital to make it. Sometimes you just need the smarts to know you have a good idea, the heart to chase the dream and the fortitude to stay the course.

Our community also boasts several incredible leaders and there's no doubt in all areas, America needs better leadership. We're all trying to make a difference, but leaders take a stance and show those around them how to gain the strength they need to improve themselves, then others they encounter. Several local leaders share their stories, as well.

We're proud of our community and we're proud to be Lake City's original magazine, now publishing in our 11th year. Let us hear from you. We're always looking for the next great story to share and it might just be yours.

Todd Wilson

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life in natural florida  
**CURRENTS**  
magazine

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## ON THE COVER



Lake City's Brad Wheeler (right) stands with his son BJ Wheeler in front of their Cessna 177 at the Lake City Gateway Airport. Brad and BJ are maintaining the Wheeler family legacy of leadership.

PHOTO BY KAYLA LOKEINSKY

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# EARNING *her wings*

By TODD WILSON







# Grace Elizabeth

takes success in stride.

Through the years, she has smiled in fields of wildflowers in Columbia County and walked in Lake City fashion shows, posed on ancient cobblestone streets of multiple European countries, basked in the sun on beaches of the Caribbean and South America.

After multiple print and video advertising campaigns, being the “New Face of GUESS for 2015,” – even seeing her image on Hollywood billboards and in an ad campaign on a double-decker London bus – Grace took it one step farther in 2016.

## **Achieving Her Dream**

The Lake City native made the modeling transition to the runway – a giant and sometimes unusual leap in the modeling industry. Recently, the 2015 Columbia High graduate was selected as a “Victoria Secret PINK Girl,” a model for the lingerie company’s junior line. So far, she has done an extensive print and video campaign for the PINK active wear exercise clothing line.

And, to achieve another personal dream, in December, Grace, 19, earned a position on the coveted Victoria Secret Fashion Show runway in Paris. She earned her Victoria Secret “Angel Wings” during the show, which is one of the top accomplishments in runway modeling.

Lake City’s Grace Elizabeth earned her angel wings, a coveted honor for many models, when she walked in the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show.



“It’s been an amazing year,” Grace said, during a visit to Lake City during the holidays. “The Victoria Secret Show was always a dream of mine and to achieve it was quite humbling.”

Grace said before she signed with her agency, NEXT Model Management, in 2014, when she was being interviewed, she was asked, that if signed, what would be her ultimate goal?

“I told them I wanted to be a Victoria’s Secret model and they all just laughed,” Grace said. “They smiled and said that’s what all the girls say when they come in. ... Well, I achieved my goal.”

### ‘Humbling’

Grace said her appearance on the Paris runway during the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show in reality lasted about 60 seconds, but it was a stressful minute, down and back on the one of the world’s most selective runways.

“During the show, there is so much adrenaline and it’s over so quick, it’s a blur,” Grace said. “The wings weigh 35 pounds, but you don’t feel them.”

The final thought in her head before stepping onto the runway with her new wings: “Don’t trip,” Grace said, laughing. “I was praying pretty hard back stage. A lot of the girls were



praying backstage.”

Grace said there was time to reflect once the lights dimmed. “After it was over, I went back and watched it and then I said, ‘Wow!’ I was honored to be on stage with some of the most beautiful women in the world, some that have been doing this for 10, 12 years, and I’m here with them. Humbling.”

During 2016, Grace adorned the cover of *Elle Italia* magazine twice and *Vogue* magazine called her “modeling’s next crossover bombshell.” Grace has modeled in nine foreign countries, mostly across Europe. Previously, she’s been coast to coast in the U.S., in New York extensively, the Caribbean and South America. Her favorite locale last year? “Greece was my favorite,” she said. “I loved the landscape of Mykonos (Greek Isles). It was so old. There are no cars allowed there. We moved around on motorbikes through narrow streets. The whole place was beautiful.”

Grace said she hopes her success can inspire others.





Among other magazine features, Grace Elizabeth was featured on the cover of *Elle Italia* for both the June and August 2016 issues.

“With hard work and dedication, you can achieve anything you set your mind to if you focus,” Grace said. “You will always encounter bumps, but you keep going. My advice is to meet as many people as you can and learn from them and go as many places as you can. Learn from it all and keep going.”

Grace said she realizes and is very appreciative of the support she gets from everyone back home.

“Knowing my family, especially my parents, and the entire town are behind me, it is an incredible feeling,” she said. “It means a lot to have the support. I appreciate it.”

Grace Elizabeth’s first magazine cover was the May/June 2014 cover of *Currents* magazine. She also appeared locally as the cover model on the Lake City Reporter’s 2015 Guide to Lake City and Columbia County.



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*amazing year.*

THE VICTORIA  
SECRET FASHION  
SHOW WAS ALWAYS A

*dream*

OF MINE & TO  
ACHIEVE  
IT WAS QUITE

*humbling*

— GRACE ELIZABETH





Dive Rite owner Lamar  
Hires explores a cave  
at Silfra Tectonic  
Fissure in Iceland.

# LIVE *to* DIVE

By TONY BRITT | Photos courtesy of LAMAR HIRES

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# The Hires family turned their love for cave diving into an international business.

**A**s a youngster living in the Jacksonville area, Lamar Hires was mesmerized by “Sea Hunt” and other marine-based television shows.

He loved watching the characters go through underwater adventures, exploring and experiencing the chills and thrills of encountering life under the ocean. Those on-screen scenes fostered Hires’ sense of adventure and spurred an unwavering thirst for information about diving.

Lamar was able to channel his enthusiasm for underwater life and he did it with such zeal and gusto that he soon mastered the treacherous sport of cave and cavern diving, which allowed him to travel the globe exploring caves.

Lamar said he developed a love of cave diving that allowed him to become pioneer.

“I’m a Trekkie. I want to go where no one has gone before,” he joked, noting that his name is listed on the maps of several local springs as an explorer. “So, with the cave diving it allowed me to do that. That’s my love of cave diving, being able to go into a place where no one has ever been before and I’ve traveled the world exploring caves. I’ve traveled the world just for the thrill and excitement of going where no one else has gone.”

Lamar is the president of Dive Rite, a diving equipment manufacturing company based in Lake City that was founded in 1984. Lamar runs the business with his wife, Lee Ann Hires, who handles the Dive Rite international sales and his son, Jared Hires, who acts as the general manager. All three are avid divers.

The family sees a lot of business in the area, as it is a destination for many cave divers.

“This area is basically the cave diving capital of the world with all the fresh water springs here along the Suwannee, Santa Fe and Withalacoochee Rivers,” Lamar said.

## On the Cutting Edge

Lamar, who is also a cave diving instructor, saw a need for equipment while teaching lessons.



Lamar Hires, along with his wife, Lee Ann Hires, has been running Dive Rite, a dive equipment manufacturer in Lake City, since 1984.

I’ve traveled the world exploring caves. I’ve traveled the world just for the thrill and excitement of going where no one else has gone.

– Lamar Hires, Dive Rite Owner

“Cave diving kept growing, so the equipment that we needed wasn’t available anywhere,” he said. “When we would teach a class we would have to find the equipment or

make it for our students. So, we started Dive Right and started making the equipment for cave diving. It just grew from there as the sport kept growing. Then as other places in the world started cave diving, Australia, Mexico and places like that, we were the only company in the world that actually catered to the cave diving community.”

Lamar called that experience the company’s start into the cave diving industry. Then, in 1990 a new kind of diving called “tech diving” emerged.

“We were the first and only technical diving company out there because technical diving had just been born,” he said. “We were on the ground floor of everything.”

Not only were they on the ground floor of technical diving, but they soon became a household name in the field.

“We’ve been doing this so long and we’re in to the





Jared Hires swims past a sunken ship at the Vandenberg Wreck in Key West. Jared has been diving since he was four years old.



Dive Rite General Manager Jared Hires explores a cave at Silfra Tectonic Fissure in Iceland.



Some of the mainstays that you see people using while diving, we were the first ones to actually bring it to market in 1984.

– Lamar Hires, Dive Rite Owner

diving so much that we innovate and actually guide the industry in areas in terms of how equipment goes because we're very active divers," Lamar said.

"Some of our dive gear has been featured in several motion pictures over the course of the last 10 years or so," Jared added, noting Dive Rite gear was shown in "The Sphere," "Amazing Caves," "The Cave," "Sanctum," "Fool's Gold" and "Jumanji."

Dive Rite is not a dive center, but Jared said they often have people walk into the building expecting them to be a dive store.

"We're actually a [dive] manufacturer and we distribute to more than 98 different countries," Jared said. "We don't do any walk-in sales here. It's all manufacturing and we ship all around the world."

Dive Rite does provide services for diving equipment, but sells its products to area dive shops and offers online sales.

"We bring in parts and pieces and we're basically an assembly plant," Lamar said. "We'll bring in

components and put together product."

The Dive Rite diving harness, called the trans pack, is one of their signature products. They also create a large number of other cave diving products.

"We do a full range of diving equipment," Jared said. "We do everything from the buoyancy compensators, rebreathers, regulators, fins, masks and dry suits. The only thing we don't have is tanks. Other than that, we have everything a diver needs to jump in the water and go diving."

Lamar has been teaching cave diving since 1984, which has allowed him to remain an innovator in the sport.

"Because of that, we're really in-tune with what's needed in the market place. And we set trends in the market place too," Lamar said. "Some of the mainstays that you see people using while diving,





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we were the first ones to actually bring it to market in 1984. There are lots of copies now.”

## Global Exploration

Cave diving is the heart and soul of the Hires family, and together they have gone cave diving all over the globe.

Lamar has dived on all seven continents and seen things up close and personal that most people can only dream about.

“I’ve been to Antarctica and I’ve dived in Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Asia, Russia, Mexico, Belize, Japan, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Egypt, Israel and South America,” Lamar said.

“Just within the last three years we’ve been to probably 10 different countries,” Jared said.

Jared, who has been diving since he was four years old, is also an instructor for diving with rebreathers and technical diving.

“We dive almost every week if not a couple of times a week here locally,” he said. “Then we do about three or four big trips a year just for diving. This year we went to Budapest and dived the caves underneath the city of Budapest about two months ago. Before that, in August, we were in Iceland diving.”

Lamar goes cave diving on a weekly basis whether it’s for fun, teaching or testing equipment.

“If he’s not in the water or a cave at least once or twice a week, I’m like, ‘Honey, you’ve got to go diving,’” Lee Ann said.



**ABOVE:** Lamar Hires prepares to dive into a cave at Ojamo Mine in Finland in 2007. **BELOW LEFT:** Dive Right owner Lamar Hires. Lamar has taken trips to dive in Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Belize, Hungary, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Europe, Iceland, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Russia, and South America. **BELOW RIGHT:** Dive Right General Manager Jared Hires. The Hires are innovators in the diving industry and Dive Rite equipment is distributed in more than 86 countries.

The caves at Rock Bluff, along the Suwannee River, were Lamar Hire’s first taste of cave diving exploration back in the 1980s and he’s come a long way and has seen a lot since those initial cave explorations.

“Cave diving is a science now. It’s very safe, but like with anything you’re going to have accidents,” Lamar said. “There is nothing that we can do for enjoyment or adventure that doesn’t have some bit of risk. If it doesn’t have a little bit of risk, why do it?”

Lamar has written and contributed to several cave diving books. He has taught students from Scotland, Austria,

Mexico, Canada, Asia, Russia, Europe and the United States the art and sport of cave and cavern diving.

“We work very strong to make sure we keep the sport safe,” Lamar said, noting he is in charge of training for the International Underway Cave Rescue and Recovery teams, teaching divers in other parts of the world for rescue and recovery operations. “The only way we can keep the sport alive is by sharing with others. By the end of the day, just like anything cave diving can be endangered if you don’t have enough people doing it. It’s not that dangerous if you’re trained and prepared.”







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Lake City's Brad Wheeler (right) and his son B.J.Wheeler lean against their Cessna 177 airplane.



# LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Brad and B.J. Wheeler both embrace leadership roles in their community

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

A leader is someone who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way. For Brad Wheeler and his son Bradley “B.J.” Wheeler, this is not just an expression, but a way of life. These two members of the Wheeler family share more than just their name; they both have a desire to lead and make a positive impact on their community.

Together, they are showing the way to the people of Lake City.

Brad and B.J. Wheeler have both taken on serious leadership roles in Columbia County. Brad, 51, will lead the Lake City-Columbia County Chamber of Commerce as president of the board in 2017, and B.J., 17, is the student body president at Columbia High School for the current school year.

“I feel B.J. is following in my footsteps,” Brad said. “I’m proud of all my children. Of course I’m proud of them, especially B.J.”

## **Giving to the Community that Gave to Them**

The Wheeler family’s desire to lead stemmed from the community rallying around them when they needed it most. When Brad’s father, Bill Wheeler, who will be 80 this February, was attending Georgia Tech back in the 1950s, he came home to Lake City for a break and was in a hunting accident where he sustained a

gunshot wound.

According to Brad, the doctors told his father’s parents that he would not make it through the night, and upon hearing the news, the people of the community lined up at Lake Shore Hospital to donate blood because he was loosing it as fast as it was going in. It was with their help that Bill survived, Brad said.

“My dad had always told me that the community supported him and he always wanted to give back to the community for what they did for him,” Brad said. “I’ve always kept that in my mind because my dad was involved in a lot of things too.”

Brad, like his father, is also involved in a lot of community activities. In addition to serving his fourth stint on the chamber board this year, Brad has also served on the Florida Gateway College Foundation Gifts Board, the Christian Service Center’s Board and the Kiwanis Board.

Soon, Brad and Bill Wheeler, who served as chamber president in 1973, will become one of two father-son duos to serve as chamber president in the history of the organization.

“I was a community leader for quite some time,” Bill said. “I’m real, real proud that they’re following right behind me.”

This father-son trend is being upheld by B.J., who is also actively involved in several organizations at





Brad has his pilot's license and B.J. is currently working on obtaining his.

Columbia High School. He has held officer positions with the school's Student Government Association for the past four years. He is also a member of the National Honor Society and the treasurer of Bleacher Creatures, the school's athletic pep club.

B.J. says his dad has inspired him to not just be involved in the community, but to be involved in any way that he can. Even as he is actively involved with the students at CHS, he is also actively involved with the administration and helping the district as a whole. B.J. serves as a student ambassador on the CHS School Advisory Council and the Columbia County School District Strategic Plan Steering Committee.

"With whatever you do you help out and you do as much as you can," B.J. said.

### **Building a Business**

Brad's experience with building his own business will serve him well as he takes over as the chamber president upon his induction at the Chamber Ball on January 28.

Brad graduated from Columbia High School in 1983,

and upon graduation started working in the funeral business at Biggs Funeral Home. Then in 1993, he went to mortuary college in Atlanta, and after earning his degree he came back home to Lake City to work at Biggs Funeral Home.

After working at Biggs for several years, Brad opened his own funeral home, Gateway-Memorial Funeral Home, in 2002. In 2004, he merged with Forest Lawn Funeral Home and his business became Gateway-Forest Lawn Funeral Home.

Although he semi-retired in 2008, Brad still goes in and works about 25-30 funerals a year, whenever a family requests him.

The funeral business has not just been a way of to make a living for Brad. It allows him to serve the community as he helps families through some of the hardest moments they'll ever face.

"The funeral business has been like a ministry to me over the years, we're just in a specialized part of it," Brad said. "You know, dealing with death and dying to help people get through it."



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B.J. Wheeler (left) stands with his dad Brad Wheeler at the Lake City Gateway Airport. This father-son duo continues to make a positive impact on their community, with Brad to serve as Lake City Columbia County Chamber of Commerce President for 2017 and B.J. serving as Student Body President at Columbia High School this school year.

With his years of experience building his own business from the ground up, Brad's knowledge of the industry and the area will help him successfully lead Columbia County as the chamber president.

"The chamber helps businesses thrive and prosper and you try to help in any way," Brad said. "We're trying to help support and make better our businesses that are a member. I've been on the chamber board a few times and it's something I love."

### **A Word of Advice**

According to Brad, being in charge doesn't necessarily mean doing what you think is best, but rather doing what's best for the people you're leading.

"You always have to listen to people, to what they're saying, and have an open ear," Brad said. "You have to help people make the decisions that might not be best for them or yourself but for the betterment of the community."

Another piece of advice Brad has for anyone who wants to become a leader in their community is to make sure you don't overlook the small details.

"I learned that in my funeral business," Brad said. "You have to pay attention to the small details because those are the ones that'll get you. You have to pay attention to the small details because those are the most important."

B.J. has already put his father's advice to good use, applying it to the situations he finds himself in while leading the students at Columbia High School. According to him, while you may have to make these tough decisions that some people may not agree with, the end result is worth the battle.

"It's definitely worth it," B.J. said. "It's a lot of work. You have to look at what's better for everyone. So you may go through a lot of stuff where you may have to make a decision that people may get mad about or people may say it's not cool but you have to look at the overall picture. You have to deal with a lot of stuff, but in the end it's worth it. It's worth what you do."

When B.J. finds himself in difficult situations while fulfilling his leadership duties, he knows he can turn to his dad for advice.

"Especially if I have a special circumstance where I don't know what to do, like if I need help with a specific person, dad is always there to help," B.J. said. "I can always ask him anything."





### Leaders Who Soar

Brad and B.J. also share another common interest besides being leaders in their community. The father and son frequently find themselves taking to the sky. Brad and B.J. both love to fly, and together they take turns piloting their Cessna 177.

When Brad semi-retired, he had always been interested in flying. So, he bought a small plane and earned his pilot's license. After taking a few rides with his dad, B.J. decided to earn his license too, and he is currently working on getting the hours in the air he needs to become a certified pilot.

"It's like father like son," Brad said.

B.J. plans on turning his love for flying into a career.

"Whenever dad started flying I thought, 'well that's pretty cool,'" B.J. said. "Then I went up in the plane a couple times and that's when I really got interested in the Coast Guard."

B.J. plans on attending college upon his graduation this year and earning an engineering degree. Afterwards, he hopes to

join the United States Coast Guard as a helicopter pilot.

Another family activity that Brad and B.J. participate in is their annual Christmas display. Together along with his dad, Bill, his wife, Dr. Lorrie Wheeler, and his children, Holly, Haley, B.J. and Hanna, Brad sets up a jaw-dropping display that lights up the whole neighborhood.

"One thing we do, which is a family affair, is our Christmas display," Brad said. "It takes us all a month to get it all up."

You may have driven through the Wheeler's Christmas display, located down the road between Sonny's BBQ and McDonald's on US Highway 90. You can ride through the family's driveway and see hundreds of holiday lights. The main reason they continue this Christmas tradition every year is because it spreads joy to everyone who sees it.

"It's a lot of work but we enjoy it and people enjoy it," Brad said. "The joy of that is seeing the people enjoy it. I feel like that's a big community thing. We do it for the community."



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# CHANGING LIVES & clothing hearts

*Laurie Giebeig uses her boutique to make a positive impact on the community.*

Story and photos by KATRINA POGGIO

Through donating to charities and embracing women in the community, Laurie Giebeig uses her boutique, Zoey's Collections, as an outreach to improve lives.

"You can change lives by just feeling good about yourself from the inside out," Giebeig said.

She has donated a portion of her profits to charities since launching her business online in 2014 – but after some store renovations Zoey's Collections is changing lives and clothing hearts in a new way. Women can now get their hair done or get facials, or shop, all at the store on Southwest Main Boulevard.

Giebeig recently introduced three new suites to the store. Two serve as hair studios and the other as a space for Giebeig's many facial services.

Before even launching Zoey's Collections, Giebeig was a licensed esthetician. Certified in microdermabrasion and microneedling, Giebeig customizes facials to each client to meet their skincare needs. But her work goes further than just the facial itself.

"I want to educate my clients too so they understand why we are doing what we're doing," Giebeig said.

Hair stylists Julie Cooper and Maeghen Soucinek offer cut, color, style and treatment options in private suites. Cooper, who specializes in color, said the hair studios create a private

atmosphere for her clients.

"That one-on-one experience definitely brings a whole new level to my clients and they love it," said Cooper, who has been doing hair for 13 years.

The suites are the most recent change to Zoey's Collections since the storefront opening in April 2016.

Zoey's Collections launched online shortly after Giebeig graduated from the University of Florida in Fall 2014. Zoey is actually her maltese, but it also translates to "eternal life" in Hebrew.

Running the store has brought new challenges as the business grows, but Giebeig thinks back to the roots of her business to keep her going through tough times.

"Owning a business can be challenging, so it's important to keep reaching for your goal and not lose sight," Giebeig said. "I try to constantly remind myself about all the women I am reaching through my business and that keeps me motivated through any challenges I face."

Meeting women and putting personal touches on her boutique are Giebeig's favorite parts about her business.

"This is kind of like my ministry," Giebeig said. "So that's been my favorite part is just to, you know, interact with people and love on people and see them every day."

Lake City does not have many bou-





“ I try to constantly remind myself about all the women I am reaching through my business and that keeps me motivated through any challenges I face.

tiques, but Giebig is hopeful that more businesses come in to boost the local economy.

“I kinda hope that Lake City gets more places like this so we can be known as a shopping destination for all these surrounding counties,” Giebig said.

Rather than spending dollars in Gainesville or Jacksonville, Giebig opted to shop small during the holiday season. She said she has made a conscious effort to support small

businesses since she became a small business owner herself.

“It might cost a little bit more to shop small, but it’s so worth it to do it to help another family. And good for that community, too,” Giebig said.

But in addition to shopping small, Giebig searches for ways to give back through her business. She stocks her store with items from companies who already give back to multiple causes in different ways.

One product she carries in store





Laurie Giebig poses inside her new suite at the Zoey's Collections boutique. Her space will be used for a variety of facial services, including microdermabrasion.

that gives back is S'well bottles, reusable water bottles created to rid the world of plastic water bottle waste. From the sale of those bottles, S'well is able to support UNICEF to improve clean water access and sanitation in more than 100 countries worldwide.

She also carries The Giving Keys necklaces, jewelry that serves a purpose to inspire and employ people transitioning out of homelessness in Los Angeles.

"It was just my way to do my part," she said.

Customers support charitable causes by buying other items at the boutique too, as Giebig donates some of her profits to Compassion International. The Christian-based

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Maeghen Soucinek (from left), Harbor Giebeig, Laurie Giebeig, and Julie Cooper pose for a photo. Meaghen and Julie are hairstylists at Zoey's Collections and the newest additions to Laurie's team. Giebeig recently introduced three new suites to the store. Two serve as hair studios (right) and the other as a space for Giebeig's many facial services (facing page).

organization is a child-sponsorship program dedicated to the long-term development of children living in poverty around the globe.

"That's a company that was close to my heart," Giebeig said.

Giebeig and her husband have sponsored a child through the organization for the past three years, so naturally she wanted to incorporate it into her business. But when she opened the storefront she saw an opportunity to make an impact in a new way, too.

"I always wanted to do something locally and my church, Christ Central, has a separate ministry where they do just local and international missions so I also give to them, too," Giebeig said.

Giebeig made it her mission to improve the lives around her through her passions.

"I just wanted to impact people in a positive way with what I'm doing," Giebeig said. "And I feel like with the store and with the facials, I can do both in different ways."







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# THE TIRE KINGS

**Jim Burke and David Johnson provide tire and automotive care at Tire Mart.**

By TONY BRITT



# In 1971

a pair of brothers-in-law came to Lake City with the dream of making a living for their families. The two purchased a five-acre piece of property along US Highway 90, which contained two buildings and a set of gas pumps. The only nearby business at the time was the newly constructed Rountree-Moore car dealership.

Little did the two northern transplants know that the dream they were crafting for their families by purchasing the two buildings would yield a gas station, restaurant and four decades later, one of Lake City's oldest tire and automotive businesses.

Jim Burke and David Johnson Sr. bought that piece of property over 40 years ago and built their business from the ground up.

## A True Family Business

While David Johnson Sr. passed away in 2006, Burke, 71, now works with Johnson's son, David Johnson II, 57, and other family members at the Lake City Service Center, doing business as Tire Mart Auto Service of Lake City. David Johnson II's brothers, Mike and John "John-John" Johnson also work at the shop along with his wife, Theresa Johnson, and his son, David Johnson III, 27, who is the third generation of the family to work at the business.

"David had been down here for a year and came across this piece of property," Burke said. "He came down here in 1970 and I was in Fort Wayne, Indiana, working for a leasing company that he had left. He said, 'I found this piece of property here and if you want to go in with me, I think we could scratch together enough money to buy it.' I always wanted to live in Florida so I told my wife, 'We're going to Florida.'"

The piece of property they purchased contained two separate buildings, connected by a breezeway. After about a year or two at the site, Burke and the elder Johnson came to a consensus: they had to do something better for their business other than just having a gas station, and the two

decided to go into the restaurant business.

Before long, they launched the Homestead Restaurant.

"We saw a need through people traveling, just stopping by to get gas and asking about food," Johnson said. "There weren't many options out here then."

## Filling a Need

The restaurant happened to be a draw for some of the biggest country music stars on the circuit at the time. Visiting regulars included Tammy Wynette, Conway Twitty, Charlie Daniels and Lorretta Lynn.

The Homestead Restaurant lasted until 1985 and the other building, which was being utilized as a gas station before, was now a full-fledged Union 76 truck stop.

Not only did the restaurant draw the country music stars, but its counterpart, the Union 76 Truck Stop also drew in heavy hitters. It wasn't a stretch of the imagination to see the elephants from the Ringling Brothers Circus on the property.

"They would take their elephants out back and we would run a hose back there so they could spray them, so the elephants could walk around," Burke said.

The family later purchased an additional five-acre plot of land adjacent to them, and after later selling it they used the money to open their first Tire Mart store.

"We decided to sell tires because of all of the traffic on US 90," Burke said. "Why are we trying to get truck drivers to come a half mile down the interstate and buy a hundred gallons of diesel fuel where we'll make two cents a gallon, and hope they want to buy a hamburger and french fries in the restaurant where we might make a little more, when we've got all these cars coming by."

Burke and Johnson had always been automobile-oriented and loved cars, plus they both had knowledge about trucks from their days of working at a truck leasing company. "It was not a difficult transition," Burke said.



In 1985 the restaurant and truck stop were closed and they built the first Tire Mart building.

In 2002 they expanded Tire Mart's original building, nearly doubling its size and adding an administrative office and a warehouse.

Tire Mart Auto Service provides services for tires, vehicle alignments, brakes, suspensions, tune-ups, AC service and other automotive mechanical services.

"Going from tires to a full auto service center was just the natural progression," Johnson said. "It was just to provide more services to the customers."

Burke said the change wasn't immediate, but happened through time and has allowed the family to maintain a thriving business in Lake City.

"The customer comes first," Burke said. "That's the way it's always been. And honesty, we don't try to who-do people. We won't do anything to a vehicle until we tell the customer."

Burke's son, Jimmy Burke, 45, operates the Tire Mart in Chiefland, which was built in 1998.

Burke and Johnson said they enjoy working in the tire and car service industry.

"Everybody needs tires and cars need service," Burke said. "We've always been into cars. I was always crazy about cars."

They say their four decades of success is a by-product of hard work.

"Hard work has allowed us to be successful in Columbia County," Burke

said. "You have to work through can to can't. We were open 24 hours, seven days a week at the restaurant and truck stop. We didn't even have a lock on the front door. In the later years we started closing on Christmas and we had to put a chain on the door because we didn't have a lock."

They said having the business has allowed them to teach their children a healthy work ethic.

"If they don't work, they don't get paid," Burke added, noting it teaches good habits. "And there's no better training than on-the-job training."

Burke has served on the board for local hospitals and is a member of several local civic organizations.

"We've always felt like we've given back to the community," he said. "We're a family here and Lake City is almost like a family. We know most everybody around town. We don't have jobs, we have a way of life and Lake City and our customers are a part of that."

"It's just the way things have always been for us," Johnson added.

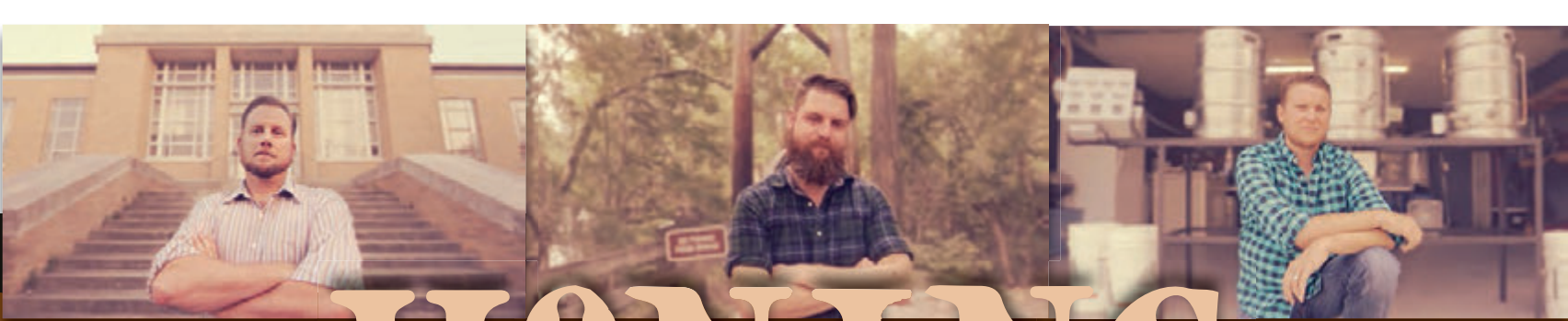


**TOP:** Hood up and with a smile is the way David Johnson II of Tire Mart is accustomed serving customers at Tire Mart Auto Service of Lake City.

**ABOVE:** Jim Burke, one of the founders of Tire Mart, rests on Firestone tire. Burke and the late David Johnson Sr. bought the property in 1971 to start a family business.







# HONING THEIR CRAFT



## Halpatter Brewing Co. set to bring craft beer to Lake City.

By CARL MCKINNEY | Photos by Holly Frazier Photography

Chris Candler and his brother-in-law, Jeremy Gable, had been talking about starting a brewery for years. Not much came of the idea, until they met Jonny Frazier about a year and a half ago.

The three men, realizing they shared a passion for home-brewing, began to practice their hobby together. With 15-20 years of combined experience between them, the trio, seeing how well they worked as a team, decided to launch the Halpatter Brewing Company in the heart of Lake City.

Candler, Gable and Frazier are transforming to the long-abandoned Montgomery Building on Hernando Avenue into their base of operations.

According to Candler, not only will it serve as a craft-beer laboratory, but also as a social hub for downtown Lake City.

"It's going to be a full-blown experience," Candler said.

The company will offer a selection of beers named after prominent people, places or events from Columbia County's past, plus a rotating menu of experimental flavors.

In early December, Frazier toured the empty room where he will practice his craft once the equipment is installed. The building isn't much to look at now, but it will house some of the best technology in the industry before the brewery's grand opening next summer.

"It'll be state-of-the-art," Frazier said.

When the company starts selling its products in bottles and cans, each label will offer a brief history lesson, Candler

said. Sixteen Springfields, an India pale ale, for example, will tell the story of the 16 Springfield rifles thrown in Lake DeSoto during the Civil War.

The Montgomery Building on Hernando Street was an ideal location, Candler added, since the three were insistent on having the brewery in downtown Lake City.

The company struck a deal with the county, which owns the facility, to lease the building for \$1 per year. In exchange, the business is paying for costly renovations needed to make the property usable again.

The agreement bought the company enough time to establish itself, but Halpatter will have to either buy or rent the space at a fair-market price after five years.

As Candler toured another empty room, he envisioned how it will look as one of the brewery's two taprooms.

"We're going to blow a big hole in this wall," he said. "Imagine the bar here."

The taproom on the lower level, which will open into an outdoor beer garden, is intended to be a place for families and friends to hang out.

"This will be a little more relaxed," Candler added.

Craft sodas might be on tap too, giving children something to enjoy other than standard colas.

"More than anything, we're selling an experience to people," Frazier said.

The upper-level bar will be

more fit for hosting a wedding reception than casual, game-day gatherings.

"To use a highly technical term, it will be swankier," Candler said. "Think 1920s supper club."

Currently, local residents have to drive to either Gainesville, Jacksonville or Tallahassee for locally made craft beer in the kind of atmosphere Halpatter plans to offer. Soon, they will be able to get that experience right in their own town.

"We felt like it was something that could benefit this city in a big way," Candler said.









# PUTTING THE CARE IN HEALTHCARE

Shands Lake Shore CEO Rhonda Sherrod has always dreamed of a career in healthcare.

Story by NICK ROLLISON | Photos by Esta Eberhardt

**I**t's no secret that the CEO of any company has a lot of responsibility. Shands Lake Shore Regional Medical Center CEO Rhonda Sherrod probably knows that fact better than anybody.

Sherrod has spent 30 years in the health care field and now oversees the very hospital she was born in, having been promoted to CEO in 2007 and later becoming the market CEO for Lake City as well as Shands Live Oak and Shands Stark in 2010.

Sitting in the lower administrative offices of the hospital, Sherrod excitedly talks about the hospital's upcoming Cardiac CATH lab upgrade, a \$1.6-million project that's expected to be completed by the first quarter of 2017.

A hospital is a unique business in that it is open 27/7, says Sherrod, with no downtime. However, her responsibilities have been made manageable thanks to the support of her family and the entirety of her hospital staff.

"As I've said this is a team effort," Sherrod said. "I may be the CEO of the hospital but it takes our entire medical staff,

our management team...it takes every employee in every role to insure the success of our hospital."

"Most importantly, job one is providing excellent care to our patients. That's job one," Sherrod went on to say. "This isn't about the CEO or about any one individual, our focus here

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I may be the CEO of the hospital but it takes our entire medical staff, our management team...it takes every employee in every role to insure the success of our hospital.

— Rhonda Sherrod, Shands Lake Shore Regional Medical Center CEO

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is on our patients and delivering high quality healthcare and that's my priority, and to do that it takes our entire team. Our doctors, our nurses, and every employee in every department giving their very best."

Sherrod, who was born and

raised in Lake City, began her career at Shands Live Oak in 1987, after receiving her BA in nursing and becoming a registered nurse. While she went on to obtain a Master's Degree, Sherrod attributes the start of her medical training to her education at Lake City Community College, now known as Florida Gateway College.

"That was my starting point and it gave me the foundation to continue on to the University of Florida and later Valdosta State University," Sherrod said. "You can get that wonderful foundation here, great education here, continue, and then come back to this community and enjoy a successful a career in Lake City."

Sherrod always knew that she wanted to work in a hospital. Her father retired from the Lake City VA Medical Center after 44 years, and she had her eyes set on becoming a nursing anesthetist, working in the operating room.

"People who know me know I'm kind of a clean freak and the OR is sterile, and I liked that," laughs Sherrod, who went on to say that the controlled environment of the operating room was a good fit for her.

But as she advanced through leadership positions at Shands Live Oak, Sherrod managed to





see both the clinical and administrative sides to the business, giving her a unique perspective on both.

“Particularly in a small hospital you wear a lot of hats,” said Sherrod. “So I worked in the ICU, I worked in the operating room, I worked in the ER. I worked on the med surge unit and then I continued my education while I worked full time. Got married, had a child, continued to work and go to school.”

And she’s still a registered nurse, having to re-certify every two years. According to Sherrod, the diversity in the nursing field allows anyone who’s interested to find an area of expertise that works for them.

“That’s the wonderful thing about nursing is that there are so many avenues to pursue with a nursing career,” said Sherrod. “There’s surgery, there’s ICU, there’s medical surgical, there’s ER, there’s administration and teaching. It’s a very broad field, so everyone in nursing can find their niche.”

Sherrod says she feels particularly blessed that she could follow her career path and remain in the community that she loves.

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# DRIVING TOWARD A DREAM



Richard Francis focuses on building his limousine business one mile at a time.

Story and photos by TAYLOR GAINES









hen Richard Francis sees a problem, he can't rest until it's fixed.

In December, he needed to build 16 outdoor car canopies for his transportation company, FTS Limousine. He went out to his lot in Lake City around 8 a.m. Saturday to work on them. He didn't stop until 1 p.m. Sunday.

"I took him some energy drinks on Sunday morning on my way to work," said his girlfriend, Natalie Metzger. "[He] won't stop until something's done."

Francis started his limo company at the end of 2012, with just a rental Chrysler 300 and his personal small blue Mercedes. His fleet has grown today to have 14 vehicles, including seven stretch limos.

However, the success of the company could not have happened without Francis maintaining a full-time job, he said. As his company grew over the past few years, Francis also worked as a district manager for Wireless Advantage, a Verizon Wireless premium retailer.

"I want to say I was fortunate, but I also worked very, very hard to make

it work out," he said. "I worked about 60 hours a week and tried to build the business at the same time. There were a lot of nights where I just didn't sleep at all."

Despite the sleepless nights, Francis emphasized that FTS Limousine's growth would have been impossible without his full-time job.

"That job is one of the larger reasons that the business was able to grow," he said. "I was able to fund its growth with my income."

During FTS Limousine's first four years, Francis built up a collection of loyal customers in Gainesville and Lake City, about 15 drivers who work for him as independent contractors and a solid fleet of vehicles.

Six months ago, the business had grown enough to require Francis' undivided attention. He quit his job at Wireless Advantage.

"When I have a goal that is what I think about," he said. "I see the business being a certain way and when it's not that way, I've gotta fix it. I've always been that kind of person."

Case in point: After a hurricane a few years ago, Francis helped to redo his mother's home. He was putting in new French doors and was frus-

---

### **A Word of Advice from Richard:**

"I've learned some lessons along the way, and I wish I hadn't made some decisions, but I think that any business I've ever been involved in — especially the first four or five years — if you're not willing to work 80-90 hours a week, you're probably not going to make it."

---

trated that they did not live up to his standards.

"I must have taken those doors down and put them in 12 times," he said.

Francis often spends about an hour and a half every day searching online for potential new vehicles. He said he'll often be car-shopping even when he's out to dinner with his girlfriend, who has made a game out of trying to guess information about the vehicles.

"He's really hard working, which I find incredibly attractive," Metzger said. "I think a lot of people see that he works really hard and that he's a very business-minded person, but I



think they might not see how big of a heart he has. He's the most generous, giving person I've ever met."

Metzger, the music director at First United Methodist Church, also runs a small business herself, Natalie Metzger Music. She teaches private music lessons in voice, piano, violin, cello and guitar.

"We've both made a lot of sacrifices to make our businesses work," she said. "It has seriously taken teamwork."

Francis was born in Birmingham, England, in the United Kingdom and immigrated to America when he was 13 years old. His father had bought and opened a jewelry shop in Lake City.

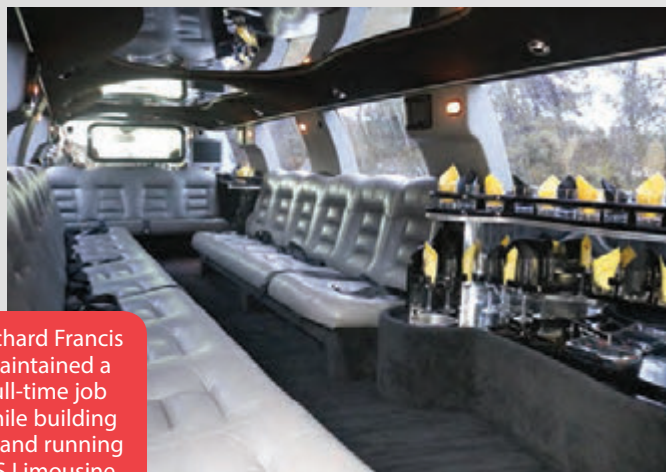
"It was hard," he said. "I was like a duck out of water for the longest time."

Francis graduated from Columbia High School and went on to play golf at the collegiate level for Webber International University. His British accent eventually dissipated during his time in customer service because he had to talk so much, he said.

FTS Limousine is not Francis' first run at a small business. In the past, he owned a men's and women's shoe store and tinkered with a jewelry manufacturing company among other things. He always knew he wanted to be his own boss.

"I don't want to work for somebody else while they're getting wealthy forever," he said. "I know that I may not know all the answers, but hard work will eventually catch up."

Laura Fowler, a caterer and friend of Francis' who worked with him in the past, said that she never doubted he would not be successful.



Richard Francis maintained a full-time job while building up and running FTS Limousine. He hopes to continue to grow and expand his business.

"Richard will definitely excel at whatever he does because of his professionalism, friendliness and attention to detail," she said. "I think he's found his niche here and that will continue to help him grow and be even more successful."

Francis is now trying to determine how he can best use his time going forward and is looking for ways to streamline his company's system.

"I've been very specific about, 'I do not spend money if I can help it,'" he said. "At the moment, it's just me full-time, and I'm trying to figure out where my time is best spent in the business. There's no way you can do it all."

Even the company's growth is just one more problem for Francis to solve.



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Maintaining A

# Legacy

**For Terry, George and John Hunter, operating G.W. Hunter, Inc. is about more than just running a business. For these three brothers, it's about maintaining a legacy that their father built from the ground up.**

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

In 1966, G.W. Hunter moved his family from Tallahassee to Lake City as he took a job as a salesman for Standard Oil agent C.C. Shepard. In 1972 he became the Standard Oil agent here in Lake City, and in August 1975 the company was incorporated and named G.W. Hunter, Inc.

Terry, George and John have been working at the family business since they were old enough to lick stamps. When their mother, Elga Hunter, who turned 89 last year, was working alongside her late husband as he grew the business throughout the early years, her sons were right there with her.

“When we were young she would hand-write the statements at the end of the month to end users and we would fold those statements, lick the envelopes and lick the stamps when we were kids,” John said.

John remembers spending his summers working alongside his brothers at G.W. Hunter, Inc. throughout his youth.

“I used to pull the hose on one of those tank wagons out there to the tobacco farm tanks and fill them up with fuel for the farmers when I was in school,” John said. “We all did that. We all helped at the business here on Saturdays and then of course during the summer we’d work here. Nothing was too small, nothing was too big.”

## Marking 60 Years

G.W. Hunter, Inc. is a wholesale petroleum marketer for Chevron, and they also have unbranded fuel. The company has grown exponentially since it was incorporated in 1975. Today, G.W. Hunter, Inc. owns and manages over 30 properties consisting of commercial fueling outlets in



Lake City, Ellisville, Fort White and Jasper, and convenience stores from Tallahassee to Macclenny along the I-10 corridor. They also deliver petroleum products to various customers in 11 surrounding counties, and they have several properties undergoing complete renovations and a “ground-up” multi-use property in the design phase.

The late G.W. Hunter passed away in July 2011, but he and G.W. Hunter,





G.W. Hunter Inc.'s Jimmy Byrd (from left), Jonathan Jarrell, Mark Chinell, Michelle Wakler, Terry Hunter, George Hunter, Elga Hunter, John Hunter and Ronald Harden stand in front of one of the company's gasoline trucks. G.W. Hunter, Inc. recently marked its 60th year with Chevron.

Inc. are still recognized by Chevron Products Company. His sons have continued to maintain his legacy as a Chevron Marketer, and 2016 marked their 60th year anniversary with Chevron.

"We just keep going with it," John said. "We keep building. That's the reason why we have a couple of properties now being worked with. We keep expanding, we keep growing, we keep his vision alive basically. We're very lucky that we had a father who left us something that we can continue to grow and where it's a product that people need. We're very fortunate."

G.W. Hunter, Inc. still operates in the original Standard Oil Bulk Plant that was built in 1950. The company's plant manager, Ronald Harden, has worked there since October 1964, before the Hunter's even moved to Lake City, and has continued to work with them to this day.

While John, George and Terry each work at G.W. Hunter, Inc., the roles they play differ greatly.

"We all have different roles here," said John, who is the company's comptroller. "I do the accounting. George is more operations. Terry's more with the customer service and everything. So we're all separate. It's not like it overlaps to a point where we're doing the same position. I think that's crucial."

While John takes care of the company's accounting, George and Terry handle the day-to-day operations.

"Me and Terry, our jobs are duel,"



"We're very lucky that we had a father who left us something that we can continue to grow and where it's a product that people need. We're very fortunate." — John Hunter

George said. "We run the company and make sure everything is operating. We can deliver fuel, we can deliver oil, we make sure everything is working."

Although some people may find it difficult to work with their siblings, the Hunter brothers see it as an advantage.

"It's funny because people will say, 'Oh, you work with your brothers?' and yeah well we're all in it for the same goal," Terry said. "We like being here, we like waiting on people basically. We like servicing what they need and making sure they're taken care of. That's what we like to do."

The Hunter brothers have learned a lot over the years between watching their father build his business from the ground up to taking over and running that business themselves. They can tell

you firsthand how hard it can be to make your business dreams a reality.

"You're gonna have to work a lot of hours," George said. "You're gonna have to work hard and put in the effort. It's not going to be six or eight hour days. It's going to be 12, 14, sometimes 18 hours. Sometimes it's a long day and week. Sometimes you never get a break. You go weeks and don't get a break, but it's worth it."

One thing that they want those trying to build their own businesses to remember: always do your due diligence.

"Always research what you want to do," John said. "Your area, the property, whatever it may be. Find out if there is a need in that area. Always do your due diligence. Learn from your mistakes and learn from your successes."



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# Reeling in the Readers

**Rob Chapman turned his passion for the outdoors into an online empire.**

Story and photos  
by NICK ROLLISON  
(Additional photos  
courtesy of Rob Chapman)

Rob Chapman is a chaser of dreams. No matter how big or how small, and no matter how much they keep changing, Chapman never waivers as he marches forward toward whatever he has his mind set on.

His current quest? To create the greatest outdoor website in the world that his audience can experience on any media device. In 2012 he took his first step toward this goal by establishing outdoors360.com and in the past four years the website has grown exponentially.

Chapman estimates that the site now reaches about 100 countries a month, and that for the past six months the website has been averaging a million hits per month. His social media reach is somewhere in the ballpark of 2 to 5 million per week. All around Lake City you will see people wearing his signature Outdoors 360 merchandise.

“When I realized we hit another level was when I started seeing the shirts and hats on people I didn’t know,” Chapman said with a laugh, remembering that in the beginning every shirt sold was out of his car or house.

Outdoors360 features a range of outdoor-focused articles including everything from hunting to fishing. Chapman works on the website whenever he has down time from his day

job. Currently, he is the coordinator of graphics production at Florida Gateway College, the establishment that arguably won Chapman away from his hometown in Bradenton.

## Coming to Lake City

Growing up, Chapman always loved the outdoors, thanks in large part to his father. There were many different activities for young Rob Chapman IV to take part in, such as fishing, but it was the dream of being a major league baseball player that shined the brightest in his eyes. Thanks to his skills, he received a lot of letters and visited a lot of Ivy League schools, but it was a small college in a small town that grabbed his attention.

“...Coach Clark from Lake City Community College, I was a 6’5 left-handed pitcher, came to me and said we could use you at Lake City,” Chapman said. “He was different than anyone I had ever met. He was to the point, direct, no fluff, and I don’t know, he sold me on this place. So I had lots of other options and offers and I came to little ol’ Lake City Community College because I liked the town. I like this small campus atmosphere.”

Unfortunately, an injury would cost him that dream, thanks to too many pitches and curve-balls, says Chapman. However, he turned to art,

the other half of his life growing up, and made plans to attend Jacksonville University. This decision came to him with some help from Brett Uravich, a physical therapist who worked with Chapman and would eventually become a future groomsman at his wedding when he married his wife, Andrea.

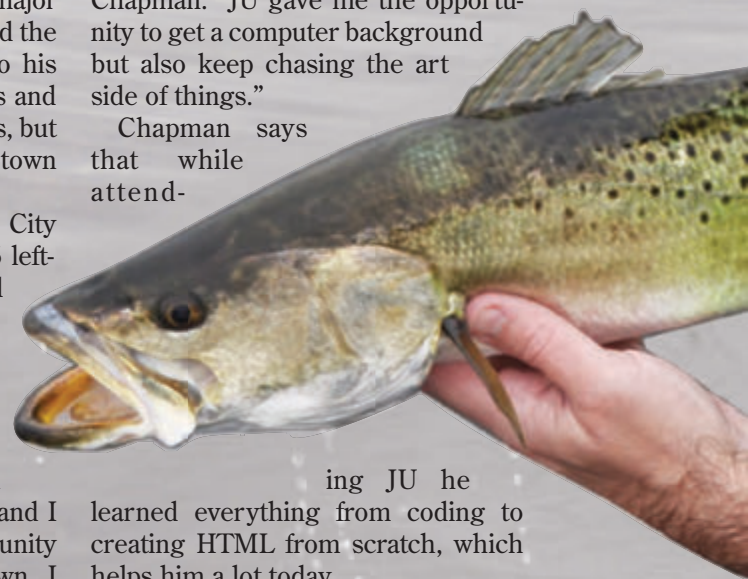
“I said, ‘If you could go back in time and you’re me now, what would you do?’ He said computers,” said Chapman. “JU gave me the opportunity to get a computer background but also keep chasing the art side of things.”

Chapman says that while attend-

ing JU he learned everything from coding to creating HTML from scratch, which helps him a lot today.

## Developing his Dream

Graduating in 2002, Chapman started to work as an intern at a graphics design company, Fierce Graphics,











In addition to running his own online sports website about all things outdoors, Chapman is the coordinator of graphics production at Florida Gateway College.



before working his way up to art director. However, Chapman wanted to be a fish artist, the next Guy Harvey, he says, and with a small loan from his dad, he started Rob Chapman Art. He took his wares, such as T-shirts, and began selling.

“I drove across the entire state of Florida, stayed with people I’d never met, visited every tackle shop, every possible retailer,” Chapman said. “Door to door to door for almost a month. I went down the whole east coast, through the Keys, up through the West Coast and I ended up getting my shirts in probably a couple dozen locations and that at the time was my dream.”

Chapman eventually made his way back to Lake City, taking up a teaching position at Summers Elementary and coaching baseball at Columbia High School in 2006. He continued with his art projects in the summers off, and soon he moved on to FGC, where he also started writing outside-oriented columns for the Lake City Reporter. He had an idea, which would eventually become Outdoors360, but it wasn’t quite there yet.

At this point heading into 2009, Chapman says he saw the future of social media, and what it could mean for that idea.

“I started to kind of see the writing on the wall at that time in social media,” Chapman said. “In our industry no one was doing it. So I was just trying to figure out a way to merge social media and digital media with the outdoors and that’s kind of where Outdoors360 blossomed.”

And blossom it did. With investor help, and content help from his brother, who was writing outdoor articles back in Bradenton, the website launched and since then it has become what it is today.

A family man, Chapman says it’s cool that his daughters, Molly and Lilla, come back to him and say they’ve seen the website’s shirts around town.

“It sounds weird to say it, but there’s a lot of pride involved when you sit, kind of kick your feet up, and say, ‘OK, this was created from scratch,’” Chapman said. “This literally came from nothing and now look what it is. Our shirts are all over town...Lake City has been unbelievable supportive.”

**I said, ‘If you could go back in time and you’re me now, what would you do?’**

**He said computers.**

— Rob Chapman on career change



# Helping You Make the Transition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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Joe Cox

# he's lovin' it

Local businessman puts his heart into his McDonald's restaurants.

Story and photos by KATRINA POGGIO

The positive energy that comes with good customer service is what makes a successful restaurant. At least, that's how Joe Cox said he strives to run his four local McDonald's restaurants.

"I try to treat the employees the way that I embody life," Cox said. "If you can

have fun while you're here, the customers are going to be happy. That fun, it bleeds off on people. It gives a good aura to the restaurant."

Sitting at a table inside the Lake City McDonald's on U.S. Highway 90, Cox waves and smiles to crew members and managers as they greet each other.

"These restaurants, right now, I'm in all the time," he said.

Cox bought two McDonald's in Lake City, plus one in Live Oak and another in Macclenny, in March 2016. Since then he's been focusing on business improvement, especially with customer service.

"I tell my folks, 'If you're behind the counter too much, I probably don't need you,'" he said.

Employees who smile, engage in casual conversation and show passion are strong employees in his restaurants. Cox remembers one employee who was shy and just focused on speedy customer service, at the expense of forming relationships with local regulars.

"I'm not here to beat some record," Cox said firmly. "I am not here to have just a bunch of 'through put.' 'Through put' will come when people understand that we're doing things differently here."

Eventually the woman became one of the most friendly employees and started training other people.

"That's what causes a restaurant's feel to change," he said. "It doesn't take a lot of awesome people.

Awesome people lure awesome people."

Those 'awesome people' that are at the heart and foundation of the company are what Cox enjoys most about running his McDonald's restaurants.

"Their multifaceted, dynamic backgrounds. Everyone is kind of in McDonald's," Cox said.

His employees range from Columbia High School students working to put extra change in their pockets, to single parents working to put food on the table for their children. But either way, he focuses on creating opportunities for his employees to grow as the business continues to develop.

Crew members become managers, managers become department managers, and those eventually become store managers.

"My mantra is the more you know, the more you get paid," Cox said with a laugh.

## Lovin' his Career

He first interviewed with McDonald's in 2001. He was transitioning into the civilian world after being in the military and his good friend, who owned six McDonald's at the time, suggested Cox look into owning a restaurant.

"I graciously declined because the only thing I really knew was the military," Cox said.

So he went to work for a start-up company called Rubicon Technology, which is now publicly traded on the NASDAQ. After helping grow the company from 13 employees to 400 employees, he was ready for something new. "And I began my McDonald's life," he said.

Training to be a restaurant owner meant learning from the ground up by working all the jobs in the restaurant. He started as a maintenance worker on Cicero Avenue, a more difficult street in Chicago as Cox puts it.

He would go in at 3:30 in the morning and get to work fixing grills, repairing toilets and cleaning







the restrooms and the lobby. From there he learned to take orders and cook all the food. He started his McDonald's ownership in Maryland with three restaurants.

"There's nothing in this restaurant that I can't do," Cox said.

But being that Cox is an engineer, technology never completely left his life. He's actually the lead of the McDonald's digital team for the state of Florida. He also helped to develop the McDonald's app, which serves as a rewards program for customers.

"It's a global app that's launching," Cox said. "You could go into McDonald's here in Lake City and you see some offers but if you go to Tampa they might be promoting something different."

On the horizon, Cox sees room for growth and hopes to continue building his local McDonald's ownership – but he does not want to lose sight of the importance of knowing his people, and understanding the best way to serve them.

"I've done this for going on 10 years. From day one I have always said I think 10 would be my sweet spot," Cox said. "There's a personal feel, as you can tell. I know my employees. I know my customers and I don't want to lose that."



**LEFT:** Joe Cox poses in front of the McDonald's restaurant on U.S. Highway 90 in Lake City. It's one of the four locations he purchased in March 2016. **ABOVE:** Lake City McDonald's owner Joe Cox (from left), Lake City Police Department Assistant Chief Gerald Butler and Chief Argatha Gilmore pose together at a Coffee and Cops event. Joe hosted the event at his McDonald's location as a way to allow community members to come and enjoy free coffee while getting to know their local LCPD officers.





# GIVING THROUGH *growing*

John Cole uses his hydrofarm to grow food to fuel the less fortunate

Story and photos by KATRINA POGGIO

Checking in on his young lettuce plants in his greenhouse, Lake City's John L. Cole leans in toward the soil to see his seedlings sprouting small leaves from the dirt. With sunlight, water and air his seeds will sprout big, leafy green leaves just like any other plant – except these vegetables aren't growing in the ground.

Cole grows his plants using a hydroponic growing system of eight vertical towers, holding about 200 lettuce plants. Each tower has four soil-filled styrofoam buckets branching off of a watering system that weaves in and out of the buckets.

Instead of growing his plants in the ground, he grows them vertically in a greenhouse to optimize growing time.

The project, Cole's Hydrofarm, is something Cole is growing into a business that will fuel the hungry while also serving as a vehicle to teach the community about agriculture.

"There's definitely curiosity for hydroponic gardening and they're all excited to see what I can do with it," Cole said.

Working as a behavioral program specialist at Northeast Florida State Hospital in Macclenny, Cole teaches psychiatric patients coping skills through growing vegetables in hydroponic systems.

"There's nothing more exciting than seeing the seed grow into something you can actually eat," Cole said.

He's been exposed to a farming and agriculture lifestyle ever since he was a young boy growing up in Lake City. His father, also named John L. Cole, has especially been an inspiration to him after founding Kids Feeding Kids in Columbia County. The pilot program taught Richardson Middle School students to grow potatoes, cabbage, turnips and collard greens.

"He's the one that taught me everything I know pretty much," Cole said.

Cole plans to grow his hydrofarm into a business that can serve the community while also feeding the local hungry. Some plans that he has in the works include holding public classes three times a year, hosting a summer program for teens and donating food from the farm to the hungry.

Cole hopes to have 300 towers in three years time to grow 7,500 plants. But one challenge he has been facing is funding the upfront costs to get the business growing from the ground. After setting up a GoFundMe account online, people have donated to get the business up and running. The towers and greenhouse were also donations, totaling about \$3,000 worth of equipment.

"I have faith in the future that I will get there," Cole said.

As far as long-term goals, Cole aims to have an assisted living facility to help those who suffer from mental illness take part in learning and growing vegetables.

He encourages everyone to do their part in making a local impact, but there's a fundamental element that needs to be found.

John Cole checks on seedlings in the hydroponics tower inside his greenhouse. Cole is currently growing about 200 lettuce plants.











The Cole family poses outside their greenhouse, a donation to Cole's Hydrofarm. John Cole (from left), Emily Cole, 7. Ashleigh Cole, 14, and Tyler Cole, 17. Small lettuce plants grow inside vertical towers composed of styrofoam containers and a watering system. The seedlings grow inside small pods before moving to the hydroponics towers in the greenhouse.



## THERE'S NOTHING MORE **EXCITING** THAN SEEING THE SEED GROW INTO SOMETHING YOU CAN **ACTUALLY EAT.**

"They've got to find their passion," Cole said. "Above all be patient because it's going to take awhile."

Cole's personal passions revolve around helping people dealing with mental health issues and homelessness. Over the past few years, he and members of his church loaded up cars full of food and handed it out to people on the street.

"We went out searching for them – instead of them coming to us," Cole said. "That's something that I love doing and it's something important to teach your kids that serving is a lot more important than getting."

Using the hydrofarm as a foundation for service, Cole wants to give healthy, organic food to people who do not know when they will have their next meal. This can range from individuals going through a tough time in their life or families struggling to feed their kids, he said.

"It's not just about the homeless but also the ones that are almost homeless – that are one tragedy away from homelessness," Cole said.

Giving through growing is a central part in Cole's life.

"We all should be taking part in helping those that are less fortunate."



# LEADER IN TRAINING



High school student Hunter Peeler has big leadership dreams in mind.

Story and Photos by NICK ROLLISON

**H**unter Peeler, a 17-year-old student at Columbia High School and the president of the senior class, is clearly not a young adult who lacks ambition. In fact, Peeler sees his position as class president as a stepping stone to his ultimate destination: the White House.

“I’ve always said I wanted to be president of the United States and I have no doubt in my mind that I can make it that far, but you have to take stepping stones,” Peeler said. “Nothing just quite yet, but I still have a little bit of time to figure out what I’d like to run for first.”

Peeler, who plans to attend Florida Gateway College after graduating in Spring 2017, has been class president in his respective grade at CHS for the past four years. Born and raised in Lake City, Peeler wanted to take more action within the school system.

“I have known a lot of people around and I wanted to be more involved,” Peeler said. “And I said why not run for a class position? I said I feel like I could pull this off and I feel like I could have a lot of

support. I wanted to run for class president to lead over our class. After talking to a few friends and family I went ahead and did it, and, four years later, we’re still here.”

Peeler has been involved in maintaining student activities in the Student Government Association, and also oversees major events for his class and community.

His interest in politics extends outside of school, however, and just this past November Peeler was outside the Columbia County Supervisor of Elections office campaigning for Republican Neal Dunn, who was elected to serve on the U.S. House of Representatives for Florida’s 2nd Congressional District.

Looking back on his school political career,

Peeler feels he has gained more trust from his fellow students.

“I feel like my peers have trusted me more, especially going in,” Peeler said. “Our class, we have won homecoming the past three years in a row and I feel like they had enough confidence in me to lead the class to it. I could have never done it without them because I’m not the one sitting there doing all the hard work by myself. Everybody is putting in and I feel like it’s more of a trust thing. If you don’t let your peers down, you have that trust there.”

It’s the same words that Peeler uses to describe himself that seem to give credence to his leadership abilities.

“Well, I’m a very outgoing person. There’s no doubt about it, I’m not afraid to be in the middle of a crowd, I’m not afraid to talk to some random person,” Peeler said. “I’m not a shy person and I try to be helpful to others. I’m kind of very stern on what I say and what I think. You can ask a lot of my friends, but I’m kind of a stubborn person, I guess I’m kind of hard headed. I mean business when I say something.”

School is first and foremost for Peeler, who plans to get his AA and then move on to a business degree. From there, he’ll go into his grandfather’s business, Creech Brothers Trucking and Brokerage, and then in the future decide on which political office he’ll run for. He’s got a few bits of advice for those wishing to get involved in community and school politics.

“I’d probably tell them to always stay positive, always be truthful and probably never let anyone down,” Peeler said. “Always try your best to make whatever you say happen. If you can’t do that, try to explain to them why it couldn’t happen. If you’re gonna say the talk, you need to do the walk.”



I’VE ALWAYS SAID  
I WANTED TO BE  
**PRESIDENT**  
— OF THE —  
**UNITED STATES**  
& I HAVE  
**NO DOUBT**  
**IN MY MIND**  
THAT I CAN MAKE IT THAT FAR



# Columbia County's UNSUNG HEROES

Story and Photos by TAYLOR GAINES

You see them everyday. Teachers, law enforcement officers, community volunteers. They are a part of our community, but many don't realize just how big a part. These five local residents are just some of Columbia County's many unsung heroes.



## MARC HARDISON

Police officers devote their work days to protecting and serving the public. Marc Hardison wanted to devote some of his own personal time to doing that, too.

As an officer involved in the Lake City Police Department's Mentors in Blue Program, Hardison gets matched up with a student at Niblack Elementary School each year.

"It's just a good experience to be able to touch the children and keep them focused and on the right pathway," he said.

Last year, he visited his student at school, had lunch with him and played some instruments in music class with him.

"It's a good feeling to be able to give these young people some direction and some positive influence," Hardison said.

He said what stands out to him when volunteering is the clear impact that

### MARC'S QUOTE “ TO LIVE BY:

"I want to give back and give the young people a positive influence to look up to."

helping out has on the kids.

"You can kind of see that gleam in their eyes when they walk through the door," he said. "I think this program is a very positive thing."

Mike Lee, the public information officer for LCPD, said that Hardison has been involved with Mentors in Blue since the beginning and is one of the most eager volunteers in the program.

"He's usually one of the first ones to volunteer and help out with that," Lee said.



## LINDSAY BEACH

Lindsay Beach always felt like her cousin's education wasn't as good as hers. She felt that Ellis wasn't

being afforded the same opportunities because of his autism. It was unfair.

"That was kind of a motivating factor for me," she said. "I wanted students with special needs to get the opportunity that all other students get."

Beach graduated from the University of North Florida with a degree in special education and taught at Lake City Middle School

for a year. She has now taught ESE students at Columbia High School for four years.

"You can see when [her students] look at her that they love her because they know she cares for them," CHS Principal Trey Hosford said. "You can see there's a mutual love, and it's genuine."

Beach's mother, Gina, who is also a teacher, said her daughter has always wanted to help special education students because she was so close to her cousin growing up.

"She saw the need for that," she said. "You want to know they're taken care of because they can't always speak for themselves."

### “ LINDSAY'S QUOTE TO LIVE BY:

"We all want tolerance, compassion and patience. Once we learn how to give that to each other, it makes life easier."

Beach said her students have taught her far more than she could ever teach them.

"I'm lucky to be a chapter in these kids' lives, and I hope that what I do for them has as big an impact as what they do for me," Beach said.

Beach also finds time to coach the varsity girls soccer team at CHS. Her assistant coach, Jessica Merker, said she is the kind of friend everyone wishes for.

"She's the type of friend that if you run out of gas on the side of the road, she'll still come and get you, and bring you the gas," she said.





## AL NELSON

At one point, people doubted Al Nelson. They told him there were things he simply wouldn't be able to do.

It's hard to believe now.

Nelson, 40, has been a teacher for 17 years, the last eight at Richardson Middle School. He's been the RMS wrestling coach for five years and a football coach for four years — head coach for the most recent season. He's about to hit the three-year mark as pastor at Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church.

"I hold myself accountable to a lot of things because a lot of people are holding me accountable to a lot of things," he said.

Nelson has been married for 15 years and has a 14-year-old and an 8-year-old. He said time management and structure is crucial for him, as it helps him balance his busy life.

"His growing process comes from years and years of study and doing the right thing," said William Murphy, a longtime friend of Nelson's and assistant principal at RMS. "If people don't see the Lord in you, they're not gonna call you into these positions."

Nelson said his pastoral responsibilities help provide a center for his life as well.

"I like the passion of it and seeing what God can do in their lives," he said. "I know that God has made things happen in their lives."

Nelson said his teaching and coaching responsibilities help him fulfill his motivation in life.

### AL'S QUOTE TO LIVE BY:

"Have I made a difference in someone's life today? Did I make a difference in my community today?"

"I missed out on so much in middle school," he said. "I guess because of that, now I want to be a part of someone's middle school life to say that I made a difference in their life."

Gloria Bradley, a longtime friend of Nelson's, has worked with him at the church and in the after-school tutoring that Nelson runs to help kids pass standardized tests. She said Nelson is one of the most giving and loving people she knows.

"He's a very kind-hearted person that's willing to go out of the way to help anyone," she said. "He's very dependable, very family-oriented, and he has a solid foundation in God."



## SARAH WHEELER

Columbia County Sheriff's Office employees don't necessarily have to be wearing a badge to help the community.

"It's easy for people to recognize those people [in a patrol car]

helping you day in and day out," said Murray Smith, CCSO's public information officer. "But there are a large amount of people behind the scenes that we could not do our jobs without."

Sarah Wheeler is one of those people. She works in records, but Wheeler also donates a lot of time to the less fortunate, helping at-risk youth at the Florida Sheriff's Youth Ranch

and organizing its annual fundraiser, Fins & Pins.

"Everybody can live off a little bit of sunshine and happiness," she said. "Seeing other people happy makes me happy."

Steven Khachigan, an internal affairs sergeant and close friend of Wheeler's, said he could barely imagine the volunteer work of CCSO without her.

"She works tirelessly behind the scenes making different things happen, making phone calls, lining things up, organizing people and doing logistical things that need to get done that a lot of people don't even think about," he said.

Wheeler, whose late father was a deputy, said she loves Columbia County and feels a

### SARAH'S QUOTE TO LIVE BY:

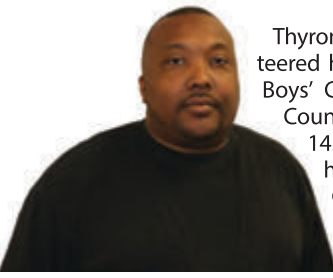
Every day may not be good, but there is something good in every day."

need to help make children's lives better in the community.

"I don't do anything for credit," she said. "I do it for other people's happiness. The thought of a child going home for Christmas break and not having food bothers me. We don't think about how well we have it."

Lynn Witt, a longtime friend of Wheeler's, said she was one of the kindest and most thoughtful people she has ever met.

"I would say Sarah is probably one of the most giving and selfless people that you could ever know," Witt said. "I'd trust her with my child."



## THYRON TAYLOR

Thyron Taylor first volunteered his summer at the Boys' Club of Columbia County when he was 14. He's 37 now, and he enjoys the Boys' Club so much that he's never left.

"It's a gift from God dealing with kids," he

said. "From my first day, I just fell in love with it. You can look in their eyes and tell how much of a difference you're making in their life."

Taylor has pretty much been volunteering 10-20 hours a week at the Boys' Club for 23 years, he said. Taylor has fulfilled all kinds

of roles, whether he's coaching basketball, mentoring kids or just helping fix whatever thing around the club needs fixing.

"He's the first one to say, 'What can I do, how can I help?'" said Bill Caley, executive director of the Boys' Club.

At one point, Taylor coached four different basketball teams at four different age levels. It never felt like a chore to him.

"The atmosphere is wonderful," he said. "When you start working there, [everyone] becomes family. You no longer become friends or workers, you really become family."

Taylor has even had kids he used to coach

### THYRON'S QUOTE TO LIVE BY:

"Never say you can't. You can always accomplish what you set out to do. Can't is not in our vocabulary. It's always can."

come up to him as adults to introduce their children.

"He's sort of like a father figure to all the children," said Edith Marsee, a board member at the club. "Parents respect him, and parents request their kids be on his team."

Caley said his influence will not soon be lost on the kids.

"They just flock around him, and you can see the energy that goes between them," he said. "He just seems to bring out the best in them."



# DIXIE

**FACING PAGE:** Civil War re-enactor Bud Thayer stands with his horse, Dixie, while dressed in his full Confederate Army uniform. Thayer and Dixie have been doing reenactments together for the past eight or nine years.





# DOWN IN LAND

Lake City's Bud Thayer participates in Civil War re-enactments all over the southern states.

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

The Olustee Festival held every year in Columbia County is one of the area's most beloved traditions. The three-day event transports visitors back to the time of the Civil War, right up until the Battle of Olustee Re-enactment, by far the most exciting part of the festival.

One of the men among the troops is Lake City's own Bud Thayer. The 79-year-old Navy veteran has been participating in Civil War re-enactments for over 30 years and is a member of the 2nd Florida Cavalry.

"I've always had an interest in the war between the states in addition to World War II," Thayer said. "Those are two periods of history that I've always had very sincere interest in and when I ran into several of the guys who were with Company D back in the early 80s in McIntosh I signed up with them and began re-enacting. The more I get into it the more I learn about history so it's been an education for me as much as it is for the people I try to present the information to."

Sitting on horseback in his Confederate uniform, Thayer looks straight out of a Civil War movie. As a matter of fact, Thayer and his company have been a part of several highly-acclaimed wartime movies. Thayer participated in re-enactment scenes for the Civil War-era movies, including "Gettysburg" and "Glory," as well for the Texas Revolution mov-



ies such as "Houston: The Legend of Texas" and "Alamo: The Price of Freedom."

"I've had various different roles in

all of them," Thayer said.

While he was working as a catastrophe insurance adjuster before his retirement, Thayer fought in movie



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battles in his off time.

"I worked from Maine to Hawaii and from Seattle to St. Thomas," Thayer said. "In doing so, I only worked when there was an emergency or catastrophe somewhere that needed me. So, at the time I did movies in-between."

While at one point he and his company were traveling to several states to participate in re-enactments and movies, Thayer and the 2nd Florida Cavalry now tend to participate in re-enactments in Florida and Georgia. This fall, Thayer and company have participated in re-enactments just about every other weekend.

#### TRAINING FOR HISTORY

In order to make sure that they continue to accurately portray what happened during the Civil War, the cavalry continuously practices and trains to make sure that their performances are not only historically accurate, but entertaining.

"You train and you keep training," Thayer said. "We're still training, even after all these years we're still practicing. We try to make things look right for the crowd. We take a lot of pride in our uniforms and our accouterments and the way we act in battle, parades or whatever it might be. We want to convey that to the crowds."

For Thayer, re-enacting is about more than just putting on a show.

"It's not just the riding and the maneuvers and putting on a show for the public," Thayer said. "You try to assimilate what our ancestors would have gone through. It's also the comradery among troops, especially in our unit. You're sitting around the campfire and having fun with your friends. It's fantastic."

Thayer has traced his ancestry back to the Civil War, where members of his family fought on both sides of the battlefield. Although he

and the other re-enactors do their best to ensure that the battles remain historically accurate, they do make a couple adjustments to make sure that they can keep the crowd engaged.

"We do our best to try to put on something that the spectators will enjoy and assimilate somewhat what the battles were then," Thayer said. "Now we naturally carry more firepower than they did back then because we've got to make this battle last for 45 minutes to an hour, and you can't be running out of ammunition on horseback."

Thayer has ridden into battle with his current horse, Dixie, for the last eight or nine years, and he taught her how to behave under gunfire and cannon fire.

"I've worked with several different horses over the years," Thayer said. "The one I had before Dixie was a big, black, 16-2 hands Tennessee Walker. Beautiful animal, but he didn't like my hobby. It took a lot of convincing that he was going to like my hobby. The first time a cannon went off it was rodeo time."

Dixie, on the other hand, was battle ready since the first time she came out onto the field.

"Dixie's been super," Thayer said. "The first time I put her into a battle she looked around and said, 'OK what's next.' She's been great. She makes me look good in the saddle."

During the Olustee Festival, which Thayer has been participating in since the early 1980s, keep an eye out for him and Dixie riding in the Olustee Parade next to the Confederate Army General, leading his cavalry through the streets.

## Annual Olustee Festival

The 39th Annual Olustee Festival will take place on Feb. 17 and 18 in downtown Lake City. The 41st Annual Re-enactment of the Battle of Olustee will take place Feb. 17-19 at Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park. There will be a 3:30 p.m. battle demonstration on Saturday, Feb. 18 and the Olustee Battle Re-enactment will begin at 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, Feb. 19. This year's event marks the 153rd Anniversary of the Battle of Olustee.

IT'S NOT JUST THE RIDING  
AND THE MANEUVERS AND  
**PUTTING ON A SHOW**  
FOR THE PUBLIC ...

YOU TRY TO ASSIMILATE WHAT  
**OUR ANCESTORS**  
WOULD HAVE GONE THROUGH.

**IT'S FANTASTIC.**

— BUD THAYER



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# Cool Weather Gardening: IT DOESN'T



1



2



3

Some of the prettiest annuals are in bloom now. Flowers that bloom in the summertime in cooler climates can now be enjoyed in North Florida during our winter. Snapdragons, petunias, violas, pansies, dianthus and sweet alyssum are great bedding plants or in containers. They need plenty of sun, six hours a day and a little fertilizer with regular watering to bloom well, while our weather is acceptable to them.

### TRANSPORT NOW; WAIT TO PRUNE

If you've been waiting for the best time to transplant your shrubs and trees, the time is here. Plants are dormant now, which means they aren't actively growing so they can concentrate on sending out roots instead of putting on new growth. When transplanting, the shorter time the plant's roots are exposed to air the better, so have your hole dug, twice the width of the rootball but a couple of inches shallower. The disturbed soil will settle down causing the plant to sink, and one of the most common reasons for deaths of plants is planting too deeply. Water well and keep the soil moist for several months until you see new growth emerging and then you can slow the watering schedule. A saucer or ridge of soil around the new plant will help the water stay put and seep down to the roots instead of running off.

If you are planting from a nursery container, you may install plants at any time of the year, just watch for watering needs in either case.

For perennials and bulbs that bloom in the spring, such as agapanthus, daylilies, amaryllis and iris, fall and winter are the best times to divide them, for fall bloomers plan on dividing them in the spring. It's not too late to plant

cool weather annuals and vegetables now, but it is better to plant them in the fall so as to establish their root system before bloom time.

Don't do any major pruning or fertilization until late February, as this might encourage plants to come out of their dormancy and be damaged by cold yet to come. There are a few exceptions, of course such as with blueberries, pears, persimmons and apples which require pruning when they are dormant. When late February arrives you may prune evergreen woody plants, such as hollies, just not the early spring bloomers such as azaleas, spireas or loropetalums. Right after they bloom is the best time to prune them.

### BLOOMS IN SEASON

One of the first trees to bloom in the new year is the beautiful Saucer magnolia, a deciduous, medium size tree of the Magnolia genus. The large oriental looking blooms come in shades of pink, purple, white and yellow. They prefer rich, acid, well-drained soil. Feed them with a slow-release fertilizer for acid-loving plants in spring. Prune only young trees to shape, as the older ones don't heal as well.

The camellias have been especially pretty this year and are still blooming with no care from me. They are great shrubs and bloom during the cooler weather when not much else is blooming. Plus, they are evergreen, and only ask for an occasional spray of horticulture oil, if insects are a problem, such as scale, aphids or spider mites. They prefer protection from the hot afternoon sun and do well in high partial shade.

There are over 30,000 different varieties and almost 300 species of camellias, including *Camellia japonica*, *C. sasanqua* and *C. reticulata*. They start blooming in late fall and on through early spring, depending on the time of bloom of the individual variety, so you can have camellias blooming all through the winter if you choose well.

The wonderful heirloom iris or passalong plant, "Cemetery White" bearded iris, is a

Trillium (1) — you might miss them if you don't know to look for them. Persimmons (2) are one exception to pruning; they require it now when they are dormant. Valentine's Day is the best reminder to prune your roses (3).



Petunias (4) are a summertime flower in the North that can be enjoyed in North Florida's winters. The flower known as "Snowflake" (5) is one of the first to bloom in January. There are a variety of daffodils (6) that will handle cool weather just fine.

# LAST LONG

tough, rapid-multiplying iris. They aren't as showy as the regular bearded iris of cooler climates, but for our temperatures they are outstanding. They do well with a few hours of sun or under deciduous trees and like to be planted in dry areas. They can be divided while blooming, cutting back the foliage by one-third and replanting with the rhizome almost on top of the ground. Their spiky foliage contrasts nicely with other mounding plants.

## DON'T MISS THESE BEAUTIES

Trillium are a favorite in my garden, each year they multiply by a few babies and are just delightful. You might miss them if you don't know where to look. They are small, reaching about 6 inches high for mature plants and the name Trillium comes from the Latin word for three. They have 3 bracts, 3 sepals, and have 3 stigmas on the pistil. They are native wildflower perennials, emerging and blooming in January and going dormant as the warm weather settles in. They like rich organic soil and shade and rare to find in the wild. I ordered mine from a catalog many years ago, not expecting them to thrive. There are many varieties but the *T. cuneatum* and a close relative *T. underwoodii* do well in North Florida and look very similar. They will reseed if the mulch isn't too thick.

Another great bulb that is one of the first to bloom in January, is the *Leucojum aestivum* or "Snowflake." It has lovely little bell shaped white flowers with tiny green dots on the tip of each petal, nodding at the end of 12 inch sturdy stems. They enjoy rich, moist soil in sun or part shade and will take boggy soil.

By February some of the evergreen plants look a little damaged from the cold, so I cut the worst looking ones back to the ground, such as holly ferns, cast iron plants and liri-ope. They look a lot fresher when they grow out, be sure to cut them back before new growth begins.

If you want to grow daffodils, there are a few that are recommended for Gainesville

and cooler. They don't need summer irrigation, or rich or wet soil. The bulbs will rot under those conditions. No slow release fertilizer and no pre-chilling required. Plant October through December (pointy side up) spaced three times the bulb's width. Plant 6 to 8 inches deep so soil temperatures are more even. Mulch about 3 inches deep. They need full sun until mid-March and shade during the summer. Water only from October until April 1. (Fall, winter, spring watering) If dry during this time it causes poor blooming. No herbicides. Daffodils love potash but are not fertilizer dependent and prefer a neutral pH soil. If you fertilize do so in the fall and the spring right after blooming with a low-nitrogen fertilizer.

The best varieties for our climate are: Campernelle, Carlton, Erlicheer, Early Louisiana, Sweetness, Texas Star, Thalia and Trevithian. These are all early bloomers which makes sense, to bloom before it gets too hot. I am growing Carlton, Erlicheer and Thalia with good success. If your paperwhite narcissus get more than 8 inches deep, blooming will decrease. They need lifting and replanting. Narcissus is the Latin or botanical name for all daffodils.

Valentine's Day is a good way to remember when to prune roses. Hybrid tea roses are pruned the most severely, into an open vase shape. Strip and remove any yellowing leaves from site to prevent fungal disease from spreading. Climbing roses should be cut back to 2-3 main canes. Old fashioned or heirloom roses and bush types are not cut back as drastically as hybrid roses but will benefit from having their size reduced for best flowering. Knock-Out roses should be pruned lightly after the first flush of blooms to shape and increase blooming.

Enjoy your gardening time during our cooler weather. It doesn't last long.

■ Martha Ann Ronsonet is the author of *Gardening in the Deep South and Other Hot Pursuits*.





# Valentine's Day

## DESTINATIONS

*Looking for the perfect Valentine's Day escape with your loved one? Well, look no further. Having a romantic getaway doesn't necessarily mean traveling far away. Here are some of the best places to travel for Valentine's Day that are just a few hours away from Columbia County.*

### SAVANNAH

There's a magic to Savannah, which makes it the perfect city for a romantic rendezvous. Whether you're getting married, honeymooning, celebrating an anniversary or simply in search of some "us" time with your significant other, you'll find romance around every corner in this hospitable southern city.

A city full of rich history and countless places to eat and explore makes Savannah an ideal Valentine's Day destination.

The city is full of charming inns, perfect for a weekend getaway. It also has dozens of intimate restaurants. Some great places for a Valentine's Day dinner are Jazz d'Tapas, a small-plates restaurant perfect for sharing, and Elizabeth's on 37th, a restaurant with a chef's tasting menu that offers all the best tastes of southern coastal cuisine.

Spend your day taking a tour of the city, either by foot, trolley, bike, boat or even Segway.

Savannah is also known for its world-renowned golf courses, so if you're a couple that likes to hit the green, this is a perfect destination for you.

Some must-see Savannah sites include the City Market, a four-block area in the heart of the Historic District that has been renovated to capture the authentic atmosphere and character of the city's old open marketplace, Tricentennial Park and the Davenport House Museum.

Visit [www.visitsavannah.com](http://www.visitsavannah.com) for more information about this stunning city.



### HIGH SPRINGS

Neighboring High Springs is an ideal Valentine's Day destination when you want to get away, but not too far away.

High Springs is full of plenty indoor and outdoor activities to partake in over the romantic holiday.

If you want to spend a romantic day in the great outdoors, High Springs is home to some of the most picturesque areas in North Florida.

O'Leno State Park, Poe Springs, Blue Springs and Ginnie Springs are all close by. While it may be a little too chilly for swimming this time of year, you can still hike, fish and explore these beautiful areas.

There are also a number of things to do in the small, close-knit town of High Springs.

It is full of great antique shops, restaurants and also the oldest movie theatre in North Florida.

For dining, there are some great local spots in High Springs. Great Outdoors, True Blue Cafe and Secret Garden Bakery are just a few of the many local eateries in the area.

High Springs is close enough to Lake City that you could make it a day trip. However, if you want to make a weekend out of it, consider staying at a local bed and breakfast.

The Historic Grady House Bed and Breakfast and the Rustic Inn Bed and Breakfast are both great local spots full of hospitality and great accommodations.

Visit [www.highsprings.com](http://www.highsprings.com) for more information about our neighboring town.



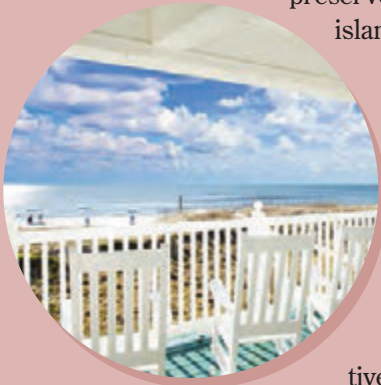




## AMELIA ISLAND

A southern jewel in the Seal Island chain of barrier islands, Amelia Island has plenty to offer anyone looking to spend their Valentine's Day on the water.

Amelia Island (pictured above) has 13 miles of pristine, uncrowded Atlantic beaches. Experience the lush landscape of the maritime forest, marshlands and beaches. Ride a bike trail or hike through one of the preserved areas that surround the island.



This small southern town is packed with lots of exciting things to do. Besides enjoying all the beautiful beaches and nature areas, Amelia Island also offers a variety of dining and shopping opportunities.

With more than 90 distinctive restaurants offering everything from fresh, local seafood to international specialties, you'll never run out of places to eat while on your Valentine's Day getaway.

When your done eating, explore some of the local antique shops or take a romantic walk along the beach.

Amelia Island is less than two hours away from Lake City. For more information on this hidden coastal gem, visit [www.ameliaisland.com](http://www.ameliaisland.com).



## HISTORIC DOWNTOWN ST. AUGUSTINE

St. Augustine is not only the nation's oldest city, but it is one of the nation's most charming. Located less than two hours away from Columbia County, a trip to St. Augustine could be a great daycation for anyone looking to have a romantic Valentine's Day.



There is no shortage of things to do in historic St. Augustine. While strolling down the cobblestone streets, you can soak in all the history and culture the area has to offer.

Whether you want to make the visit informative and take in a few tours of the area and the fort, or you want to window shop and eat at one of the many fabulous restaurants, downtown St. Augustine has a little something for everyone.

One special Valentine's Day surprise you can include in your trip to the nation's oldest city is a romantic horse-drawn carriage ride through the streets of downtown.

If you're looking to make a week-end out of it, St. Augustine has an abundance of hotels, bed and breakfasts and resorts to stay at. Visit [www.oldcity.com](http://www.oldcity.com) for accommodations and any other information you may need about historic downtown St. Augustine.





# 10

## SUPER BOWL PARTY TIPS

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY

The Super Bowl is as much about the gathering as it is about the game. Whether you're a huge football fan or just looking to spend time with friends, a Super Bowl party is fun for everyone. So don't fumble on game day. Check out this list of 10 Super Bowl party must-haves to score big points with your guests.



### 1. Keep it Neutral

Unless your hometown team made it to the Super Bowl, chances are your guests will have mixed opinions on who they think should win the big game. So, in order to make all your guests feel welcomed and comfortable regardless of their opinions on which team is better, keep the decor neutral. By making the party about football and not about one particular team, it guarantees that none of your guests will feel singled out while cheering for their team.



### 2. Have a Nacho Bar

If you're looking for an easy menu for your Super Bowl party, look no further than the nacho bar. Guests will love getting to make their own crazy combinations. Create your own queso in the crock pot so it will stay warm throughout the whole party, then provide lots of tortilla chips with all the fixings. Whether your guests want to stick with the traditional chips and cheese or load it up with chicken, veggies and sauces, a nacho bar is a go-to crowd pleaser.





### 3. Make it a Potluck

To keep yourself from going crazy trying to plan out the perfect party menu, make the party a potluck! Each guest can bring an appetizer, chips, drinks or sweets while you supply the main course. That way, you don't get stuck scrambling to make sure all the food is ready, and everyone gets to bring a little something to the party.



### 4. Ice, Ice, Ice

Ice seems to be the number one thing people forget to supply for parties. Sometimes your ice maker just won't cut it, especially if you have lots of thirsty guests. Make sure to stock up before the party so you don't find yourself running out to the store at halftime to grab another bag. Even if you think one bag is enough, get two. If you think two bags is enough, get four. You'll be glad you did.

### 5. Have Open Seating

Creating a comfortable game-viewing environment is essential. No one wants to feel like they have to stay in one spot all night in fear of losing their seat. Bring throw pillows, bean bags of comfy cushions into the main viewing area and scatter them around the floor so people will have plenty of places to sit.



### 6. Take it Outside

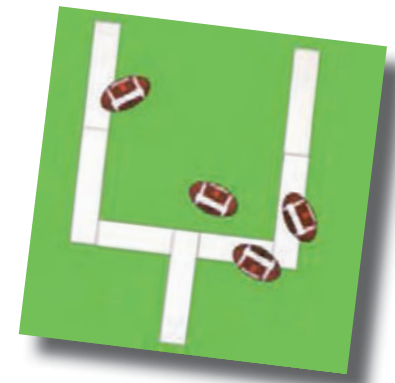
Having a small home doesn't have to stop you from throwing an awesome Super Bowl party. If you don't think you can fit all your guests in your home, take the party outside. Set the TV and all the necessary equipment up on a table on your porch, patio or in the yard. Lay out blankets, lawn chairs or any other seating you can think of and you have your own outdoor screening area. If you decide to go with an outdoor party, just keep the weather in mind.

### 7. Play Football!

If you and your guests are an athletic bunch, you can get together and have your own football game. Whether you choose to do it before the game or during halftime (if you don't care much for the halftime performer), a friendly game of touch football is the perfect way to burn off all those snacks you've been munching on. Just remember, keep it fun, friendly and fair!

### 8. Rank Commercials

Let's face it, sometimes people only watch the Super Bowl for the commercials. If you and your friends are more interested in what's going on outside of the football stadium, make the party even more fun by ranking the best commercials. This works best for small gatherings, and is a great way to get everyone engaged with one another. Plus, for those non-sports lovers, it's something fun to do while the actual game is going on.



### 9. Other Games, Too

While the big game and the commercials are likely to keep guests engaged throughout the party, it doesn't hurt to add a bit of handmade entertainment for anyone in need of a change of scenery. One go-to football themed game is "Pin the Football in the Goal Posts." With the same concept as "Pin the Tail on the Donkey," guests can be blindfolded and try to pin the football between the goal posts. This is also a great distraction for kids who may not be able to sit through the whole game.

### 10. Don't Forget the Party Favors

After a long night of cheering and rooting for their favorite teams, some guests may feel a little sour if the game didn't go their way. So, to end their night on a sweet note, send each guest home with a "Super Bowl ring." Just grab a bag of ring pops, put them in a bowl and make sure everyone grabs one on the way out. It's a cheap, easy party favor that your friends and family will love.



# Perfect Party Bites FOR THE SUPERBOWL

The perfect party foods are the ones you can easily pop in your mouth, no utensils required. These tiny bites pack a lot of flavor, and are the perfect treats to accompany the big game. From sweet treats to spicy snacks, these Super Bowl party bites are sure to be a hit!



## MINI-Loaded Potatoes

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 400° and line a large baking sheet with foil.
2. Using a sharp knife, make several cuts through each potato, but avoiding cutting all the way down. Place potatoes on baking sheet. Rub with olive oil and sprinkle with salt.
3. Bake for 30 minutes, until potatoes are tender.
4. Place cheese squares in between a few of the cuts on each potato. Return to oven for 5-10 minutes, until cheese has melted.
5. Let cool 10 minutes before topping with sour cream, bacon and green onions, or your desired toppings. Serve warm or at room temperature.

### Ingredients

- 1 lb. small red potatoes (2" across)
- Olive oil
- Kosher salt
- Sliced cheese, cut into small squares
- FOR TOPPING:
- Light sour cream
- Cooked bacon, chopped
- Sliced green onions

## Philly Cheesesteak Sliders

### Ingredients:

- 3 lb. ribeye steak
- 2 tbsp. butter
- 2 bell peppers, diced
- 2 yellow onions, diced
- 2 cups cheese sauce
- 16-20 frozen dinner rolls
- Salt and pepper, to taste

### Directions:

1. Place steak in freezer for 30 minutes so that the meat is easier to slice. Remove the meat from the freezer and slice very thinly.
2. In a large sauté pan, melt butter. Add in onions and peppers, and sauté over medium heat until onions are translucent, about 7 minutes. Meanwhile, preheat oven according to dinner roll package instructions.
3. Add meat to pan, and sauté on medium until only slightly pink, about another 7 minutes. While the meat cooks, put the rolls in the oven and heat according to package instructions, and heat the cheese sauce according to jar instructions.
4. Assemble the sliders: Slice dinner rolls long-ways, and fill each with some of the meat mixture. Top each with cheese sauce. Serve warm with extra cheese sauce on the side.



## Bacon-Wrapped Stuffed Jalapeño Poppers

### Ingredients:

- 12 fresh jalapeño peppers
- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- ½ tsp. smoked paprika
- 12 slices bacon, cut in half
- 24 toothpicks



### Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper (best for clean-up) or a silicone baking mat. Place a baking rack on top of the baking sheet. Set aside.
2. Cut the jalapeño peppers in half lengthwise; remove seeds and center membrane. Set aside.
3. Using a handheld or stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat the cream cheese, cheddar cheese, garlic, and paprika together until combined. Add salt to taste, then spoon filling equally among all 24 jalapeño halves.
4. Wrap each stuffed jalapeño with a half slice of bacon and stick a toothpick through the center to assure the bacon stays in place. Place each on the baking rack and bake for 25-28 minutes or until the bacon is crisp to your liking. Serve immediately.
5. **Make ahead tip:** Jalapeño peppers can be stuffed and wrapped 1 day in advance. Refrigerate until ready to bake. You can also assemble and freeze up to 2 months. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator and bake as directed.

## Cookies & Cream Cheeseball

### Ingredients:

- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened
- 2 cup powdered sugar
- 2 tbsp. chocolate syrup
- 18 double stuff Oreos, crushed
- 1 cup mini semi-sweet chocolate chips



### Directions:

1. In a large mixing bowl, beat cream cheese and butter for 3 minutes. Add powdered sugar and beat an additional 2 minutes, scraping down the sides of the bowl as necessary. Remove a spoonful (about 2-3 tbsp.) and place in a small plastic bag. Seal and set aside.
2. To the bowl of cream cheese, add chocolate syrup and crushed Oreo cookies. Blend completely.
3. Line a large bowl with plastic wrap. Drop the cream cheese mixture into the plastic wrap lined bowl. Fold up the plastic around the cheese ball. Refrigerate for about an hour.
4. Remove plastic wrap and shape cheese ball into a football on a serving plate. Press chocolate chips into top and sides until completely covered. Using your reserved bag of cream cheese mixture, snip off the corner and pipe "laces" onto your cheese ball.
5. Serve immediately or cover and refrigerate for up to 3 days. Enjoy with pretzels, apples, or cookies.



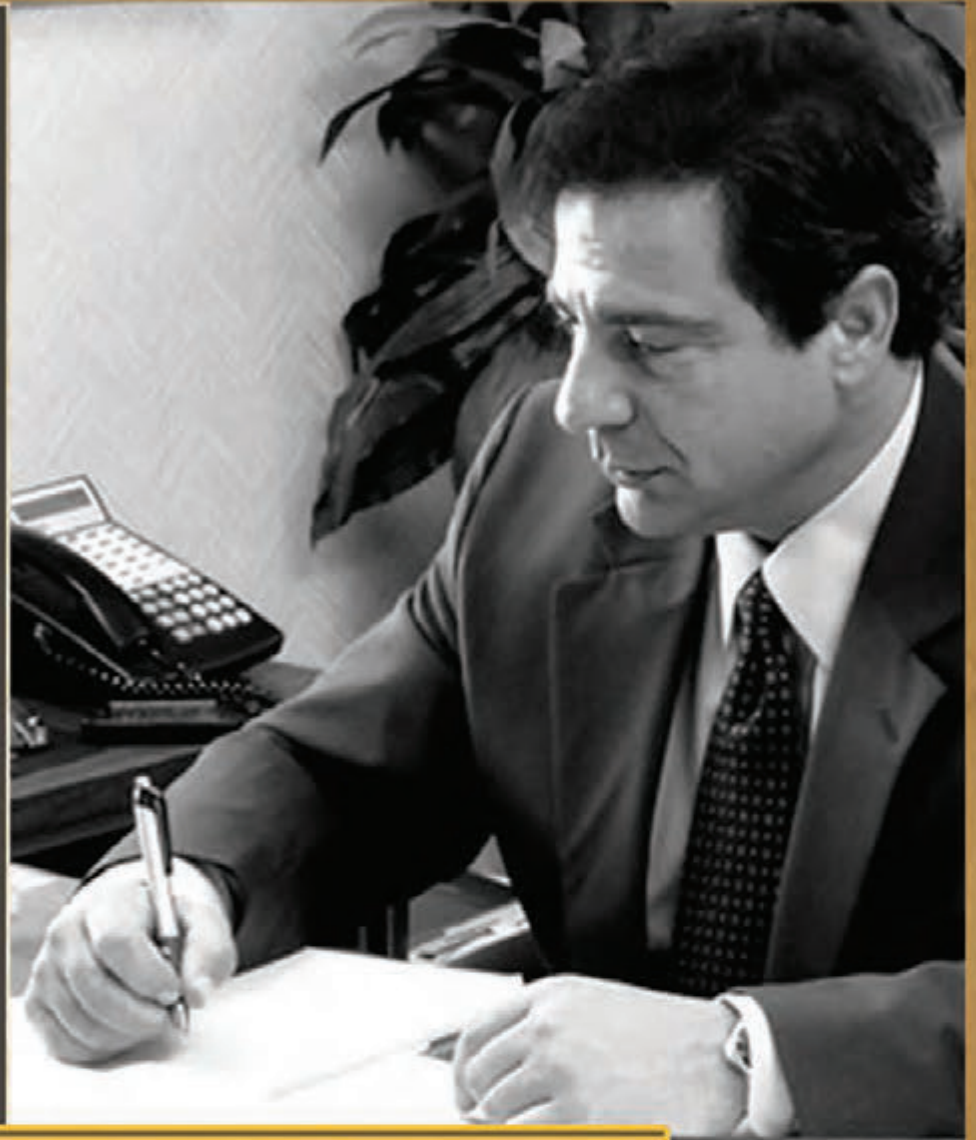
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DEATH

PERSONAL  
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