

WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

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WELLEN PARK / COURTESY PHOTO

Wellen Park Welcome Center comes to life

▲ The Welcome Center's reception area features a vintage Ape truck that serves as the greeting and registration area for visitors.

BY PATRICIA HORWELL

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

With a ribbon cutting event set for Wednesday, Oct. 28, the Wellen Park Welcome Center will serve as the first stop for future home buyers to learn about the neighborhoods, builders and amenities within the master-planned community.

Throughout the center, numerous touch screens present up-to-the-minute information on the features of Wellen Park's many neighborhoods, including model home plans and available move-in ready/quick move-in homes.

Becky DeGeorge leads the center's team of community ambassadors. Experts on "all things Wellen Park," the ambassadors are on hand to familiarize prospective buyers and real estate agents with all the ins and outs of the community.

"We ask what they need," Ms. DeGeorge says. "What do they want in a community? Do they play golf? Do they want a large home? A villa?"

"We streamline the home-buying process by helping buyers and their real estate agents identify the neighborhoods they want to explore and tour in greater detail." For families that are considering a move to Wellen Park, the

SEE WELCOME, A14 ►

Fun-loving lifestyles

IslandWalk's community garden is reaping bushels of fun.

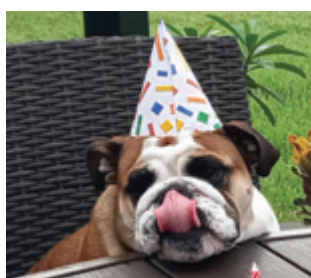
A4 ►



Pet Parade

A celebration of Wellen Park's adored and adorable animal companions.

A8 ►



All Wellen Good

New hospital on target for Fall 2021 opening.

A32 ►



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FUN-LOVING LIFESTYLES

IslandWalk's community garden is reaping bushels of fun

BY ROBIN F. DEMATTIA

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

There are a lot of green thumbs in IslandWalk at West Villages.

When 74 planting beds at the new community garden became available in June, they were sold out within hours.

"Before DiVosta Homes built the amenities, they did a survey and people loved the idea of a community garden," Lifestyle Director Mark Craycraft says. "Our sign-up lottery went quickly. We have a waiting list of about 20 people."

Each 4x8-foot plot contains two irrigated 4x4-foot beds. Each resident can rent one plot (\$10 for six months, \$25 for 12 months).

By late summer this year, some residents were already eating the fruits of their labors.

"My squash has been amazing," says Cindy Hurwitz, who had harvested at least three dozen by early September. She has also done well with cucumber, red pepper and zucchini.

Ms. Hurwitz had an extensive garden when she lived in Rochester, N.Y., but found success hard to come by with container gardening on her lanai in IslandWalk. She was one of the first to log on and register for a community garden plot when the link went live.

In just a few months, she's learned a lot about the challenges of gardening in Florida.

"The heat and the sun are so strong," she says, adding she soon realized she needed to filter the sunshine. She had bought some start-



COURTESY PHOTO

Squash grown by Cindy Hurwitz in the thriving community garden at IslandWalk, where all 74 planting beds are being lovingly tended.

er plants at local home improvement stores and noticed that they had screening over their plants. She purchased a similar material and strung it from four poles over her garden plot.

"It filters beautifully," she says. Her fellow community gardeners took note, and "now everybody has screening."

She also learned that the soil needs potassium and calcium supplements and that she sometimes needs to water twice a day.

Ms. Hurwitz is happy to share what she's learned with her neighbors.

"I'm at the garden a lot in the evening and talk to a lot of people who ask for suggestions because I have a very successful garden," she says, adding many of the people she meets are first-time gardeners.

Barbara Bryden is not one who needed lessons. A master gardener, Ms. Bryden was very happy to have a plot to grow vegetables and also interact with her neighbors. "People who are gardeners are generally lovely people," she notes.

Like Ms. Hurwitz, she also unearthed the differences between gardening here and when she lived in New York and Maryland.

"The conditions are much harsher here," she says. "There is very strong sun and lots of insects. The soil has to be amended with calcium and fertilizers to make sure it's nice and thick and rich."

Ms. Bryden researched what grows well in Florida and initially decided to plant okra, peppers and cucumbers. She added lettuce

and radishes, says her eggplant was "fabulous" with about 20 on it, and plans to try tomatoes in the cooler weather.

IslandWalk provides carts for gardeners to carry their supplies, but people must bring their own soil and gardening tools.

The gardeners hold monthly meetings and often arrange for a speaker. They are planning a home and garden show in March that will have about 35 vendors and programs about conservation and the importance of bees.

Mr. Craycraft applauds DiVosta for building such a popular amenity.

"I'm glad to be part of an organization that takes the residents' comments seriously," he says. "You take a survey and bring it to life. That's pretty strong." 🍷

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ART & SOUL

Taking “a lyrical approach” to line and balance

BY CHARMAINE ENGELSMAN-ROBINS

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

Laura Ann Pommier has, since the ripe old age of 4 years, been blessed to know exactly what her life path was to be: art.

While growing up in the Midwest (mostly Louisville), she would observe her father as he sketched just for fun, copying characters from comic strips, and then she would copy her dad’s work. Once in grade school, she was fortunate enough to have very open, observant teachers who (just like her parents) immediately recognized her talent and enthusiasm and encouraged her right from the start.

Grade school, middle school, high school ... all through the years, art was a constant and important part of her life. When it came time to choose a college and a major, Ms. Pommier knew she would major in fine art, at Murray State University in Murray, Ky.

“It’s still considered one of the best,” she notes proudly. And that’s no idle boast; this is the 30th consecutive year that U.S. News & World Report has recognized Murray for quality, value and student success, among other attributes.

Following graduation, Ms. Pommier continued creating fine art for her own satisfaction and taught workshops. She also embarked on what was to become a 23-year career creating art for newspaper advertising.

In her late 30s she decided to go back to school, this time to Indiana State University in Terre Haute, where she earned a master’s degree in art.

With her three daughters doing well living their own young adult lives, Ms. Pommier felt that this was the time to put fine art at the forefront of her life. She started thinking



CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

Laura Ann Pommier teaches classes via Zoom for the North Port Area Art Center.

about all the art centers she’d found in Southwest Florida while visiting her parents here time after time, and thought, “Why wait until retirement to move to Florida?”

Her enthusiasm and excitement put her plan in action quickly — so quickly that she didn’t realize heading for the Sunshine State

would have her driving straight into Hurricane Irma. Luckily, she was able to stop and weather the storm with her daughter in Orlando before continuing to Port Charlotte. Within a month she had settled into a condo, found a part-time job and started entering area art shows.

Then one day she was happily scavenging for materials and supplies at the North Port Area Art Center yard sale and discovered the fellow artists she was chatting with there weren’t just being neighborly; they wanted her to start teaching at the center.

Ms. Pommier quickly accepted and jumped in with both feet. She’s still teaching there today, though with the current pandemic restrictions she’s teaching via Zoom for the time being. And she says that’s not entirely a bad thing; utilizing Zoom also allows her to teach students in Indiana and Punta Gorda. It might not be quite as satisfying as the up close and personal camaraderie fellow artists so enjoy when taking class together in one studio, but it’s certainly better than being completely cut off from the art scene and like-thinkers. Students of all levels can begin — or keep — learning, primarily in oils in such traditional areas as landscape, portrait and still life.

Much as she enjoys and excels at those subjects, when she’s creating all by and for herself, Ms. Pommier tends to express herself in what she terms “my own unique style.” Her website describes it this way: “Realistic paintings and drawings. Full color palette, unique perspectives, and lyrical approach to line and balance.”

If you’d like to see and learn more about Ms. Pommier’s classes and style, you can check it out on her site at www.laurapommier.com and see it in person at the Wellen Park Welcome Center during the first quarter of 2021 when she will be the artist-in-residence.

How often do you get the opportunity to share the passion of a dream that has motivated someone since they were 4 years old? Enjoy! 🍷

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WANDER WITH WELLEN

Making the most of your visit to Mote

BY CHARMAINE ENGELSMAN-ROBINS

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

How long has it been since you've had a great outing that was so wonderful it transported you to a happy place and took your mind off everything else? With few adjustments to visitor guidelines, Mote Marine Research Lab and Aquarium in Sarasota remains open to offer such an escape.

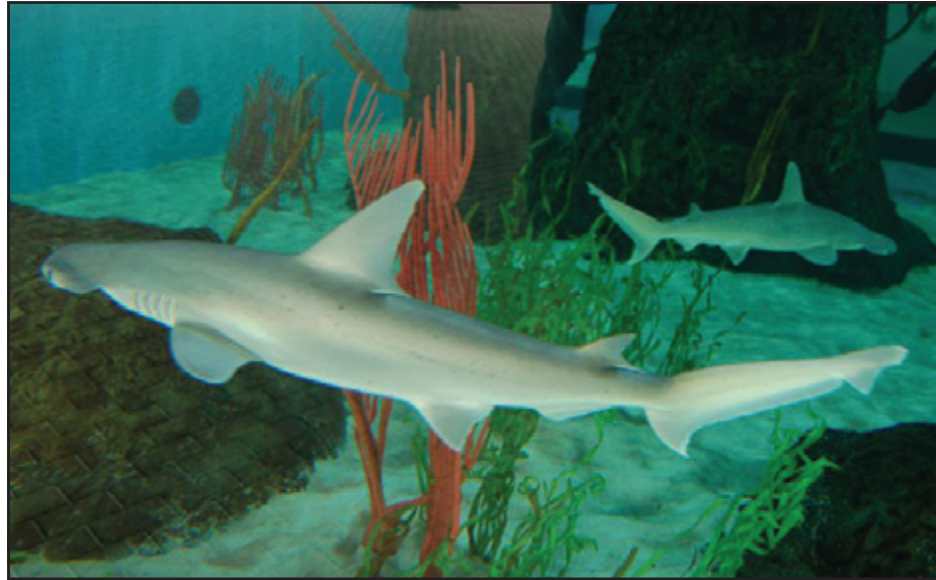
With so many venues closed or operating with reduced hours and visitor capacity because of the pandemic, Mote's marine animals and staff are proud to keep welcoming everyone 365 days of the year, even on holidays. The hours are still 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day.

If you've never been there, you're in for a treat.

Mote Marine Research Lab and Aquarium is a completely different animal than the usual theme parks and roadside attractions in Florida. No "tourist trap" this, the aquarium is an addition/extension to a long-standing and well-respected nonprofit sea life research/rescue/and rehabilitation program. Growing in exciting scientific stages since the 1950s, to the betterment of our sea life and marine environment, Mote has continuously extended its reach to the area's residents and tourists alike.

We asked Mote's Stephanie Kettle for some inside info as to what she considers must-see features for visitors to the aquarium. Without hesitation she gave us an enthusiastic response.

■ You must meet the Mote rescue manatees, Hugh and Buffet. Because these two gentle giants cannot be safely released back into the wild, they live a life of luxury, safety,



MARKUS / COURTESY PHOTO

Bonnethead sharks at the Mote Marine Research Lab and Aquarium in Sarasota.

comfort and care at the aquarium, and delight everyone who sees them. Their huge girth coupled with the prehistoric demeanor and the extremely placid personality truly make the manatee a one-of-a-kind creature.

■ The Shark Zone is a 135,000-gallon shark tank that affords visitors a rare opportunity to safely see sharks up close, along with such other gasp-inducing creatures as snook, tarpon and goliath grouper. If you want to know the real shark story that "Jaws" never touched on, this is the place to ask questions and learn.

■ Need a giggle or a smile? Head for the Otters Waters exhibit and meet Mote's three North American otter rescues, Huck, Pippi

and Jane, appropriately named after three human orphans of literature. The cutest little cut-up clowns of any environment, these guys are so full of joy and energy they're sure to bring a smile. Delightful little showoffs, they seem to be energized and encouraged when an audience is present.

■ When you're swimming in the gulf or ocean, do you ever slide your feet over the smooth, cool sand under the water and wonder to yourself, "What's down there?" If so, you're bound to enjoy Contact Cove. Here you can reach out to live starfish, sea cucumbers, sea urchins, horseshoe crabs and other fascinating creatures. You might not enjoy finding them unexpectedly underfoot when

you're swimming, but take away the element of surprise and you'll see they're really quite docile and beautiful.

And there's more.

You'll also find casual outdoor dining available on site at the Deep Sea Diner, and there's a gift shop with a variety of clothing items (adult and children) and souvenirs to remind you of the animals you've seen during your visit.

Of course, with the current restrictions on public venues, visitors to Mote are reminded:

■ No walk-in admissions. To practice safe crowd control, visits must now be arranged prior to arrival by buying tickets and reserving your day and time on the website at www.mote.org or by phone. This enables Mote to allocate only a certain number of admissions per hour, ensuring plenty of room to practice safe distancing with a good view all there is to see.

■ All visitors over 5 years of age must wear a mask.

These simple rules should allow a great visit for everyone, in the safest possible atmosphere, so make your plans now and prepare to enjoy a day with the marine life you seldom see. 🐟

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ALI

Little Ali is a well-mannered maltipoo who loves to give and receive cuddles with **Gran Paradiso** residents David Anthony and Tracy Pierce.

JACKSON

Jackson is an English bulldog who has an insatiable appetite for treats of both human and doggy kind. He makes sure there's never a dull moment (or a crumb left behind) at the home of Mary and Ken Spaeth in **The Preserve**.



OZZIE

Awesome Ozzie is a golden doodle who rules the roost that he happily shares with Gene Isbell at **IslandWalk**.



Welcome to the inaugural **Wellen Park Pet Parade**, where we share pictures sent in by the proudest pet owners in our pet-loving community. It's just a coincidence that our first-ever photographic procession is all-canine (and that two of them are named Ali!); rest assured that whether your best animal buddy is a cat, a bird, a rabbit or even a reptile, we want to see it and share it in the Wellen Park Journal and on our social channels.

Submit your pet pics via email to info@wellenpark.com or via Facebook messenger [@wellenparkfl](https://www.facebook.com/wellenparkfl). We'll do our best to include them in the next Wellen Park Pet Parade and on our social channels.

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UPWELL

BE PREPARED FOR YOUR BICYCLING ADVENTURES

Biking in Florida presents unique rewards and challenges. Before you don your helmet, think about the needs that might present for yourself and your riding companions.



BEFORE YOU HEAD OUT:

Make yourself easy to find if need be. Leave a note stating when you departed, where you're going and when you expect to return. If you're heading to less populated areas, wear colors that make you easy to see, and do NOT ride in those areas during hunting season.



IN CASE YOU NEED TO ALERT SOMEONE: Bring your fully charged cell phone and secure it in a place where it can't fall out along the way. You might also want to bring a whistle and a small flashlight.



PACE YOURSELF & COMPANIONS: When riding with others, be sure to plan the distance and pace of the ride for the comfort of all. Is someone along for the first time? Start out slow, be open to questions and concerns, respect any hesitancy or fears to ride in certain areas or conditions, and don't set a pace that makes others push themselves. This is not a race; it's supposed to be relaxing and fun.

KIDS ON BOARD? This calls for more than good listening skills; you need to keep a close eye on kids. Just because they're young and healthy doesn't mean they are physically fit; a LOT of kids aren't today. Also, in their excitement they might not stay as alert to sticks on the path, traffic, wildlife, etc. You go first, pointing out and loudly announcing any hazards you encounter.



IS YOUR DOG YOUR CO-PILOT? Realize that dogs will push themselves until they drop just to please their person, and don't let that happen. Also consider that your canine companion is getting the same exercise as you are, but doing it in bare feet and a fur coat. Look for cooler surfaces (even grass can get very hot), shady lanes, little or no traffic, frequent breaks and hydration for you both. In very hot temps, leave Fido at home in the A/C.

Wellen Park is a beautiful, bike-friendly community, so you needn't go far to enjoy pedaling for exercise, fresh air and pleasure. Should you ever want a change of scene or pace, however, there are lots of great places nearby to try. One of the most ambitious is the **Legacy Trail** (www.friendsofthelegacytrail.com), a former railroad corridor.

There's also the city of **North Port's Paved Trail Network**. If you're into mountain biking, the trail along the Myakkahatchee Creek is, according to the www.cityofnorthport.com, "one of Southwest Florida's most intense."

You might also like the **Punta Gorda Linear Park** or the **John Yarbrough Linear Park Trail**.

For specifics such as photos and maps and an overview of more than 12 trails covering 90-plus miles, go to www.trailink.com.

Happy trails!

— Compiled by Charmain Engelsman-Robins
Wellen Park Journal Correspondent



ENHANCE YOUR LIFESTYLE

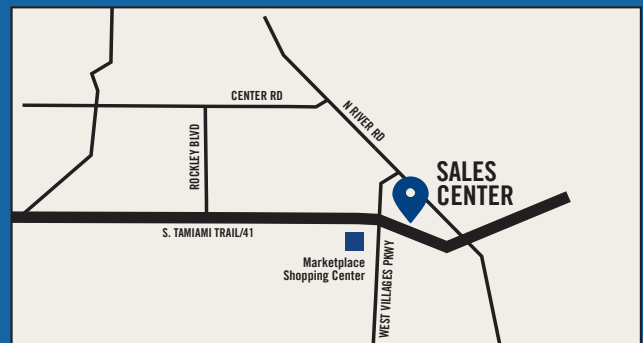
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WELLEN ROUND-UP

Atlanta Braves Farmers Market



The market is open from 8 a.m. to noon every Wednesday through March at the Atlanta Braves CoolToday Park.



COURTESY PHOTOS

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CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

A 24-foot-by-10-foot moss wall showcases Wellen Park's various neighborhoods and the coastal plain topography of Southwest Florida.

WELCOME

From page 1

ambassadors also have information about area schools and activities for children.

In addition to being the first stop for anyone in the market for a new home, the welcome center can accommodate events for real estate agents and builders and has cool touches that make it a great place for future and current residents to hang out. There's even an adjoining café, Barrel & Bean, where prospective residents can strike up conversations with people who already call Wellen Park home.

The new center is at the heart of Downtown Wellen, where the centerpiece 80-acre lake is surrounded by a 2.8-mile walking path. Waterfront dining, boutique shops, apartments, a hotel and an assisted living facility are all part of the plan, as are a food truck park, splash pad and children's playground. Construction is underway and opening is on target for the first quarter of 2021.

"We're extremely excited," Christine Masney, vice president of marketing at Wellen Park, says about the new welcome center. "Everyone who comes in will enjoy a hospitality-type welcome and can learn about the region and the history of our community, while exploring some really fun elements that tell the Wellen Park story."

As the welcome center supervisor and a licensed real estate agent, Ms. DeGeorge knows how to make the process of home buying a little less daunting. "It's a hot market right now," she says. "Inventory is low. The ability of real estate professionals to really understand what their customers need is critical. We're here to help agents figure out what Wellen Park neighborhood is the right fit for their client."

Her background has more than prepared her for the job. She has more than 20 years working in the corporate world developing training programs to optimize the customer experience

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for companies including Wachovia Bank and J.D. Power and Associates. A resident of the Sarasota National golf course neighborhood in Wellen Park, she most recently worked with Coldwell Banker.

"I live in paradise," she says. "I am thrilled to leverage my background and expertise to deliver excellent customer service and assist home buyers in finding their forever home in the Wellen Park neighborhood that best fits their lifestyle."

Another aspect of the ambassador role is to educate visitors on Wellen Park's neighboring communities of Sarasota, Venice, Port Charlotte and Tampa. Ambassadors are happy to share information about attractions including Mote Marine, CoolToday Park (Spring Training home of the Atlanta Braves) Selby Gardens and the Ringling Museum, to name a few.

Wellen Park has also partnered with the North Port Area Art Guild to showcase local artists' work at the welcome center (see related stories on pages 4 and 16).

The Wellen Park Welcome Center is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Home buyers can stop by to speak with an ambassador or schedule an appointment by calling 941-960-9805. Visitors can feel comfortable about social distancing as there are several meeting areas in the 5,000-square-foot facility where everyone continues to mask up. 🧐

"The ability of real estate professionals to really understand what their customers need is critical."

— **Becky DeGeorge,**
Supervisor of the Wellen Park Welcome Center



WELLEN PARK / COURTESY PHOTO

Above: An innovative display depicts Wellen Park's commitment to wellness and the continuous expansion of its pathways and trails.



CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

Left: Connected to the Welcome Center, Barrel & Bean is a coffee shop, wine bar and craft beer tasting room with an inviting atmosphere for home buyers, residents and guests to mix and mingle as they learn more about Wellen Park.

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AROUND TOWN

The little art guild that could ... and does!

BY CHARMAINE ENGELSMAN-ROBINS

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

Executive Director Dee Dee Gozion has had her hands full with the leaps-and-bounds growth happening over at the North Port Area Art Guild. And she's glad of it.

This friendly little haven for artists and art lovers has garnered so much adulation since its 1988 inception that participants and members from all over Southwest Florida now flock to its exceptional exhibitions, classes, social events and Artisans Port Gift Shop (featuring original artwork from local artists, including handmade jewelry and pottery).

Once an unknown little organization hidden away in a location you had to look for to find (5950 Sam Shapos Way, North Port ... Google it), "find it" folks did. And as they did, the word spread far beyond the North Port base. As the center's popularity and prestige grew, it wasn't long until larger gatherings drew so many people that finding enough parking to accommodate everyone could be challenging.

The guild's expansive children's program is especially popular with families, but seniors also love devoting some of their free time to creating art and/or soaking up the beauty and knowledge offered there. Despite the recent changes in how we congregate and interact, the center has continued to offer something for everybody — just not everybody at the same time. Class size has been limited and social distancing is observed, temperatures taken, hand-washing and sanitizing encouraged, masks mandatory. With this additional effort and consideration, the center's slogan of "Art for Everyone" and its mission/motto of "Inspiring and encouraging creative pos-



sibilities for everyone through visual art" remain accessible. Here are just some of the offerings the center has refined for the times; for more, keep checking www.northportart-center.org:

■ **Zoom classes** are offered in Basic Oil Painting and "Sketch of the Week," with additional choices in the works.

■ **"Mini-Monets Mommy & Me"** class taps into the tiny toddlers' desire to discover and explore creativity.

■ **Kids ages 6-12** enjoy Free Saturdays at the Center, After School Art Program, Home School Art Program and Funtastic Art Camp

with Children's Gallery Receptions.

■ **Ages 12-18** have Summer Teen Camp and the North Port High School Gallery Show (which is archived on the center's website).

■ **Developmentally disabled adults** can enjoy classes designed to enhance each individual's creative expression.

■ **Adult classes** for beginners to advanced artists run the gamut of mediums and are never in short supply: Oils, Acrylics, Watercolor, Pas-

tels, Drawing, Colored Pencil, Scratchboard, Graphite, Wheel Pottery, Handbuilt Pottery, Fused Glass, Stained Glass, Mosaics, Plein Aire and more. scheduling for each depends upon the availability of resident and visiting instructors.

■ **Weekend workshops** are also available, conducted by award-winning professionals.

■ **"Kaleidoscope of the Arts,"** the guild's radio show, airs Wednesdays at noon on Community Radio WKDW 97.5. Broadcasts highlight artists and events around Southwest Florida and beyond.

■ **"Wine & Unwind"** art parties let participants create their own art in a party atmosphere with snacks and beverages.

■ **Open studio hours** allow members to gather and use the classrooms on scheduled days and times to work on their art projects and socialize.

■ **"Art Better Together!"** team-building outings are designed for fun and camaraderie.

If you haven't discovered your area art center yet, this is a great time to do so. It's a warm and friendly, unpretentious organization for all of Southwest Florida, staffed and enjoyed by people who love all kinds of art and people.

And a last-minute update: The Wellen Park Welcome Center is presenting the work of local artist Nish Nishihira (whose story was featured in the August issue of the Wellen Park Journal) on display for the final quarter of 2020; 2021 will ring in with art by this issue's featured artist, Laura Pommier (see story on page 4). Watch for works by more local artists to grace the new Welcome Center throughout the new year. 🍷



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HOMES AT WELLEN PARK

FALL 2020

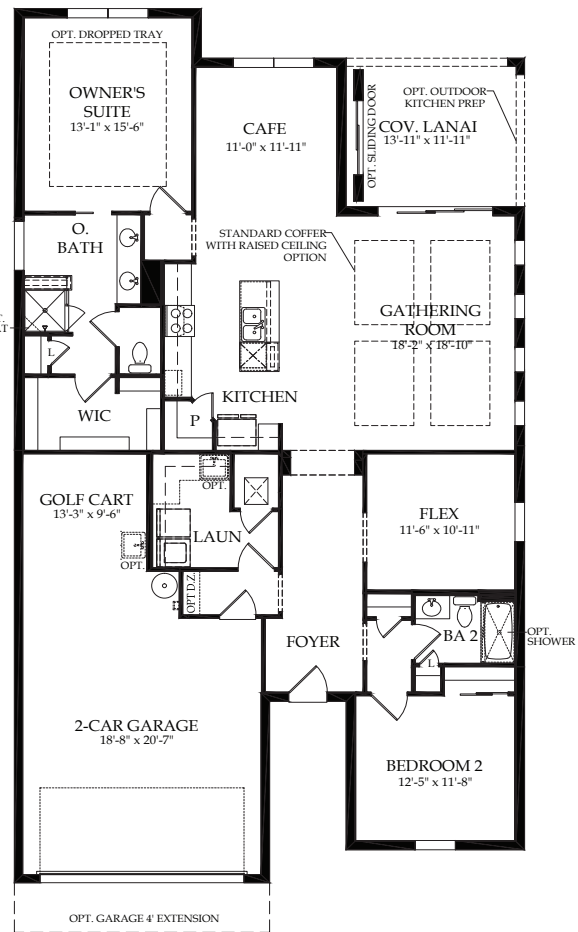
| A17

ISLAND WALK – DIVOSTA



Summerwood

Summerwood is a versatile floor plan that offers 2-5 bedrooms, well-suited for families and empty nesters alike. The beautiful one-story home design (with optional upstairs loft) features an open kitchen with center island that overlooks a bright gathering room, perfect for entertaining and everyday living. The 2-car garage includes an expanded area ideal for a golf cart or extra storage.



Sales center:
13639 Salinas St., Venice
941-220-0548

Specifications

- Base price: \$357,990
- SF: 3,070
- 2-5 Bedrooms

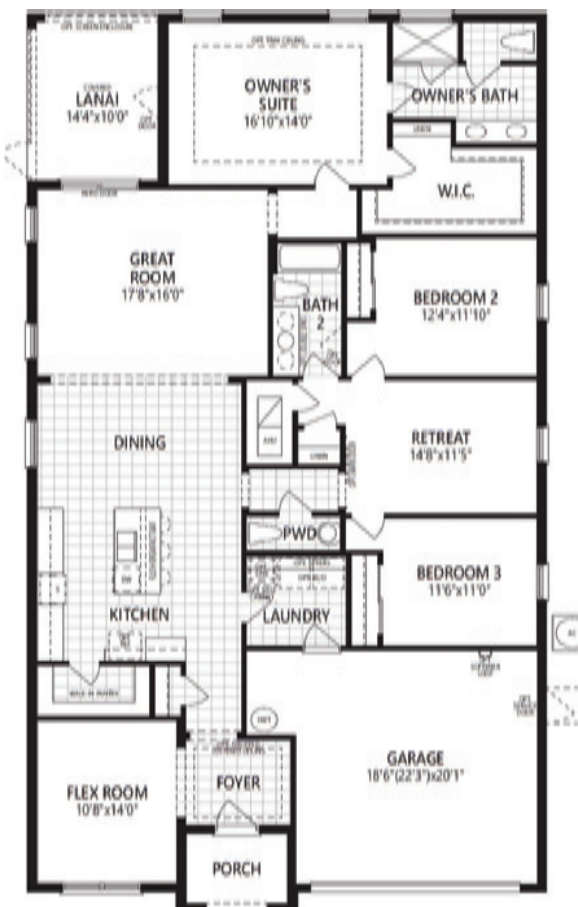
- 2-3 Bathrooms
- Home Type: Single Family

RENAISSANCE – MATTAMY HOMES



Dominica

The Dominica II is a single-family home that offers 2,381 square feet of thoughtfully designed living space including 3 bedrooms, 2.5 baths and a 2-car garage. This open and airy plan features flexible living spaces include a flex room and a retreat that you can use to best fit your living needs from a home office, to a hobby room, to a card room. The hub of the home is a designer kitchen with an expansive island that overlooks the dining area and sunny open Great Room. You will love the covered lanai that is perfect to enjoy the sunny, southwest Florida weather.



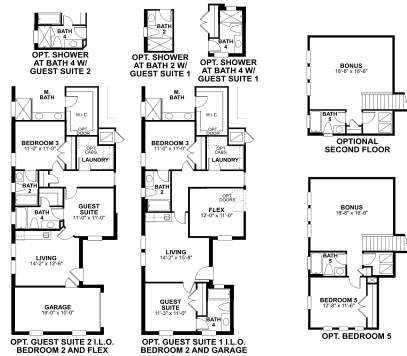
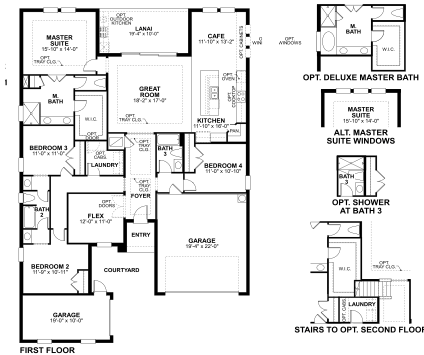
Sales center:
11720 Renaissance Blvd., Venice
941-208-6375

Specifications

- Base price: \$324,990
- SF: 2,381
- 3 Bedrooms

- 2.5 Bathrooms
- Home Type: Single Family

OASIS – M/I HOMES



Columbia

Welcome to the Columbia. Starting at 2,370 square feet, the Columbia's standard layout includes four bedrooms, three full bathrooms, a flex room and an open-concept kitchen/great room. There's also a three-car garage. This plan is uniquely designed to allow for several structural options, including bonus room and guest suite with living and garage space, making it ideal for the multi-generational family. Personalize your Columbia today. It can become truly what you need.

Sales center:
19806 Bridgetown Loop, Venice
941-208-6897

Specifications

- 🏠 Base price: \$389,990
- 🏠 SF: 2,370 – 2,973
- 🏠 4-5 Bedrooms
- 🏠 3-5 Bathrooms
- 🏠 Home Type: Single Family with Multi-Gen Option

SARASOTA N WCI, A LENNA



Roma

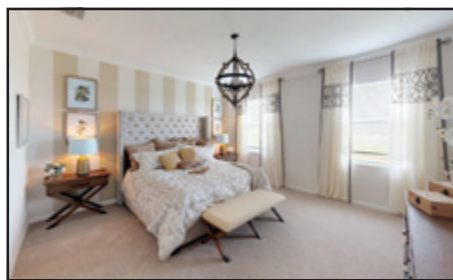
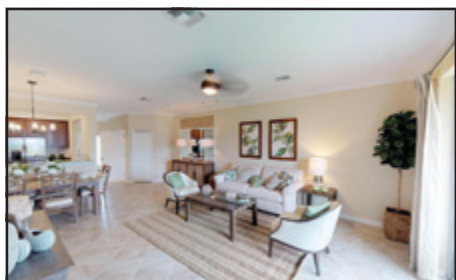
The living is easy with a perfect 1,917 square feet of under-a full baths, a large 2-car garage and airy and open living room.

Sales center:
23114 Copperleaf Drive, Venice
941-246-0076

Specifications

- 🏠 Base price: \$323,999
- 🏠 SF: 1,917
- 🏠 2 Bedrooms & Den
- 🏠 2 Bathrooms
- 🏠 Home Type: Single Family

GRAN PARADISO – LENNAR



Berkly

The Berkly floor plan features 1,879 square feet of living space ideally arranged in two stories. The upstairs is where the three bedrooms reside with a convenient split plan with owner's bath and guest bath. The downstairs features an expansive family room and dinette off of the kitchen for multitudes of relaxation options. A downstairs half bath keeps guests from having to go upstairs and is the perfect primping spot before heading out. A large lanai is ideal for spending a lazy day reading or kicking back with a nice cool drink after a long day. The one-car garage keeps your auto safe from the elements rain or shine.

Sales center:
20061 Galleria Blvd., Venice
941-214-9684

Specifications

- 🏠 Base price: \$220,999
- 🏠 SF: 1,879
- 🏠 3 Bedrooms
- 🏠 2.5 Bathrooms
- 🏠 Home Type: Townhome

NATIONAL –
NEAL COMPANY

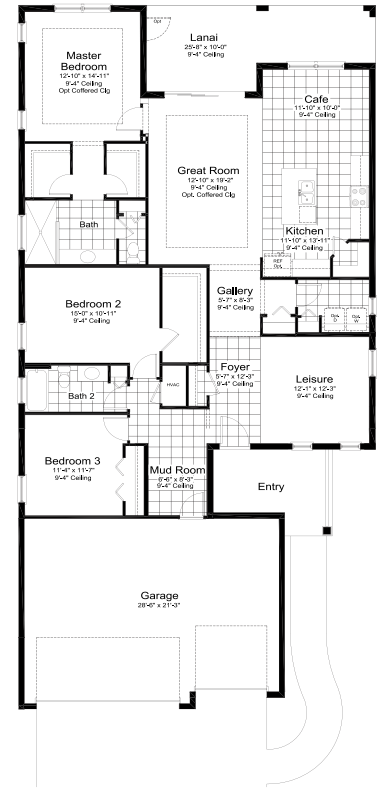


...er-air living space, featuring 3 spacious bedrooms, 2
...g room with sliders leading to screened-in lanai.

enice



GRAND PALM – NEAL COMMUNITIES



Meadow Brook

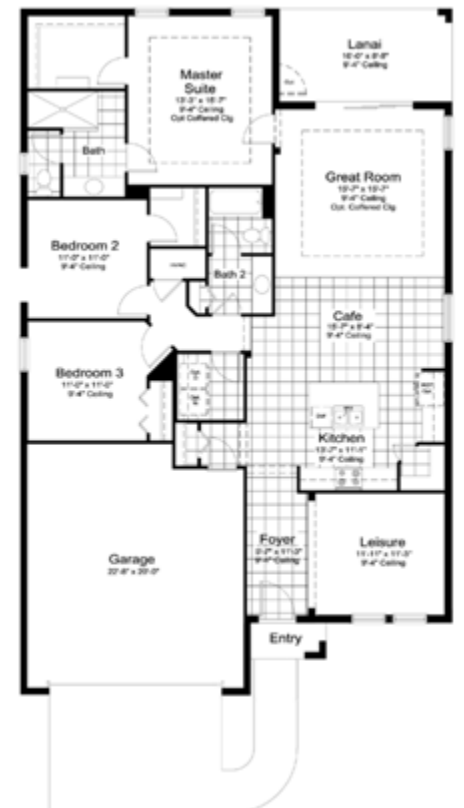
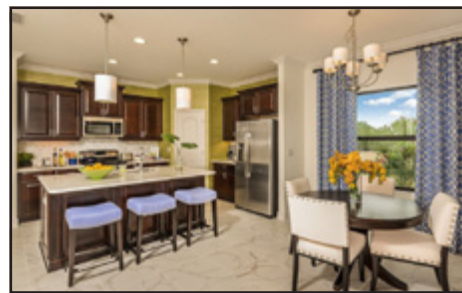
The Meadow Brook home design in Grand Palm offers an open layout for the common living areas and several options to fit your needs and preferences. Opt for a den with French doors in lieu of the leisure room. Add an outdoor kitchen wall or pool bath to the spacious lanai. Put dual sinks in the master bath. You can also create a guest suite with private bath in place of one of the secondary bedrooms with walk-in closet. The open gourmet kitchen comes with an island, corner walk-in pantry and dining nook. A spacious great room has the option of a coffered ceiling for an extra touch of elegance. In the master suite, a door from the bedroom to the lanai can be added. The suite also includes dual walk-in closets and master bath with large walk-in shower and private water closet.

Sales center:
21209 Wacissa Drive, Venice
941-241-0667

Specifications

- 🏠 Base price: \$352,990
- 🏠 SF: 2,014
- 🛏️ 3 Bedrooms
- 🚿 2 Bathrooms
- 🏠 Home Type: Single Family

BOCA ROYALE – NEAL COMMUNITIES



Fresh Spring

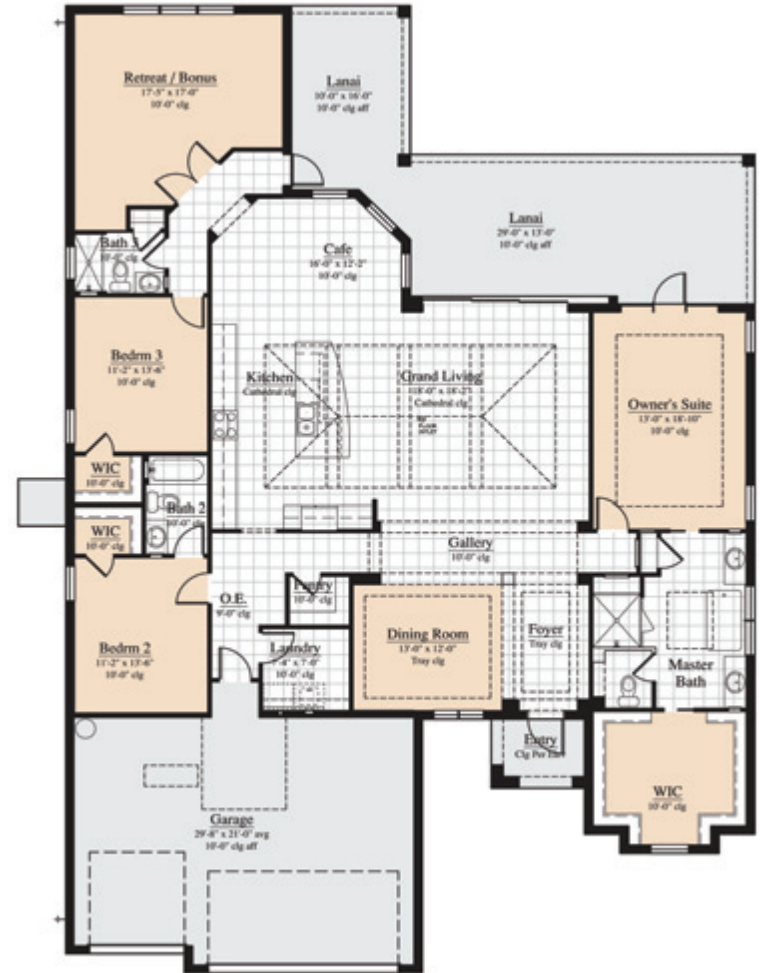
The three-bedroom Fresh Spring floor plan by Neal Communities features an open main living area... The kitchen includes an island a walk-in pantry and opens to the café dining area and great room, with views through glass sliding doors to the covered lanai. This plan gives you to the options of having an outdoor kitchen wall on the lanai as well as a door with direct access to the master bedroom. The master suite also includes a walk-in closet and a master bath with walk-in shower and private water closet. The home features a den in lieu of a bonus leisure room. Other options include coffered ceilings in the great room and master bedroom, laundry tub in an expanded laundry room, and dual sinks in the bathrooms.

Sales Center:
1 Golf View Drive, Englewood
941-214-9760

Specifications

- 🏠 Base price: \$330,990
- 🏠 SF: 1,812
- 🛏️ 3 Bedrooms
- 🚿 2 Bathrooms
- 🏠 Home Type: Single Family

GRAN PARADISO – SAM RODGERS



Napoli

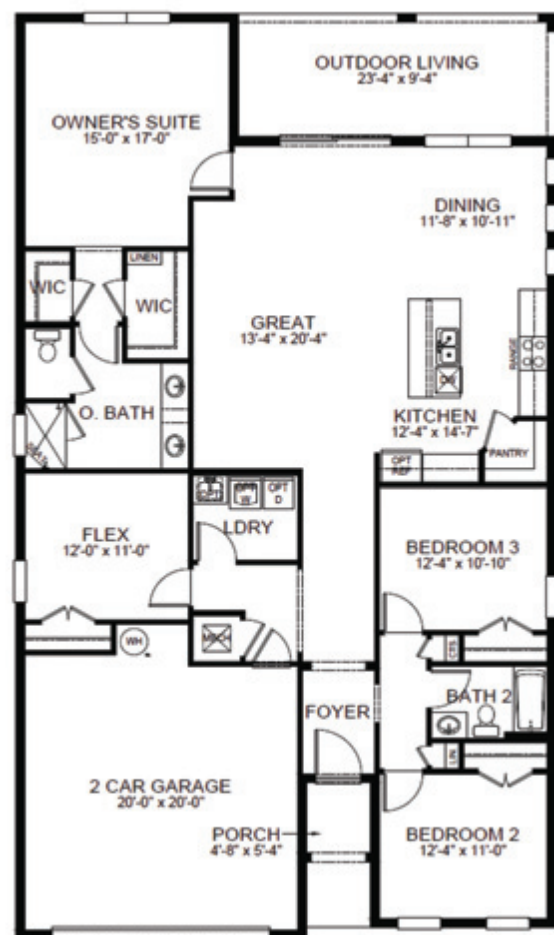
The Napoli's impressive, open grand living area, with expansive views of an oversized outdoor living area, includes an island kitchen with lots of storage space and a large casual cafe.. You can choose to add the optional fireplace on the lanai to make your outdoor living area perfect for year-round enjoyment. The formal dining room, located next to the foyer, is open to the grand living area for easy kitchen access. The inviting owners' suite stretches across one end of the floor plan and features a nearly 20 x 13 dressing room and an elegant master bath with garden tub, double vanities, and a private water closet. The laundry room and a large pantry about the private owners' entrance, which conveniently connects directly to the kitchen from the three-car garage.

Sales center:
20107 Passagio Drive, Venice
941-218-2696

Specifications

- Base price: \$526,900
- SF: 2,796
- 3 Bathrooms
- Home Type: Single Family
- 3 Bedrooms & Bonus room

THE PRESERVE – D.R. HORTON



The Delray

Upon entering the Delray model in The Preserve at West Villages, two bedrooms and a full bath can be found to the side, and a bright, naturally lit kitchen, great room and dining area are straight ahead. Every aspect of this home design accentuates the open concept feel, with a large island kitchen featured at the heart of the home. The owner's suite is privately located at the back of the home and features two walk-in closets, a double vanity and a walk-in shower. The home's flex room features a closet and can be used as den or a fourth bedroom. Off of the great room is a spacious, covered lanai ideal for relaxing or dining al fresco.

Sales center:
11961 Blazing Star Drive, Venice
941-246-0154

Specifications

- Base price: \$313,990
- SF: 2,034
- 2 Bathrooms
- Home Type: Single Family
- 3 Bedrooms & Den



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- ◆ **Develop a structured routine** and be consistent. A visual schedule might be helpful, and pictures can be included for younger children.
- ◆ **Set a bedtime** to help make sure that your child is getting adequate sleep.
- ◆ Make sure your child is provided with **nutritious meals and snacks** (these may be through the school or provided from home).
- ◆ **Check your child's backpack** nightly for any information or student work. Many teachers use a communication folder to send important information to and from school.
- ◆ If your child is a remote learner, make sure they're **engaged and logging in** when they are supposed to, limit their distractions, and keep camera and audio on.
- ◆ If your child attends school in person, always be prepared with their **mask and water bottles**.
- ◆ **Check with your child's teacher** to see what method of communication they use most. Some teachers have apps that are available to download on a phone they use to easily stay in touch with families. You can also email your child's teachers directly through your Parent Portal account.
- ◆ **Update your School Dismissal Manager app** as needed to reflect how your child will be getting home from school if there are any changes.
- ◆ **Read with your child each evening.** Depending on their age and reading level you might want to take turns, reading a page yourself and then having your child read a page. Ask your child questions about the story such as what they think will happen next, or how they feel about a choice a particular character made.
- ◆ **Promote an open line of communication** with your child by actively listening to what they have to say. Ask them specific questions about their day and talk about their feelings and any challenges they may be facing so that you can start to problem-solve together.
- ◆ **Reach out to school staff** with any questions or concerns so that you can work together as a team to continue to support your child.

— Provided by Chelsea Tuggle, school counselor, Taylor Ranch Elementary School



WELL-VERSED

Satisfy your tastes for Chinese and Japanese cuisine at the Marketplace

BY **ROBIN F. DEMATTIA**

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

When you and your dining companion can't decide between Chinese and Japanese food, head to West Villages Marketplace where China 1 and Fuji Sushi Hibachi Noodles are near each other.

Both restaurants opened earlier this year and are owned by Danny Shi, a restaurateur with more than 30 years of experience. Mr. Shi is the chef at Fuji Sushi Hibachi Noodles; his brother Tony Shi is the chef at China 1.

"I loved to cook when I was younger," Mr. Shi says. "I went to culinary school when I was 17 and came to the United States at 19, as soon as I finished school. I kept working in restaurants because people loved my food."

Mr. Shi worked in Pennsylvania from 1991-1996 and owned restaurants in Milford, Conn., from 1996-2001. He has been in Florida for almost 20 years and has previously worked with the West Villages Marketplace developer.

China 1 serves New York-style Chinese food, which Mr. Shi says uses more soy than California-style cooking. One of the most popular dishes is General Tso's Chicken, which is chicken dipped in a thin batter and then deep fried and served with General Tso's sauce, which has more than 20 ingredients. Sweet & Sour Chicken also sells well. China 1 features chicken, pork, beef and seafood dishes.

Guests at Fuji Sushi Hibachi Noodles love the Chef Specialty Rolls that Mr. Shi and his chefs exclusively design. There are more than 30 different types of sushi, including the Dynamite Roll, which is deep fried assorted fish topped with spicy crabmeat, masago and spicy eel sauce; as well as the Autumn of Connecticut Roll, which is fresh Alaskan king crab wrapped with seaweed and rice then topped with salmon and avocado and garnished with yellowtail tobiko.

Fuji Sushi Hibachi Noodles is also known for its Hibachi Steak served with fried rice, noodles and a side of mixed vegetables, all cooked on the hibachi grill.

The restaurant serves more than a dozen types of sake.

Danny Shi is the chef at Fuji Sushi Hibachi Noodles.



CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

Above: Danny Shi is the owner and chef at Fuji Sushi Hibachi Noodles. Mr. Shi also owns the China 1 restaurant. Right: Mr. Shi at the hibachi grill preparing Hibachi Steak served with fried rice, noodles and mixed vegetables.



Both restaurants offer dine-in and carry-out. They work with Bite Squad, Door Dash and Uber Eats for delivery. 🍱



Above: A selection of sushi from Fuji Sushi Hibachi Noodles. Top left and right: Signature dish selections from China 1.

CHINA 1

- » **Where:** 12189 Mercado Drive, Venice
- » **Phone:** 941-493-2299
- » **Online:** chinaonevenice.com
- » **Hours:** Open daily from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

FUJI SUSHI HIBACHI NOODLES

- » **Where:** 12205 Mercado Drive, Venice
- » **Phone:** 941-492-6677
- » **Online:** fujisushihibachinoodles.com
- » **Hours:** Currently open 3-9 p.m. daily. Later this year, the restaurant will begin serving lunch. Check the website for updates.

CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

COURTESY PHOTO

CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

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M/I HOMES

SIP 'N' SERVE

Fall is fabulous for roasted veggies and more

We don't have "leaf season" in Southwest Florida, but you can cook up a taste of fall with these recipes created by Chef Marie LaForge, principal owner of the award-winning Mango Bistro in Englewood and one of the founders of the Englewood Farmers Market.

Chef LaForge also operates the Atlanta Braves Farmers Market from 8 a.m. to noon every Wednesday through March at CoolToday Park right here in Wellen Park. For more information, visit bravesfarmersmarket.org or call 941-445-9209.



Roasted vegetables

INGREDIENTS

- 1 small butternut squash, cubed
- 2 red bell peppers, seeded and diced
- 1 sweet potato, peeled and cubed
- 3 Yukon gold potatoes, cubed
- 1 red onion, quartered
- 1 TBS chopped fresh thyme
- 2 TBS chopped fresh rosemary
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 TBS balsamic vinegar
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 475 degrees.

In a large bowl, combine the squash, red bell peppers, sweet potato, and Yukon gold potatoes.

Separate the red onion quarters into pieces and add to the mixture.

In a small bowl, stir together thyme, rosemary, olive oil, vinegar, salt and pepper.

Toss with vegetables until coated. Spread evenly on a large roasting pan.

Roast for 35-40 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes

or until vegetables are cooked through and browned. Serves eight.

DEGUSTATION

Roasted vegetables are a good accompaniment to grilled meat, fish and fresh pasta. You can also get creative and roast other seasonal vegetables, such as broccoli, zucchini, eggplant and asparagus.

Fresh mango and pineapple salsa

INGREDIENTS

- 2 fresh mangoes, diced
- ¼ cup thinly diced fresh pineapple
- ¼ red bell pepper, coarsely chopped
- ¼ green bell pepper, coarsely chopped
- 1 jalapeno, seeded and minced finely (for more heat use a habanero)
- 2 TBS extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, minced finely
- 1 red onion, finely diced
- 4 TBS chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 TSP fresh lime or lemon juice

Mix all ingredients together in a bowl.

DEGUSTATION

Serve salsa at room temperature with fresh fish tacos, chips (and a homemade fresh

lime margarita) or over grilled tuna, salmon, chicken or pork.



Fabulous butterscotch french toast with apple cinnamon topping

FRENCH TOAST

INGREDIENTS

- 8 ½-inch-thick slices French bread
 - 1 cup half-and-half (milk can be substituted for a lighter breakfast)
 - 3 large eggs
 - ¼ TSP salt
 - 4 TBS butter
- In medium-size mixing bowl, whisk together the half-and-half, eggs and salt. Dip bread into mixture, allow to soak for 30 seconds on each side. Over medium-low heat, melt 1 TBS butter in a 10-inch nonstick saute pan. Place two slices of bread at a time into the pan and cook until golden brown, 2-3 minutes per side. Remove from pan and place on rack in preheated oven for 5 minutes. Repeat with all eight slices. Serve immediately

topped with caramelized apples (recipe below) and maple syrup. Serves 4-5.

CARMELIZED APPLES

INGREDIENTS

- 2 TBS butter
 - 4 spicy-sweet, crisp apples (Jonagold, Crispin, Honeycrisp), peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes
 - 3 TBS granulated sugar, divided
 - ½ TSP ground cinnamon
 - ¼ TSP lemon zest
- Melt butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the apples and sprinkle with 1 TBS sugar and sauté, stirring frequently, for 6-8 minutes, until just starting to turn tender. Sprinkle the apples with the remaining sugar, cinnamon and lemon zest. Toss the mixture gently and cook over medium heat for an additional 2 minutes, until the sugar begins to caramelize and the apples are crisp-tender.



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The holiday season brings together family, friends and our pets. Keep your pets healthy and safe during the holiday season by following these tips from veterinarian **Andrea Daniels of West Villages Animal Clinic**, www.westvillagesvet.com.



Stuff yourself, not your pet. It's best to maintain your pet's regular diet during the holiday season, as many foods we enjoy are dangerous for our pets. Avoid feeding the following foods: turkey skin, dressing/pan drippings, chocolate, nutmeg, pecans, onions, garlic and bread dough. These foods can cause upset stomach, pancreatitis and even toxicities.

Keep the drinks flowing for the people.
Pets should **never consume alcohol**.



Best party practices:

- Inform your guests of your pet-feeding rules
- Put away leftovers and take out the trash right away
- Put escape-artists away when guests are entering and existing
- Keep toys and appropriate treats on hand for both distraction and rewarding good behavior.

Whether you are hosting guests or traveling, **every pet should have identification**. Pets should wear a collar and tag and their microchips should be registered with updated contact information.



Houseguests can be stressful for pets. Create a **safe, quiet and comfortable spot** for your pet to escape the commotion.

Pets are creatures of habits. Keep the routines as consistent as possible. Make sure your pet continues to get **regular exercise, daily attention and affection**.



Panther Hollow Dental Lodge

Meet the newest member of the practice

Dr. Neil Seaver joins five dentists at “The Lodge”



Above Standing Left to Right: Timothy L. Palmer, D.D.S., Joseph C. Bender, D.M.D., Robert G. Coseo, D.D.S.
Above Seated Left to Right: Ashley N. Reynolds, D.M.D., Melissa M. Duston, D.D.S., Right: Neil Seaver, D.M.D., the newest dentist to join Panther Hollow Dental Lodge.

COURTESY PHOTOS



WHO WE ARE

THE NEWEST DENTIST AT PANTHER HOLLOW DENTAL LODGE:

Neil Seaver, D.M.D.

HOW LONG WITH THE PRACTICE:

Joined this year

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in biomedical science, University of South Florida, 2012; D.M.D., Nova Southeastern University, 2017

HOMETOWN: Akron, Ohio

What would you like people in the community to know about you?

Originally from Akron, Ohio, I then moved to Tampa after high school and studied biomedical science at the University of South Florida. After graduating in 2012, I continued my doctoral studies at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale and graduated in 2017. Now my fiancé and I live in Port Charlotte. I look forward to introducing myself to my patients and our community.

How do you tap into your super power?

I truly enjoy producing high quality dentistry. I continue to strive

to take advantage of any updates in technology. This makes dentistry more predictable as a practitioner and more comfortable and longer-lasting for the patient.

To what professional associations do you belong?

I am a member of the American Dental Association and Florida Dental Association.

What do you enjoy most about being a dentist?

I really enjoy all aspects, including cosmetic dentistry. I also have enjoyed two years of pediatric dentistry.

How do you spend your leisure time?

Outside of dentistry, my main passion is travel. I also enjoy trekking, photography and videography. One travel destination I especially like is South America.

Who are your fellow dentists at Panther Hollow?

All of the dentists at our practice are great — Drs. Joe Bender, Robert Coseo, Melissa Duston, Tim Palmer, and Ashley Reynolds. We truly learn from each other and challenge one another to keep up with the latest advances in our profession. ■

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FUN-LOVING LIFESTYLES

Gran Paradiso residents keep busy with a full activities calendar

BY ROBIN F. DEMATTIA

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

If you live in Gran Paradiso and want something interesting to do, you have a wealth of options.

“If you’re bored, it’s your own fault,” says Louise Elleo, who has lived in Gran Paradiso for six years. “There’s so much to do.”

Lorraine Welch, the community’s bubbly and passionate lifestyle director, loves her dream job and plans a wide variety of activities and events.

“Lorraine does such a fabulous job,” says Liz Van Osdol. “She treats you like family and goes out of her way to make sure the calendar is filled. And if there’s not something on the calendar that you would like to see, she will make that happen.”

Ms. Van Osdol, a Realtor who has lived in Gran Paradiso for three years, even got caught up in Ms. Welch’s enthusiasm this past spring.

“She needed someone to get into the Easter bunny costume and drive by every home. It took four hours, but she wanted to make sure the holiday didn’t get passed by without something being done. Even though we were in lockdown, everyone stood in their driveway. I can’t tell you what an awesome experience that was.”

Ms. Welch, who has worked at Gran Paradiso for almost two years, enjoys creating and managing events. “I love this field,” she says. “I get to brainstorm and use my ideas. Most importantly, I listen to the residents and hear what they want.”

Ms. Elleo, who was vice president of corpo-



CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

Lorraine Welch has been in her “dream job” as lifestyle director at Gran Paradiso for almost two years.

rate events for Cisco Systems, says she would have loved to have Ms. Welch on her team because of how hard she works and the ideas she develops.

“I really respect Lorraine so much. She puts a lot of thought and effort into her job — and I understand what it takes to do her job,” she says. Ms. Elleo worked with Ms. Welch on a

canine demonstration with the North Port Police Department and a Jesus Loves Me Ministry clothing drive.

Ms. Elleo takes advantage of Gran Paradiso’s amenities. She plays tennis daily, does water aerobics and gets together with the Grand Lago Ladies group. “We have wonderful neighbors,” she says. “They’re like family.” She and

her husband, Keith, play golf on the weekends.

Gran Paradiso has a resort-style pool, spa, eight lighted tennis courts, pickleball courts, miles of scenic walking and biking trails, a game room with billiards and card tables, a craft room, a library, a state-of-the-art fitness center and more on its 1,100 acres.

Ms. Welch plans outdoor activities that take

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“Lorraine does such a fabulous job. She treats you like family and goes out of her way to make sure the calendar is filled.”

— **Liz Van Osdol**, *Gran Paradiso resident*

advantage of the beautiful Gran Paradiso setting, such as the fall festival, craft fairs and a hugely successful luau complete with hula dancers and fire throwers. “Jukebox Bingo” played to music rather than numbers is popular, as is “Cigar & Whiskey Night.”

When the pandemic began, she organized a graduation parade, Zumba classes on Zoom, a virtual talent contest and a socially distanced tailgate party with a band. Drive-in movie night at the pool was also a hit.

Making sure to create something for everyone, she also coordinated the “Flat Stanley Project” where kids colored drawings of the flat boy from the children’s book series and took photos of him around their Gran Paradiso homes and yards.

A self-professed lover of holidays, Ms. Welch is looking forward to “Trunk or Treat” for Halloween and continuing with other popular annual activities. Gran Paradiso residents watch for her weekly email with all the event updates.

A Detroit native and mom to three children, ages 8 to 13 (who she homeschooled for seven years), Ms. Welch enjoys roller skating with her husband and kids and shopping at Ross, Marshalls and TJMaxx.

And she credits her co-workers — Grant Gorski, Brittany Bergeron, Karen Lay, Brian Hedges and Lee Milstead — for helping ensure the success of every Gran Paradiso event. “We are the best team,” she says. “At any event, there’s always somebody there to help me.”



Ms. Welch talks with a resident about what’s coming up in Gran Paradiso.

CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

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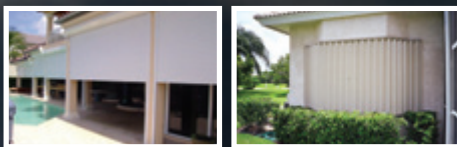
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AROUND TOWN

New Taylor Ranch Elementary principal has long history with the school

BY ROBIN F. DEMATTIA

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

Tara Spielman became the principal at Taylor Ranch Elementary School this summer, but her affiliation with the school began in 2003 when her son entered kindergarten there and her daughter entered first grade.

She began volunteering and “got bit by the bug of education,” she recalls. “I felt at home, welcomed and encouraged at Taylor Ranch.”

Ms. Spielman went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from the University of South Florida, a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction from Walden University, and a master’s degree in educational leadership from American College of Education.

She worked in the Sarasota school system as a teacher, assistant principal, professional development and teacher evaluation specialist, and as a facilitator of adult education before coming full circle back to Taylor Ranch Elementary.

“I have always loved this school tremendously. My whole journey began here. To come back here is an incredible blessing, especially during this time,” she says. “The only thing on my mind and heart is to be a support to our children, teachers and families.”

Taylor Ranch Elementary has been an A+ school since 2001. This school year, it is serving 734 pre-K through 5th grade students, with about 200 remote learners and 534 in person.

“We want families to access education the way they want,” Ms. Spielman says, adding she and her team spent the summer preparing not

only for the varied ways of teaching but for implementing safety protocols and ensuring socialization activities.

Technology has been a key, with cameras and microphones installed in each classroom over the summer.

Eighty percent of the school’s teachers are concurrent teachers, with students in their classroom and some accessing the classroom online. “We had to train for something we hadn’t done,” the principal explains.

Students wear masks throughout the school day, except when they are eating lunch, where they do not sit next to or across from another student.

“It’s not the same as when they had the freedom of communication at lunch,” Ms. Spielman says, “but they are still chatting and getting social time in.”

Overall, the school year started off extremely well, she adds.

“I was impressed beyond belief at how well the students acclimated. I thought for sure teachers would tell me a student wouldn’t keep their mask on. Even our 21 pre-K students wear their little masks. What we thought was going to be a huge issue has been a non-issue.”

When she visits classrooms, Ms. Spielman says, “the students are engaged and working. I don’t see a difference.”

She credits the school’s teachers for “doing things they didn’t realize they could do” and

CHRIS TILLEY / WELLEN PARK JOURNAL

Tara Spielman is the new principal at Taylor Ranch Elementary School. Her children began attending the school in 2003.



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AROUND TOWN

for being creative. For example, at recess they give students bubbles, chalk and jump ropes that they can use safely in their own personal space.

Teachers have also implemented programs to help students practice patience and flexibility. One mindfulness exercise involves taking deep breaths and focusing on what students are grateful for. There are also Sanford Harmony Program group lessons that emphasizes getting to know others and acceptance, as well as the Civility Squad character program that teaches kindness, respect and other traits.

Ms. Spielman makes sure she “over-communicates” with parents as well through automated phone calls, emails and Zoom video messages.

Parents also work together to support the school and each other.

“We loved (retired principal) Dr. (Bill) Bolander, but we were excited to get Principal Spielman,” says Lieselot Ober, president of the Taylor Ranch Elementary School Boosters. “It’s always good to get a new vibe and new ideas.”

Ms. Ober’s kindergarten son and third-grade daughter are attending school remotely this year.

Parents, including Ms. Ober, haven’t been allowed in the school since March.

She says that is difficult but, as the Boosters president, “my main goal is to keep our families engaged no matter where they are. Every student and every parent is an important part

of our community.”

The Boosters are meeting through Zoom and planning online fundraisers and spirit nights at local restaurants.

Ms. Spielman encourages parents and family members to join the Boosters. “So many good things come from that group,” she says.

And even though volunteers cannot come on campus, she invites people to use Zoom to read books to children or discuss their jobs as part of the career spotlight offered to older students.

Natalie Barton is another parent who wishes she could be on campus. She sent her first child, kindergartener Paxton, to school this year after debating home schooling right up until school started. She said a phone call from Paxton’s teacher, Sarah Hill, made all the difference.

“I can’t thank her enough. She put all my worries aside and was so sweet and caring. She went above and beyond to make me feel comfortable.”

Still, her child’s very first day of school wasn’t what she had envisioned all these years.

“It broke my heart that I couldn’t walk him into class,” Ms. Barton says. “You want to feel like you’re a part of this new chapter and milestone with your child.”

She appreciates the photos that Ms. Hill texts of Paxton in the classroom and says Ms. Spielman has been “amazing. She is so active. We’re very lucky to have at our school.”

“I have always loved this school tremendously. My whole journey began here. To come back here is an incredible blessing ...The only thing on my mind and heart is to be a support to our children, teachers and families.”

— Tara Spielman

Taylor Ranch Elementary School principal



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ALL WELLEN GOOD

New hospital on target for Fall 2021 opening

BY PATRICIA HORWELL

Wellen Park Journal Correspondent

Wellen Park residents are closer to having a state-of-the-art hospital in their backyard. Sarasota Memorial Hospital–Venice is more than halfway completed. Although the project has faced several setbacks because of COVID-19 and extreme weather conditions, hospital spokesman Kim Savage says construction is currently proceeding “full-steam ahead.”

Despite the ongoing pandemic, hospital officials and construction team members gathered in mid-April for a traditional topping-off ceremony to celebrate reaching the building’s highest level — 82 feet.

A topping-off ceremony can be traced to the ancient Scandinavian religious rite of placing a tree on top of a new building to appease the tree-dwelling spirits displaced in its construction. The practice traveled to England and Northern Europe and eventually took hold in the United States. At SMH–Venice, the construction team signed the highest beam and hoisted it to the rooftop along with a tree to symbolize bringing life to the building.

“Topping out is a transformational step in a building’s construction, and especially meaningful for the more than 600 workers who have persevered through months of rain, extreme heat and the many challenges and uncertainties of this pandemic,”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SARASOTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Above: An artist's rendering of Sarasota Memorial Hospital–Venice.

Left: Construction continues on the hospital at Laurel and Pinebrook roads, just off Interstate-75.

Co. The team worked 390 days and 321,500 hours since site preparation began in late February 2019 to bring the 365,000-square-foot, five-story hospital to the halfway mark. In recent weeks, as work continued, crews have been working on exterior walls and windows, framing interior rooms and spaces and installing electrical, mechanical, medical

says Sharon Roush, SMH–Venice president. “It’s also an important milestone for SMH and the residents of south Sarasota County,

bringing us ever closer to opening our new facility.”


The general contractor is Gilbane Building



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PHOTO COURTESY OF SARASOTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

The topping-off ceremony celebrated construction reaching the hospital's highest level.

gas and plumbing systems, according to Ms. Savage.

Completion of the hurricane-hardened facility is expected in the fall of 2021.

The hospital will have 110 private patient rooms, a 28-room emergency care center and eight surgical suites at opening. The all-private suites include a 10-bed labor and delivery/post-partum unit.

The 65-acre SMH-Venice campus is designed to be flexible, with the capacity to expand to 300 patient rooms, 16 operating rooms and a 50-bed emergency room to accommodate future growth.

SMH expects to open the Venice location with 600-700 staff members, bringing its

physician base farther south, which in turn will help build the medical staff for a future SMH hospital in North Port.

The hospital, at Laurel and Pinebrook roads, just off Interstate-75 in Venice, will plan celebrations for the community once the pandemic subsides. Ongoing updates and a video of the topping-off ceremony are available at smh.com/venicehospitalupdates.

SMH was named among the nation's 100 top hospitals by IBM Watson Health in 2019 and remains the only hospital in Florida to have consistently earned the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' highest five-star rating since the evaluation system launched in 2016. 🏆

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WHY I LIVE HERE

For Gene Isbell, the road to IslandWalk was paved with a world of adventure

BY GENE ISBELL

IslandWalk Resident

Editor's note: In one of his previous lives, Mr. Isbell worked as a newspaper reporter, managing editor, editor and general manager. As such, he is uniquely qualified to write the story about his road to IslandWalk.

Lackland Air Force Base, Texas; Clark Air Base, Philippines; Kadena Air Base, Okinawa; MacDill AFB, Florida; Yokota Air Base, Japan; Andrews AFB, Maryland; RAF Chicksands Air Base, United Kingdom; Scott AFB, Illinois — all destinations lead to IslandWalk.

For Gene Isbell, the U.S. Air Force provided opportunity to grow, learn and see the world that would not have occurred had he remained in the coal fields of southern West Virginia where he was raised.

Isbell, 69, moved from Mascoutah in southwestern Illinois to IslandWalk about a year ago. With his partner of 29 years, Barb, a retired nurse, and goldendoodle Ozzie, the family is enjoying every day on the Sun Coast. They are content with their choice of IslandWalk, a decision made after evaluating numerous communities in the Wellen Park area.

"Everyone is friendly and quick with a greeting or wave as we pass on our daily walks," Mr. Isbell says. "We've met some great people."

Just as the Air Force was a melting pot of cultures and people, he notes the same about IslandWalk. "It's interesting to meet people and discover where they are from and what they did in their lives," he says. "It sparks great conversations about careers, kids and



GENE ISBELL / COURTESY PHOTO

Barb and Gene Isbell moved to IslandWalk about a year ago with their goldendoodle Ozzie.

grandkids, pets, sports teams and places folks have lived.

"Those interactions remind me we are more alike than different as people."

Mr. Isbell has a diverse background. His 24-plus years in the Air Force were spent as a police officer, with 14 of those as a K-9 officer.

His responsibilities managing the largest operational Air Force working dog program (24 dog teams) in the U.S. put him up close and personal with presidents and world leaders during an almost eight-year assignment

at Andrews AFB, Maryland, the home of the presidential aircraft, Air Force One.

"We provided bomb dog support and security protection for all movements of the president, vice-president, cabinet officials, heads of state and distinguished visitors to and from our nation's capital," he says. "Anything going on the aircraft transporting the president and others was screened by our explosive detection dog teams."

The job had no margin for error, he adds. "I always told my dog handlers a bad day at the

office for them would result in a worldwide headline if anything happened to the president or any of the distinguished visitors we protected."

In addition to protection for Presidents Carter and Reagan, Mr. Isbell oversaw security details for the visit of Pope John Paul, the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, the return of captured munitions from Grenada, the sad return of 242 Marines killed in the Beirut bombing and the joyous return of the 52 freed American hostages from Iran.

"It was a special assignment. I got to see history unfolding day by day," he says.

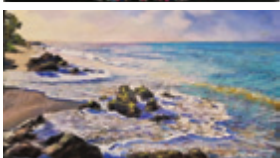
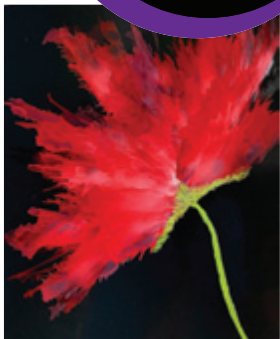
Alas, all good things end. Mr. Isbell retired from the Air Force as a Senior Master Sergeant (E-8) in 1994 at Scott AFB, Illinois. There, he worked on security manpower and equipment requirements safeguarding Air Force personnel and aircraft deployed during Operation Desert Storm, Operation Restore Hope in Somalia and other military deployments.

"I gave myself time to decide what I wanted to do next," he says as he entered retirement. "I considered civilian policing, but I wasn't ready to strap on a weapon again, so I spent the summer watching the OJ Simpson trial."

"After about six months, Barb suggested it was time to get off the couch. I saw an ad in the weekly newspaper in Mascoutah where



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"I was on top of the world, ecstatic that someone would pay me to be creative and write for a general audience. I was hooked."

From there, Mr. Isbell rapidly progressed, moving to full-time staff reporter, managing editor, editor, general manager and then to semi-retirement where he wrote a lively opinion column called "Izzy Writes."

"Our group consisted of seven weekly newspapers. We covered local and regional governmental issues, along with school news and sports," he says. "It was highly rewarding and demanding at the same time. The hours were long and the pay was low, but I felt we were providing a vital community service, one that is fading away as more and more small-town newspapers go out of business. I enjoyed our role in upholding the First Amendment and ensuring government stayed accountable to the people they serve."

The flagship paper in the group, the Mascoutah Herald, has been in publication since 1884, and Mr. Isbell was proud to be part of its leadership team. During his tenure the paper earned more than 70 awards from state and regional press associations for news coverage. "Not bad stuff for a guy with no formal journalism school training," he says.

Mr. Isbell says his approach to journalism approximated his work as a police officer.

"As an officer, you are dispatched to a scene and charged with determining who, what when, where, why and how," he explains. "Then, you typically write a report that is approved by your sergeant.

"Newspaper reporters do a similar thing. They go to a scene, ask questions, make obser-



Gene Isbell at MacDill Air Force base in 1974. He was an Air Force K-9 officer for 14 of his 24-plus years in the service.

GENE ISBELL / COURTESY PHOTO

ventions and try to figure out what is occurring and then document it. The story they write must be approved by their editor before it can be published."

All in all, Mr. Isbell says, it's been a good run: 24 years in the Air Force and 24 years in community journalism.

He's an inveterate newspaper reader, digesting two national papers a day, numerous news magazines, the Venice Gondolier and the Wellen Park Journal, plus his hometown newspaper from West Virginia and the Herald from his job in Illinois.

"I love the look of a well-designed paper and the feel of newsprint," he says. "It gets in your system."

He also stays abreast of the ongoing evolution in policing practices. "The profession has changed tremendously since my day," he says. "It was a privilege and honor to wear a badge."

The road to IslandWalk certainly gives Mr. Isbell time to savor his travels and experiences, his love of reading and to enjoy the Sun Coast.

"It's all good," he says. "We couldn't be happier." 🍷

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