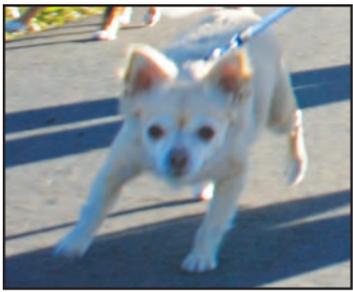




Knights get serious

UCF Mens Basketball heads into conference play

Page 7



Get fit in East Orlando

A list of parks, fitness programs and gyms, plus expert advice

Page 10

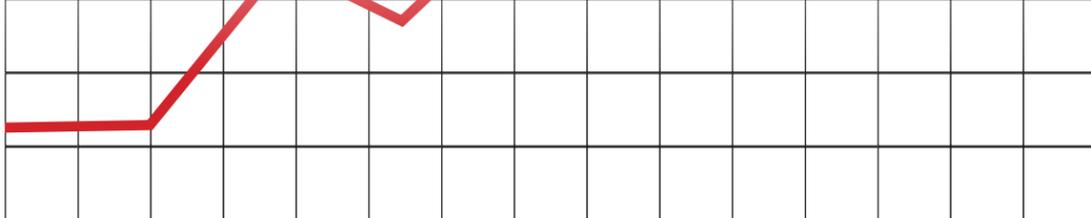


Arts and Entertainment

Concerts, free programs and food trucks!

Page 8

EAST ORLANDO'S ECONOMY in 2012



■ SARAH WILSON
Sun Staff

"It gets better," are three little words everyone needs to hear sometimes. From personal troubles to financial woes, everyone finds hope in the fact that there is, eventually, a light at the end of the tunnel.

Economically, that tunnel has had many Americans' holding their breath for four years now, since the 'great recession' took its toll on the housing, labor and business markets in 2008.

So when local economist Sean Snaith says looking forward to 2012, "It gets better," you may want to pause for a brief sigh of relief — before you hear what else he has to say.

"There's still a lot of headwinds facing the economy going forward, and I'm expecting growth to be sub-par," Snaith said, "But it will continue."

From slight improvement in the job and the housing market, to the state of local business welfare and the overall world economy, local experts, includ-

ing Snaith, say they expect 2012 to be another year of slow economic recovery.

To get a better sense of what's to come, we can break down the 2012 forecast into three different tiers of the economy — real estate, labor and local business — to get a feel of what's to come in the new year.

Feeling it at home

Perhaps the area hardest hit in the past few years in Cen-

■ Please see FORECAST Page A4

LYNX changes in East

■ MEGAN STOKES
Sun Staff

LYNX plans to pull out all new stops to get people to ditch their cars and hop on a bus, starting with East Orlando.

One of the biggest complaints LYNX gets from its riders is efficiency: buses that are late and rides that take too long.

CEO John Lewis said the system is about to be overhauled to avoid this problem, starting with Link 30, which ran from the University of Central Florida to Winter Garden.

Lewis said Link 30 was notoriously late. To fix that, the Link was cut into two routes on Dec. 4, creating Link 104, which runs from the UCF station to the LYNX station in downtown Orlando, making stops at the intersection of Alafaya Trail and East Colonial Drive, Valencia East Campus, the intersection of Semoran Boulevard and East Colonial Drive and Fashion Square Mall.

"Link 30 is our first try at that, but there will be several other corridors where we'll be repeating the same action — cutting routes, gaining efficiency and cutting down on peoples' travel



PHOTO COURTESY OF LYNX

The route that traveled from UCF to Winter Garden was cut in half so that East Orlando residents will enjoy a more direct route to downtown Orlando.

time. We think we'll be able to gain more riders when the ride is much shorter."

The new route will run every 30 minutes, instead of every hour.

"At the end of the day, my job is to compete with the single-occupant car," Lewis said. "If I can get within 10-15 min of the competition — yes it's still a little longer but it's much cheaper — we're able to recapture that time period for the rider by allowing them to work while they ride and we're environmentally friendly."

Waterford Lakes Town Center Marketing Director Jamie Fraser envisions more people visiting the outdoor shopping mall now that the new route is

in place.

The change will "increase traffic here at the center," she said. "Reducing the wait time from one hour to 30 minutes will encourage shoppers to leave their cars at home and come to the Waterford Lakes Town Center".

Stops along the way

Despite its problems, Link 30 was the fourth most popular link in the system with 1.1 million riders in 2011, averaging 95,000 riders monthly.

But not only was the route long, it also required riders with a destination other than Winter Garden to transfer to other bus-

■ Please see LYNX Page A4



Learn more

Visit www.golynx.com, click on 'Plan a Trip' and then 'Maps and Schedules' to get bus schedule information for all LYNX stops.

WORD ON THE STREET

We asked people in downtown Avalon Park, 'What's your New Year's resolution?'



I don't do New Year's resolutions because I don't really follow through with them so if I don't have one, I feel more accomplished than if I make one up and not follow through.

-Lenny Pistorio



My New Year's resolution this year is to get closer to God and really study his word at a deeper level and serve him with a deeper desire.

-Elizabeth Henderson



My New Year's resolution is to run a 10k. So just to be more fit.

-Jen Fortin with 1-year-old son Cooper



To move to California. All of my family's there. My dad is getting older so it'd be nice for my family and my children to spend more time with him.

-Cynthia Robertson

First medical clinic in Bithlo

■ MEGAN STOKES
Sun Staff

Dr. Khaled Mohamed would see up to 50 patients a day, needing anything from vaccinations to emergency wound care, as a doctor in his native Guyana.

He worked at one of the many medical clinics built specifically for the country's hundreds of thousands of sugar cane industry workers and their relatives. It was hard, seemingly endless work, but he did what he could to see as many people as possible because for these people, living in a very rural part of the country, he was all they had.

Now, decades after leaving his country, Mohamed is once again bringing health care to an area where doctors are nowhere to be found: Bithlo.

He's the sole doctor at the new Community Health Centers clinic in Bithlo — the first medical establishment that far east in Orange County. Many of Mohamed's patients have not seen a doctor in a long time and, like in Guyana, because of a lack of private and public transportation in Bithlo and Christmas, many of his patients walk or bike to see him. Since the clinic opened on Oct. 10, the clinic's patients per day has doubled to an average of 15 to 18.

"I see a lot of chronic illness but they can't get their meds," Dr. Mohamed said of his patients. "They've been off of their critical medication for long periods of time. People who have had heart attacks couldn't go to the doctor or get their meds. You say, 'How can this be?'"

The clinic, a 1,300-square-foot double-wide trailer off of East Colonial Drive with three exam rooms, a laboratory and offices, handles everything a standard medical clinic provides, including physicals, blood work, immunizations, wound care, pap smears and STD testing. The clinic's staff said many people are just coming in for a check up.



Dr. Khaled Mohamed and his staff treat about 15 patients daily — a number that's doubled since the clinic opened in October. If the number of patients continue to increase, CHC plans to open a 10,000-square-foot facility, which will provide services like dental, gynecology, pediatrics and obstetrics in addition to primary care.

PHOTO BY MEGAN STOKES

"They are coming in to establish care. It's unique [to have so many people being proactive about their health] but I think that's because there hasn't been anything out here for so long," said Ayanna O'Connor, CHC operations manager. "Plus it's walking distance and they've been watching this building go up from their homes."

Shawn Pate, who recently suffered six broken bones in his foot after being struck by a vehicle on the Florida Turnpike, said he plans to use the clinic for follow-

up care.

"Bithlo needs to grow just like the rest of the area," said the Bithlo resident.

CHC Vice President Jeff Boeman said their goal for their current building is to see about 20 patients a day. But since they're already nearing that, it's possible they could be overcapacity soon.

If the flow of patients rises or stays steady, the clinic plans to expand to a 10,000-square-foot facility, which will offer dental, pediatrics and possibly obstetrics in addition to primary care.

All are welcomed

The clinic operates on a sliding scale based on income so it welcomes the uninsured, the underinsured, Medicare and Medicaid and anyone else who needs treatment. O'Connor said they plan to start promoting their clinic in Wedgfield, a housing community tucked far back into rural east Orange County, near

Christmas.

"We want to be your medical home," O'Connor said. "We can see anyone."

To ensure that every patient can see a doctor with only a day or two wait, CHC has an Open Access schedule, meaning they operate by appointment, but always leave several slots available throughout the day for walk-ins. Even with only four staff members, O'Connor said they are careful to return phone calls within 24 hours.

Mary Nierodzinski of Christmas said long waits is the reason she usually avoids health clinics.

"I fell while I was walking my dog once and waited for two hours bleeding at a walk-in clinic. It's good to know this is there when we need it," she said.

A need for dental, specialty care

Yadira Solando, CHC clini-

cal manager, said one of the first things people ask when they talk to the community about the clinic is whether there's dental.

"There's a huge need for that. I think it's because of access and education but also because of priorities. People are choosing between dental work and putting food on the table," she said.

Dr. Mohamed said dental care is more critical to overall health than most people realize. Blood vessels in the mouth lead directly to the heart so infections that start in the mouth and are left untreated can enter the blood stream and travel to the heart.

When there is a need for specialty medical treatment, CHC refers those patients with limited health insurance to Orange County's PCAN (Primary Care Access Network). Many of the people the clinic sees suffer from chronic illness such as hypertension and diabetes, Solando said.

Although they're able to see children, Solando said they currently don't have many child patients.

"They're trickling in," she said. "We are seeing more."

Dr. Mohamed said it's his vast experience — he's been practicing since 1983 — that has kept him in clinics that accept the uninsured.

"It's the need. There's a need here. I think the real thing is the experience I have. I know I can take on the challenge here."

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CHC Bithlo is located at 19108 E. Colonial Drive, Orlando. For more information, call 407-905-8827 or visit <http://chcfl.org/locations/bithlo>.

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FORECAST

■ CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

tral Florida, Snaith said, has been the housing market. With people owing more than their homes are worth, and facing the loss of wealth and financial security that goes along with that, Snaith said its recovery plays a large role in that of the overall economy.

"The burden of that lost wealth is still going to weigh heavy on the economy, certainly in 2012 and probably well beyond," he said.

Joe Stout, real estate broker with Millennium Realty Group based in Avalon Park, said he sees 2012 as a means to an end on the way to the recovery of the housing market.

"There's definitely a recovery and end to all of this, but the end isn't going to come until the housing market is cleaned up," Stout said.

The current housing market, he said, is saturated with short sale and bank-owned foreclosure properties, which continue

to drive home values lower. Until these work their way through the market, he said, overall improvement will be limited.

"Once that takes place, the recovery can begin," he said. "But it's going to be quite a few years until then, I believe."

He said that in the first quarter of 2012, he anticipates a large number of bank-owned properties to be released to the market, making it a great time for first-time homebuyers and investors to get into the market while prices are still low.

"Everything just needs time to correct itself, and once the banks get all of the foreclosures out of the pipeline, and short sales move through as well," he said, "we can move forward to a total recovery of the housing market."

Job outlook

The twin to the housing market to watch in significance of the economy in 2012, Snaith said, is that of the labor market. Improving unemployment rates, he said, is key to the over-

all economy's success.

Amy Baker, with the Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research, said growth in the job market is, and will continue to be, gradual in the upcoming year.

"Most all of our economic indicators are positive, which means we're growing, but it's still going to take a while to get back to where we were," she said.

According to labor statistics released Dec. 16 by Workforce Central Florida, Central Florida's unemployment rate, 9.6 percent, was down 2.2 percentage points in November from the same time the previous year. This makes the Central Florida average unemployment rate 0.2 percent below that of Florida overall, but 1.4 percent higher than the national rate.

"Compared to a year ago, we're definitely seeing improvement," Baker said, "but it's going to be a slow, gradual improvement."

Baker said she anticipates the health care, hospitality and retail/trade fields to continue

to see the most growth in the upcoming year, and jobs in the housing and construction job markets to continue to dwindle.

Local business leverage

University of Central Florida economist Snaith said that local businesses are not slated to see substantial growth in the upcoming year, until the bigger forces of the economy are able to play out — including the housing and labor markets.

People, he said, aren't going out spending at local businesses like normal, because they are still worried about the value and state of their homes, while many are also facing uncertainty in the workplace.

Kevin McFall, executive director of the East Orlando Chamber of Commerce, said he feels business owners are more optimistic going into 2012 than they have been in past years, but are still unsure of what is to come.

"You still have many businesses maintaining a very austere budget going into next year

because they don't know what's going to happen," he said.

Adding to the uncertainty of the housing and labor markets, which tend to control how much disposable income people have to spend at local businesses, McFall said the state of the national and global economies also has business owners on their toes.

Snaith said this economic uncertainty of business is likely to continue all of 2012, and into 2013, in a large part due to the presidential election in November.

"Right now it's hard to evaluate a project because you don't know necessarily what the cost and benefits might be because of some of the question marks regarding tax policy and where everything is going in that regard," Snaith said.

He said these qualms can't be settled until the election is over and businesses can start to envision whether Obama's current plans for economic and financial reform will be implemented, or if a new Republican candidate will be elected and new policies enacted.

LYNX

■ CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

es. Link 104 will create a direct line from East Orlando to downtown and vice versa.

"Some people don't like to transfer. It's like when people fly, they want to get to their destination as quickly and directly as possible," LYNX Spokesperson Matt Friedman said.

New route for Bithlo

Residents in Bithlo have complained that the lack of public transportation has cost them jobs, kept them from attending community events and limited their access to things like the grocery store and health care.

In 2008, LYNX cut the fixed route that traveled through Bithlo and Christmas due to low ridership. The system has since implemented a pick-up line, which operates on request Monday through Saturday, but residents have voiced concerns with that system saying it's too unreliable and inadequate to fulfill their transportation needs.

In November, LYNX approved Xpress 212, a direct line running from Bithlo to Waterford Lakes that would feature free WiFi and bathrooms on board. LYNX does not have the funding to purchase any new buses so they've solicited the private sector to provide the vehicles and partner with LYNX.

"Instead of waiting until we can buy more, we're looking to partner so it saves us on capital expenditures," Lewis said. "For folks out in Bithlo, it's an issue of access for them. We're talking about providing basic access to the people in that part of the county."

Xpress is already in Clermont and Volusia County. East Orlando would be the first to have the service in the Orlando area. Because it's premium service, Xpress costs \$1.50 more than the standard \$3.50 bus fare.

"I'm super excited that LYNX has made restoring efficient bus service back to the Bithlo community a priority," United Global Outreach Executive Director and Bithlo advocate Tim McKinney said. "I have no doubt that this is going to save lives and allow people who want to work the opportunity to work."

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A good year past

Is it just me, or does it seem like the weeks and months are passing more quickly these days? When I look at how fast my son is growing up, it scares me.

But when I ponder the many trials and tribulations I can now file away as "2011", maybe it's not so bad.

I hope all of you will enjoy a more fulfilling and rewarding experience in 2012. A more blessed experience.

Hope is one of the most endearing qualities we human beings share. Optimism! The will, the ability, the desire to experience a future better than the one we share today.

Hope is a trait that spans generations. We bear children so that they can experience a better life than the one we have. Hope transcends international borders and cultural distinctions.

Evidence of hope — great hope — emanates from other historical eras, in documents like the Declaration of Independence and traditions like New Year's Eve.

Top athletes today try to visualize their athletic performance by making a

picture in their minds before the contest starts.

They imagine themselves crossing the finish line first, scoring the goal, catching the touchdown pass. They imagine their triumph in great detail. They know they can run faster and jump a little higher if they believe they can do it, if they "see" it in their minds first.

We might all give that a try. How can we make 2012 a better year than 2011?

One way is to celebrate the New Year. Say goodbye to last year, be thankful for the good parts, and resolve — decide — to strive to thrive in 2012.

Now that the craziness of New Year's Eve is over, relish the quiet moments in life—spend time with your closest family members or visit your church, synagogue, ashram, mosque or temple.

You want to touch base with your conscience. You want to have one of those conversations that only you and God will ever have.

That's the way to celebrate the New Year.

Building healthy habits

Building a behavior and maintaining it for a lifetime can seem intimidating, especially if the behavior is not something you were born doing. When building exercise as a behavior, recognize better health is a behavior practiced daily. It is a process; it takes time and patience.

It's important to recognize health starts from the inside, out. Many times when we participate in physical activity, the first physiological changes are made inside the body. Better blood circulation to organs, improved resting heart rate and blood pressure, changes in blood cholesterol, increased lung function, regular bowels, better blood sugar regulation and absorption, hormonal changes, which increase euphoria and relaxation, are only a handful of amazing reactions taking place when a person initially starts exercise and maintains a regimen. Once the body continuously is exposed to bouts of exercise and it adjusts to this new experience, then external body composition changes become apparent. Scales don't tell the entire story.

Here are some practical tips to help you stay motivated in the journey of maintaining exercise:

- Your health needs to become priority. If you do not view your time and actions for your health as imperative as taking care of your family, house, finances or even career, then do not expect long-term changes.

- Recognize your life will not instantly change with the initial incorporation of exercise into your lifestyle. Do not be surprised when you encounter barriers, such as unsupportive family member or friend, while you transition to maintain exercise.

- Find a support system or person to join you for workouts. Sometimes working with another person or having a wellness coach helps with accountability.

- Join a fitness center that offers a variety of programs for its members such as: organized group sports, group exercise classes of different intensity levels, a variety of equipment and academically certified and trained wellness staff. You will be surrounded with multiple oppor-

tunities for physical activity, which can assist you through the process.

- There are no short cuts. You will have to put effort to take care of your own health. No one else will do this for you.

Currently in the Avalon Park YMCA, The Coach Approach® – An Exercise Support Process, created by Dr. Jim Annesi, a leading expert in the field of exercise adherence, has recently been implemented in order to assist members with building exercise as a lifestyle habit. YMCA members meet periodically one-

Scales don't tell the entire story.

on-one with a certified Wellness Coach, discussing long- and short-term goals, challenges — whether they be physical or mental, and likes and dislikes pertaining to exercise. The coaches also teach the members how to use the skills in creating and sustaining a consistent exercise routine.

The primary purpose behind Coach Approach is to break the common start-and-stop cycle and replace it with the habit of consistent exercise through the teaching of self management skills. Members focus on increasing energy, decreasing stress and fatigue rather than physical changes of weight loss, which are usually slower to achieve and can be defeating psychologically.

At the YMCA, our mission is to improve lives of all in Central Florida by connecting individuals, families and communities with opportunities based on Christian values that strengthen spirit, mind and body. If you are ready to kick the inactivity habit and break the start and stop cycle of exercise, then get started today.

— Shirley Rojas, CPT, and Jill Thomas, CPT, YMCA wellness instructors

COMMENTARY

Alafaya Trail widening project update

■ JENNIFER THOMPSON
Orange County Commissioner of District 4

The question comes from everywhere — via telephone, email, Facebook, Twitter and even the occasional post on my blog: "What's going on with the construction along Alafaya Trail?"

As a resident of East Orange County and a daily driver of the road, I understand and appreciate your input and concerns because, frankly, I share many of the same thoughts you do. Below is a compiled list of our most common inquiries and a brief description detailing what has been done about them.

-Stoneybrook Reserve residents who travel south on Alafaya Trail must turn left to enter their subdivision while cars traveling north tend to drift into the turning lane just as the curve begins. Citizens stated they have witnessed near collisions and it becomes particularly dangerous when trucks and buses pass. Both the Orange County Traffic Engineering and Highway Construction Divisions have reviewed the traffic layout and stated there is currently only enough room for a south bound through lane, south bound left turn lane, north bound through lane, barrier wall and a sidewalk.

-The curve at the intersection of Broadhaven Boulevard and Alafaya Trail was lengthened and widened, thus improving the transition flow. Warning barrels must remain since their purpose is to prevent a head-on collision with cars in the left turn lane.

-Complaints of a jagged asphalt area causing flat tires near the fire station at Stoneybrook's main entrance have been answered by the contractor widening this area. No further problems have been cited.

-The speed limit has been lowered and the fines are now doubled. Additionally, the Orange County Sheriff's Office has increased patrols in an attempt to reduce speeds.

-The traffic lane switches are now complete and subsequent switches will not occur for another 12 -18 months.

-There were delays due to traffic signals being placed on standard timing rather than a detection system.

Traffic Engineering has since corrected this matter and vehicular flow should improve.

-Reflective pavement markers (RPMs) missing mainly along the transition/curved areas are likely due to the heavy equipment and normal construction activities. These RPMs have been replaced.

-The contractor will install "speed limit advisory" and "speeding fines doubled" signs through the temporary transition/curved areas.

Other updates

In addition to the major road construction occurring along Alafaya Trail, road improvements are scheduled for S.R 50/Colonial Drive between Dean Road and Old Cheney Highway. With changes in recent funding to the Florida Department of Transportation, I

am closely monitoring the timeline for construction. If you're interested in learning more about the plans for improvement along S.R 50/Colonial Drive, a public information meeting will be held at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 17 at Spirit of Joy Church, 1801 Rouse Road, Orlando.

Throughout the New Year and into the next few months, my office will begin wrapping up the policy improvements to the Narcoossee Corridor with the help of the residents living within the rural settlement communities. Our Parks & Recreation Committee continues to work to identify available lands for future recreational facilities. Also, I will continue to press to identify a location for the East Orange Homeless Drop-in Shelter to provide assistance to the over 700+ homeless individuals living in our community.

If you have any questions please email me at Jennifer.Thompson@ocfl.net or call 407-836-5881.

Regards,
Jennifer Thompson
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Timber Creek girls basketball rolls to 12-0 start

■ JOHN BEDELL
Sun Staff

Nothing helps build confidence like a winning streak.

And the Timber Creek High School girls' basketball team headed into the holidays with a 12-0 record — something Head Coach Richard Cross hopes will motivate them to keep the streak alive.

The squad capped the run with a 59-56 win over district rival University on Dec. 16.

Senior leadership is part of the Wolves' winning formula. The trio of 12th grade top brass includes Brittany Whatts, Jasmine Wigfall and Brittany Cross, the coach's daughter.

Coach Cross has been pleased with the teamwork he has seen this season. He praised the team's ball movement and the number of assists per game. He also credited the team's defense with a key boost in wins over Jones and Evans.

Brittany Cross has been averaging two blocks per game and she led the team with 16 points in the win over University.

"She is short for a post player, but she plays strong," Richard Cross said.

Brittany also provides her dad with an extra coach on the floor. She quickly states that "patience" is the key to the team's success on offense.

"We run our game, not theirs," she said. "When we execute our plays we get open looks. We are a close-knit and very connected team. We have known Coach and each other for a long time."

Coach Cross has his team running both

the fast break and the half-court offense. He is also throwing different defenses at opponents. Timber Creek can create a lot of challenges for teams that come to play the Wolves, he said.

Wigfall has also been a reliable scorer for the team. She had 10 points against Father Lopez and 11 against University.

Sophomore Christina Potts and freshman Jessica Font have been big contributors to the Timber Wolves. Potts had 13 points against University and 24 against Father Lopez. Font directs the offense from her point guard spot and she can also shoot from the outside. She nailed a pair of threes against Father Lopez.

"I have to be confident and calm," Font said. "I have to keep my head up and see what everyone is doing."

Font credits her teammates with keeping her relaxed on the court. She can always count on someone to make a joke or wise-crack to keep the game fun.

If Timber Creek has a second half of the season anything like the first half, Coach Cross and all his girls will have time for a lot more fun.

The girls and their coach have set their sights beyond the district tournament and on state playoffs — a point the team has yet to reach.

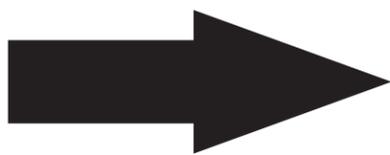
The District 5-8A line-up includes Colonial, East River, University and Winter Park. The Wolves have already defeated the East River Falcons and the University Cougars.

The showdown with the Winter Park Wildcats will be on Jan. 13 at Winter Park. On Jan. 20, Timber Creek will host the Colonial Grenadiers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TCHS
The Lady Huskies hope to continue their winning streak, which included a win over University.

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Knights getting serious

■ ISAAC BABCOCK
Sun Staff

A string of wins heading deep into the holiday season carried the Knights men's basketball team to a compellingly strong start to the 2011-12 season, but with conference play starting up, things are about to get serious.

The Knights have pulled off convincing wins so far, but they have been against teams that are relatively untested in the broad NCAA landscape. That's not to discount their eye-opening win against Connecticut on Nov. 25 that shocked the college basketball world. The Huskies have ranked in the top 10 all season. A week before many teams go on their holiday break, the Huskies' only blemish was that 68-63 nail-biter loss to the Knights.

After hosting the UCF Holiday Classic to end the year, the Knights will blast into their Conference USA schedule with eight straight league games to start 2012. That could set the tone for how they handle their postseason and exorcise some demons at the same time.

The Knights started last season ablaze with 14 straight wins before collapsing in C-USA play with an unnerving string of eight straight losses before they finally righted their season with a 58-57 win over Tulsa.

Their introduction to conference play this time around will be a baptism by fire for the Knights, who play the Tulane Green Wave as their first conference foe Wednesday, Jan. 4. The Green Wave had already stormed to a nearly undefeated season start in the first month of play, though they lack a difficult schedule.

The last time the Knights played Tulane, on Feb. 16 last season, they won a narrow 65-62 victory thanks to strong all-around play by the Knights, led in scor-



PHOTO BY ISAAC BABCOCK

Isaiah Sykes has proven a driving force at the net, with a breakout year.

ing by 18 points from Keith Clanton.

Clanton has again factored heavily into scoring this season, but he's joined by the duo of the Jordan brothers, Marcus and Jeff, who have teamed up lately to bamboozle opponents near the net.

The Knights will also likely welcome team captain A.J. Rompza back to the court in that first game of conference play. Rompza was an energizing force last season, helping engineer inspiring comeback victories against difficult teams.

The action all kicks off at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 4, at the UCF Arena, with conference play continuing through the beginning of March.



The **Avalon Lady Husky Volleyball** team won its first four games this season, led by eighth-graders Alison Coleman, Carolina Ganan, Janelle Harrigan, Abby McWhorter, and captains Paula Campo, Lenore Chenard and Emily Manning. They came in second in their cluster and earned a trip to the OCPS middle school volleyball tournament, making it to the second round before succumbing to Meadow Woods.

UCF junior Tishia Jewell received one of the highest **honors in college soccer** when she was named to the 2011 NSCAA/Continental Tire Division I All-America Third Team. Jewell

helped the Knights to an incredible campaign this past season as UCF advanced to the NCAA Championship Elite Eight. Jewell led UCF with 24 points on the year. The forward scored seven goals and dished out 10 assists, good for 24th nationally. She recorded 90 shots on the year, with 40 coming on goal, and netted a pair of game-winning goals.

Pincastle Baseball Facility is hosting a six-week **baseball camp starting Sunday, Jan. 22**. Some of the area's top coaches will direct the program in conjunction with U.S. Baseball Academy. Classes are available for players in grades 1-12 and are limited to six players per coach. Sessions are offered in advanced hitting, pitching, catching, fielding and base running. Cost starts at \$99 for six weeks. For more information or to register, visit www.USBBaseballAcademy.com or call 866-622-4487.

After a monstrous 2011 campaign for the UCF baseball team, two-way player **D.J. Hicks was honored** by the National Collegiate Baseball Writers Association (NCBWA) by being named to the preseason All-America Third Team. This is the first time a Knight has been tabbed to a preseason All-America list.



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Calendar

JAN. 6

Storybook Fun for Your Little One is at 11:45 a.m. Friday, Jan. 6 at the Alafaya Branch of the Orange County Public Library, 12000 E. Colonial Drive, Orlando. These read-aloud programs are recommended for children ages 3-5 and last about 25 minutes. Bring your children often to enjoy folk and animal tales, flannel, big book stories, rhymes, songs and poetry. Free

JAN. 7

Puffins climb, Penguins rhyme is at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 7 at the Alafaya Branch of the Orange County Public Library, 12000 E. Colonial Drive, Orlando. Preschoolers waddle to Iceland and back down to Antarctica then warm up with cozy stories and chill out with activities and cool crafts. It's for ages 3-5. Registration required. Call 407-835-7323. Free

"Family Focus: Tell a Story with Digital Media" is at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 7 at the Alafaya Branch of the Orange County Public Library, 12000 E. Colonial Drive, Orlando. Use a collection of digital media such as photos, narration and music to create a compelling visual story. Bring family pictures on a flash drive and save the project at the end of the class. It's for ages 6 and older. Free



Rise Against

JAN. 12

Winter Jam 2012, **"Christian Music's Largest Annual Tour"**, is at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 12 at the UCF Arena. See Skillet, Sanctus, Dara Maclean, Peter Furler, Kari Jobe and NewSong, among others for \$10 at the door. Visit jamtour.com

JAN. 13

Friday Night Life, a teen club in Avalon Park, is open from 5-9 p.m. Friday, Jan. 13 in the Avalon Community Center, 13013 Founders Square Drive, Orlando. This event is free. There will be dodge ball, a graffiti art board, a DJ, ping-pong, foosball

tournaments and more. For more information, call 407-381-2500 or visit fridaynightlife@yahoo.com

The **Winter Clearance Sidewalk Sale** will run from Friday, Jan. 13, to Monday, Jan. 16, to accommodate the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Retailers will have clearance merchandise outside of their stores at the Waterford Lakes Town Center.

JAN. 14

Vegetable Gardening in Florida – The Basics is 9-10:30 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 14, at Orange County Extension, 6021 S. Conway Road, Orlando. This

class is for beginners who are either new to Florida or gardening. This is free and in English.

JAN. 21

Rise Against is in concert at 7 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 21, at the UCF Arena in Orlando.

JAN. 29

Food Truck Bazaar is in downtown Avalon Park from 5-9 p.m. Jan. 29. About a dozen trucks will sell gourmet food like cupcakes, Korean BBQ and vegetarian cuisine. Visit thefoodtruckbazaar.com

JAN. 31

The University of Central Florida's Spring 2012 **Career Expo** is from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 31 at the UCF Arena. For more information or to register, visit www.career.ucf.edu



Dara Maclean at Winter Jam

Teen Club



Food trucks in Avalon

Culture

worthy of your calendar

Josh Garrick



Dragons at the circus

Leading the world in all things spectacular, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey has searched the world-over to create "Dragons", a once-in-a-millennium event honoring The Year of the Dragon. The cavalcade of circus champions brings together dragon lore with circus feats in a never-before-seen blend of myth and real-life legends. The circus comes to the Amway Center in Orlando from Jan. 12-16. "Children of all ages" will see acts including Kung Fu Warriors, Cossack riders, Asian elephants and the frenzied Globe of Steel. Glimpses of the elusive Dragon will be seen, but

will the dragon emerge from its lair? The Dragons pre-show opens an hour before show time. Tickets are available at ringling.com or ticketmaster.com, by calling 800-745-3000, or at the Amway Center box office, 407-440-7900.

WinterFest in Daytona Beach

The Daytona Beach Symphony Society, currently celebrating their 60th season of incredible concerts, will present the only fully staged opera to take place in Central Florida this season, and they've chosen the original "bad boy" of opera. "Don Gio-



"Dragons"

vanni" is the story of Don Juan, history's most famous lover (and seducer). It's by Mozart, it's fully staged, and it's one of the greatest operas ever written. Since Mozart conducted the first performance, audiences have found the roguish romancer so intriguing that they root for him even as his dark side takes over. Mozart's "Don Giovanni" comes to the Peabody Auditorium in Daytona Beach on Jan. 27 with orchestra, sets, costumes and singers drawn from Europe's great opera houses. And to make it even better, English supertitles are projected above the stage. Call 386-253-2901 or visit peabodyauditorium.org

Virtuosity takes the stage

Virtuoso pianist William Wolfram joins the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra to perform Brahms' powerful 1st Piano Concerto on Jan. 14 at the Bob

Carr Performing Arts Center in Orlando. Savaged by critics at its first performance, the Concerto has since joined the ranks of the finest of classical music creations. Reflecting Brahms' decision to combine the piano with the orchestra as 'equal' partners, award-winning pianist William Wolfram is the perfect pianist to fulfill the composer's intent. Call 407-770-0071 or visit orlandophil.org

Les Mis' 25th birthday

The epic Broadway musical "Les Miserables" celebrates its 25th anniversary as the most successful musical of all time with a brand new production, including new staging and re-imagined scenery inspired by the paintings of Victor Hugo. The New York Times calls the new version "an unquestionably spectacular production from start to finish," and NY1-

TV says "this new production actually exceeds the original. The storytelling is clearer, the perspective grittier and the motivations more honest. 'Les Miz' is born again." Les Mis will inspire audiences Jan. 17-22 at the Bob Carr Performing Arts Center. Tickets are available at OrlandoBroadway.com and at the Orlando box office at 100 South Eola Drive, Suite 101. To charge by phone, call 1-800-982-2787.

Handpicked by Billy Joel

The "New Voice of the American Rock & Roll Songbook," Michael Cavanaugh was handpicked by Billy Joel to star in his Broadway musical "Movin' Out". Evoking a voice and talent to rival the Piano Man himself, Cavanaugh will be joined on-stage by the entire Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra at the Bob Carr PAC on Saturday, Jan. 28 at 2-8 p.m. Call 407-770-0071 or visit orlandophil.org

The Art of Missionary Mary Proctor

Tallahassee-based Missionary Mary Proctor is a self-taught African-American artist who has exhibited her work nationally in galleries, festivals and museum exhibits. Her work will be celebrated at the Hannibal Square Heritage Center (in Winter Park) from Jan. 20 to April 21. The exhibit includes work from Ms. Proctor's personal collection as well as from the collection of the Mennello Museum. Ms. Proctor began her career as an artist by painting on an old door lying in her yard, inspired by Bible scriptures and memories of her childhood. The Hannibal Square Center is at 642 New England Ave. in Winter Park. Call 407-539-2680 or visit hannibalsquareheritage-center.org

Valentine's Day with Andrea Bocelli

If you had trouble finding the perfect holiday gift for your sweetheart, then I've got the perfect gift for Valentine's Day. We need a word bigger than "superstar" for the Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli, who will make a very special Valentine's Day weekend appearance at the Amway Center for an evening of romance on Sunday, Feb. 12. The performance will include Bocelli's lushly romantic repertoire of classical arias along with the world's most famous love songs. This is Bocelli's first-ever performance in Orlando, and this tenor sells out, so I'm alerting you to his performance early. You can buy tickets at amwaycenter.com, Amway Center box office, Ticketmaster retail locations, 800-745-3000 or at Ticketmaster.com



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Staying healthy in East Orlando

Parks, gyms and fitness programs abound in the community

■ KRISTY VICKERY
Sun Staff

Staying fit is not always easy, but with a new year upon us, East Orlando offers many ways to serve the communities' fitness needs.

Waterford Lakes Trail attracts a steady stream of people every day, and especially after the recent renovation by the Waterford Lakes Association.

"I think it helps build on the community and keeps it strong," President of Waterford Lakes Association Ken Zook said.

People use the 8/10 of a mile trail to walk, run, ride their bikes, skateboard and walk their dogs. Trail improvements include more than 200 new palm trees, new asphalt, a new gazebo with benches and matching trash cans, and improvements to the landscaping and the stationary exercise equipment.

"This community has a very simple theme... work on the things that people see every day," Zook said.

Waterford Runners and Riders use the trail every first and third Wednesday. Or-

ganizer John Tenney said this group is a good place for everyone to start out.

"If you don't think you can run, this is the place to come," he said. "The goal is to have a stress-free place to exercise."

Small goals

UCF Fitness Coordinator Ashley Hathcock said the best way to get healthy is to start small.

"Don't start with huge goals; start small, even with something as simple as avoiding meat on Mondays. Break your big goal into smaller, more manageable goals. Take things one step at a time," she said.

Another key to starting a healthy regimen is to set goals, think about why you chose those goals in order to find the drive behind them and then plan out how to achieve them.

"Schedule in your workouts, and take the time to plan exactly what you are planning to eat for the week. Being prepared is the key to success, especially with your diet," Hathcock said.



PHOTO BY MEGAN STOKES

Mother and daughter, Diane and Christina LaPella, strolled with their pups at the Waterford Lakes Trail. The duo and several other citizens braved the outdoors despite the chilly temperatures.

YMCA membership director Rebekah Ball agreed. She said 97 percent of Americans struggle to complete regular exercise each week, even though they know how important it is for their health and well-being.

"Consistency is the key," Ball said. "It's

about finding out what you enjoy."

Perhaps one of the most important things to remember is not to let setbacks sideline a new-founded health regimen.

"If you do happen to fall off track, it's not the end of the world. Get right back on course," Hathcock said.

Parks: 18 percent of all available land in East Orlando is set aside strictly for recreational use

Arcadia Acres Park – Located on Goldenrod Road in Azalea Park, the 10-acre neighborhood park offers a playground, basketball court and access to the Little Econ Greenway trail.

Bithlo Community Park – Home to 38 acres, the park is a partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida, and features Little League baseball fields, a covered basketball court, community center, fishing pond and skate park.

Blanchard Park – Located in the heart of the East Orlando community, just one mile north of Highway 50 and east of Alafaya Trail, Blanchard Park is 84 acres equipped with picnic areas, tennis courts, sand volleyball courts, trails, baseball fields, multipurpose fields, playgrounds and soccer fields. It also parallels the Little Econlock-

hatchee River, allowing for canoeing, kayaking and fishing. The Little Econ Greenway Trail runs through the park, and the Blanchard Park YMCA Family Center is located within the boundaries of the park.

Cady Way Trail – This 3.5 mile paved trail extends from Herndon Avenue, near Baldwin Park, north through Winter Park to the Goldenrod area before it connects to the Cross Seminole trail, and is good for jogging, riding and skating.

Downey Park – East Orlando's off-leash dog park is home to a variety of other recreational opportunities. Located at the intersection of Dean Road and Highway 50, the park includes a baseball and softball complex, sand volleyball, picnic areas, a playground and sand beach on the shores of Lake Downey.

Engelwood Park – Located at 6050 Lake Underhill Road is comprised of 6.8 acres surrounded by the Engelwood neighborhood on the east side of Orlando, and features playground and picnic facilities.

Fort Christmas Park – Located in Christmas, just off State Road 50, features 25 acres of picnic areas, a rental pavilion, playgrounds, basketball, tennis courts, sand volleyball and several multipurpose fields.

Goldenrod Park – Located on Goldenrod Road near Aloma, the park is home to a playground, small pavilion and basketball, tennis and volleyball courts.

Hal Scott Preserve – Over 9,000 acres of preserved land and wildlife waiting to be explored on miles of hiking trails that travel along the Econ-

lockhatchee River.

Little Econ Greenway – This 7.9-mile paved trail runs parallel to the Little Econ River and stretches from Forsyth Road to Alafaya Trail. The trail will eventually extend 10 miles linking the University of Central Florida and the Cross Seminole Trail System.

Moss Park – This 1,551-acre park in Southeast Orlando off Narcoossee Road, features picnicking, camping, boating, hiking and volleyball. There is a park entrance fee of \$1 per person.

Orlando Wetlands Park – The 1,650-acre park is home to more than 20 miles of scenic trails in Christmas. The park is closed from October 1 to February 1 each year.

Split Oak Forest – This 1,800-acre forest in Southeast Orlando is only ac-

cessible by a hiking trail located within Moss Park and offers exceptional wildlife views.

Tosohatchee State Reserve – 28,000 acres of the reserve border 19 miles of the St. Johns River in Christmas. The park offers horseback riding, primitive camping, hiking, biking and swimming.

Waterford Lakes Trail – an 8/10 of a mile trail located across from Waterford Lakes Recreation Center with a gazebo and fitness equipment.

Wedgfield Park – Featuring volleyball, baseball and softball facilities, this park is also home to a playground and picnic area.

For more information on parks in the area visit www.cityoforlando.net

Fitness groups: Run, bike, swim

Waterford Runners and Riders — Meets the first and third Wednesday of the month to run, ride or walk for fun and health, at the Waterford Lakes Walking Track at 6:30 p.m. in the summer, 6 p.m. in the fall and spring and 5:30 p.m. in the winter. For more information on Waterford Runners and Riders visit www.WaterfordRunners.org

Running Club and Triathlon Club — Meeting at the Blanchard Park and Avalon Park YMCAs, these groups are for individuals of any fitness level — from beginners to advanced. Most of their members are relatively inexperienced in at least one discipline when they join the club. Experience is not required. Tri Club will help you reach

your personal fitness goals and race goals with weekly swim, bike and run workouts. YMCA has a membership plan for everyone. Join before Jan. 31 and pay \$12. For more information, call 407-381-8000.

East Side Cycling — A cycling club that is divided into four groups based on riding speeds. The club's primary ride is at 7:30 a.m. Saturdays at the Avalon Park YMCA, 12001 Avalon Lake Drive, Orlando. Membership cost is \$25 and the benefit includes rides, development and support, social functions, club meetings with cycling specific guest speakers and online social networking. For more information, visit www.eastsidecyclingclub.org or email info@eastsidecyclingclub.org



YMCA Tri Club

Fitness programs and gyms: There are also many fitness programs for all ages, from children to seniors

Orange County Orlando Magic Rec Centers — Fitness center memberships are available for \$100 a year for ages 18 to 54 and \$75 a year for ages 55+ and active military at the Orange County Orlando Magic Rec Centers at Goldenrod Park, South Econ Community Park, which includes use various equipment, including cardio equipment and weights, basketball courts and lockers and showers. Fitness classes such as zumba, belly dancing, karate, spinning, boxing, yoga, boot camp and more are also open to the public at an additional fee. For more information visit www.OrlandoMagicOC-FLgyms.net or call 407-836-6200.

Anytime Fitness — Anytime Fitness, 2504 S. Alafaya Trail, Orlando, sets itself apart with access to any of its 1,800 locations 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It also offers tanning, personal training and online tools. For more information, call 407-736-9893 or visit www.anytime-fitness.com

LA Fitness — LA Fitness is located in the Waterford Lakes Town Center at 815 Alafaya Trail, Orlando. It offers tons of amenities including, personal training, racquetball courts, basketball courts, a pool, group fitness classes, a spa, a sauna, a kids club and a juice bar. For more information, call 407-380-1526 or visit www.lafitness.com

Yoga East — Yoga East, 3734 E Avalon Park Blvd., Orlando, offers classes including, power yoga, hot yoga and basic yoga, but it also caters

to families by offering yoga for expecting mothers, Baby Moma Yoga for moms with newborn to toddlers and Kids Play yoga for ages 4-9. For more information, visit www.yogaeastorlando.com or call 407-730-3257.

Everything ZenYoga — Everything Zen Yoga, located at 801 Woodbury Road, Orlando, offers a variety of traditional classes including Ashtanga, Hatha, Power, Slow Burn, Vinyasa and Yin. For more information, call 407-760-7930 or visit www.everythingzenyoga.com



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StoryWalk combines reading and exercise

Avalon Park's new StoryWalk activity gives families a fun, free way to spend time together, read and exercise

■ BRITTON JOHNSON
Sun Staff

It's a brisk, bright morning, and mother-daughter duo Wendy and Emma Tutins are breaking up their day by taking a walk. But it isn't just any walk, it's an adventure into a story.

"It was amazing," Emma, 12, said.

The two are taking a StoryWalk in Avalon Park. Each month, in collaboration with Avalon Park and the Alafaya Branch Library, a featured children's book is chosen and each page is posted in the windows of 28 Avalon Park businesses. Originally created by Anne Ferguson in Vermont, the activity started to catch on in Avalon Park in October, combining physical and mental fitness.

"It's to promote literacy and fitness together with families by using local resources through the community," said Stephanie Hodson, marketing manager for Avalon Park Group.

Hodson heard about the StoryWalk program, which is usually put on trails outdoors, and thought that she could translate it for the Avalon community perfectly. Families start at the YMCA, get a map to locate the story's pages, a pedometer for their first Walk, and then they go reading. At the end, they get a certificate of completion to bring to the Alafaya Branch Library for a special goody bag and their photo on the wall of StoryWalk participants.

Teaching tool

Because Tutins is homeschooling Emma, she said the half-mile StoryWalk is a great opportunity to get out of the house, and uses the Walk as a teaching tool. It's especially good for Emma, who has autism and gets to read each page



Emma Tutins, 12, right, reads the November StoryWalk story "Pet Show." Her mother, Wendy, said it's great practice for her autistic daughter.

PHOTO BY BRITTON JOHNSON

aloud.

"It helps with her speech," Tutins said.

It's also great for her comprehension, and Tutins said that although Emma is autistic, this activity would be a great resource for any child. They've done the walk three times now, and Tutins loves taking the book they read and bringing the lesson home. After they read October's book "Stone Soup," they purchased a copy and went home and made their own stone soup, with real rocks. They also made soup without stones, which was much more edible, Tutins said with a smile.

Emma likes that the story feels like a scavenger hunt, with each page placed in a different window leading her all over town. She gets to wonder what might happen next as she walks, looking for that

colorful page hanging up for her to find. "She likes to piece it all together," Tutins said.

Being together

Tutins also loves the idea that this activity is something that brings families together, without all the gadgets. No iPads, phones or computers, a little exercise and fresh air are what make this program special, she said. It's an opportunity to treasure for parents of young children, because when they get older, like her highschoolers, they won't be as available.

"These are times you can't get back," she said. "Engage with your children."

Hodson and fellow organizer Danielle King agreed.

"It promotes family bonding," Hodson said.

"I think it brings everyone together and gives them time to reflect on reading, on exercise and being part of something," said King, branch manager for the Alafaya Library.

Community minded

It's also a great opportunity for businesses involved. It brings new faces into stores the community might not have known about, Hodson said. Tutins said she has found new spots to enjoy, and likes treating Emma to a snack during their StoryWalk adventures.

They also choose the books to coincide with events in the community. For November "Pet Show" went well with an animal event in Avalon. In November they got even more community-centered by featuring the book "Jessica McGee Wants to be..." by local author Taina Haiman.

"It's very unifying for the community," said Judi Rachwitz, who is in member services at the YMCA.

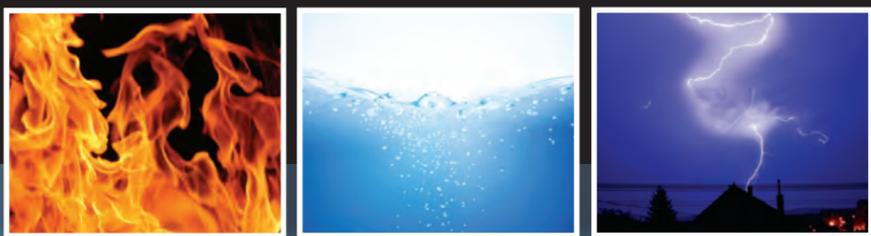


Learn more

Each month the StoryWalk will feature a new story. January's story is "Alexander the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" by Judith Viorst. Start your story adventure at the YMCA in Avalon Park.

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School News

Students from Magic Curtain Productions have been accepted into the invitation-only 2012 Junior Theater Festival happening Jan. 13-15 at the Cobb Galleria Centre in Atlanta, Ga. The Junior Theater Festival is the world's largest musical theatre festival dedicated to groups working with elementary and middle school students. This year the 20 students, aged 9-17, will present "Seussical JR". The students have raised much of the money for the trip themselves, doing a fundraiser with Bashful Bliss, selling keychains and necklaces and taking home a first-place prize of \$500 in a group talent contest at the Playground Arts Fest. They also performed a pre-show and collected donations before Magic Curtain Productions' main stage show, "Grease."

The University of Central Florida's Anxiety Disorders Clinic is recruiting **children ages 8-17 who need help** conquering social phobia and learning how to interact with others. Children may be eligible for free treatment sessions at the clinic, as well as restaurant, miniature golf and bowling outings with children who are comfortable in social situations. Parents who are interested in learning more about the free treatment programs available and whether their children may be eligible can call 407-823-3910. The Anxiety Disorders Clinic also is seeking socially comfortable children to interact with the children with social phobia at the weekly outings. They are paid for their time, and the cost of their outings is covered by the clinic. Participating also counts toward high schools' community service requirements. For more information, call 407-823-3910.

East River first-time debate members Erin Renwick and Kerriann Roe competed against veteran forensic students and came home with second place trophies in duo interpretation. They competed against schools that have been doing this for years, and scored only three points away from the No. 1 spot. East River's Jacky Raasch smoked her completion in the declamation-speaking event. East River scored third place per capita.

Valencia College won the inaugural Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. Announced in a ceremony



held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., the award comes with \$600,000 in prize money. In selecting Valencia as the **best community college in America**, Aspen officials noted that over half of the college's full-time students graduate or transfer within three years of entering the school, a rate significantly higher than the national average (51 percent versus 39 percent).

Sunrise Elementary fifth-grader **Ashley Voglewede** was a **winner** in the Orange County Green Canvas Challenge Recycling Poster Contest sponsored by the Orange County Utilities Solid Waste Division. Her slogan was, "Have you bin recycling?" Posters were made for all of Ashley's classmates. She also was awarded \$100 for herself and monetary awards were given to the school.

Stone Lakes Elementary has started its first Science Club. Fifth grade teachers Mrs. Katie Polito and Mr. Albert Cervellera organize and provide additional lessons to mirror the big ideas outlined by Orange County and set up hands-on projects for the kids to perform. The program cost and T-shirts, free for students, were made possible by Stone Lakes Principal Ginny Kennerly.

"KIDS' QUOTES"

We asked Stone Lakes Elementary first-grade students what they like about New Year's Eve.



"Spending time with my family. We go out to lunch and go to my cousins' house and play with them."
-Mason, 6



"I like to go shopping with my mom to get new stuff like lamps, candles and toys."
-D.J., 6



"I like New Year's Eve because it's the day before the holiday. I like it when the whole year starts over again."
-Basil, 6



"I'd say waking up and watching [the ball] go down on the TV. We go over to my aunt's house."
-Raina, 7



"I get to stay up late and hang out with my friends and my brother. At 12 o'clock, we do sparklers."
-Scott, 6



"I like that we get to count down. I get really excited that it's a new year."
-Andrew, 7

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Chuluota post office open

After closing for three months last year, the Chuluota post office is now open

■ BRITNI JOHNSON
Sun Staff

In rural Chuluota, businesses are few and far between. Located off South County Road 419, in an unadvertised, washed-white strip building set back from the road and behind some trees is the Chuluota United States Post Office contract branch.

For the residents of Chuluota, this was their community post office, but one day it closed. It reopened months ago, but some residents said they're just finding out now.

"I just wanted people to know that the Chuluota post office is open," said Marcel Gajownik, a resident since 2000.

A history of instability

The Chuluota branch has had quite a history. Its first community contract office, which are smaller post offices run by private citizens, closed in 2005 after the USPS failed to make a good deal with the current contractor. That same year, residents lost the P.O. boxes in the former office.

In 2004, though, another contract post office, the one residents use now, opened. While the Oviedo USPS branch does inspect it, the office is run and

supplied by manager Paris Patel and her family. They get no money from USPS.

At the end of January, the office closed to update its computer system and train the two employees, including Patel, on the new system. That process took about three months, and the office reopened in mid-April, unbeknownst to most Chuluota residents.

"A lot of people don't know we are open," Patel said.

Reluctantly using Oviedo's office

There are no signs pointing residents in the post office's direction, no announcements of reopening, and the only way someone would find out it's open is by choosing to visit the gas station in the same strip, also owned by the Patels.

Patel said they don't have any money for advertising, and though the USPS said they would try to help, they haven't.

In the meantime, residents have been driving to Oviedo to use that post office, about six miles away. But they aren't pleased with that. Lack of convenience to where they live, customer service, accessibility and

ease of parking, and, most of all, the long lines, have been some of the problems Chuluota residents have encountered.

"I literally bring a book to read in line," Gajownik said.

Some said they missed the atmosphere of their hometown branch.

"It's a sense of community out here," Mary Dall said.

Tough business

Contract post offices aren't an easy business, Patel said. They provide all of their supplies from their own pocket, along with the utilities for the building, which they own. Business has always been slow, but since closing and reopening, it's gotten even worse. They only break even.

"It's a very tough business," Patel said. "We're trying hard for it."

"Business is slow," husband Jay Patel said. "We never made a penny yet from that store."

That isn't uncommon in this economy and time, when post offices even in busy areas are in jeopardy, and most rural post offices don't make any money. Earlier last year, the USPS announced it would potentially close 3,700 offices across the nation, and ended this fiscal year



PHOTO BY ISAAC BABCOCK

After closing for a short while in April, the Chuluota Post Office has had trouble attracting customers. The office is privately owned by local residents.

with a \$5.1 billion net loss. Patel said their branch is safe for now.

Even though it's hard for them to stay open, Patel said she loves her customers and giving them the service they need. She said she doesn't see them closing the post office any time soon, and will stay open as long as they can make it work.

"We are open to help the customers out," Patel said.

It's important

And while a younger generation might not understand the importance of the post office, Dall said hers still find beauty

in the act of sending some love through the mail. She likes sending her grandchildren letters with stickers in the mail, something you can't get through email.

"It really kind of connects us," she said. "You want people to have the joy of opening a package."



Learn more

The Chuluota full-service post office is located at 650 S. County Road 419, and can be reached by phone at 407-359-5987.

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-Friday, Jan. 13 at 6 p.m. - Shabbat Dinner (Social Hall), 6:30 p.m. - Meet and Greet (Lobby), 7 p.m. - Musical Simcha Shabbat (Sanctuary)
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Rotary of Avalon Park’s Jim Foules (left) with Publix of Avalon Park Manager Phillip Wearsch.

Co-sponsored by the Rotary Club of Avalon Park, the East Orlando Sun and Pinnacle Awards and Promotions, the Rotary Business of the Month recognizes East Orlando businesses and organizations that are actively involved in their communities and embody the motto of “Rotary: Service above self.” Winners receive a plaque, a free advertisement in the Sun and a spot in the Downtown Avalon Park Discount Card, which serves all of East Orlando. The Business of the Year is selected from the Businesses of the Month winners. Nominate a business at www.facebook.com/avalonparkrotary.

2011 Businesses of the Month: Davis Bakery; Publix of Avalon Park; Groom, Grub & Belly Rub; Eastside Bistro; Fairwinds Credit Union; Lowes of Waterford Lakes; Avalon All Star Cuts; Keke’s Breakfast Café; Margarita’s Grill

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New construction in this market?



BRENDA: Pamela, I’ve seen a lot of new construction going on this year and many communities finishing up their home building. In this economy this is interesting to see. What have you been seeing as a buyer’s specialist and how does this new construction affect the existing home sales?

PAMELA: Yes I’ve seen and shown a number of buyers’ new construction, something I haven’t done in a while. Buyers are buying new homes even in this economy. If they are relocating from another state or they have purchased their homes a number of years ago they often qualify to purchase a new home. A big factor in the fairly brisk sales of new construction is that the new homes are now priced aggressively and to the market. The builders of the new home projects need to compete with the existing inventory of homes. And the inventory of homes is at a record low for East Orlando in particular.

BRENDA: Yes, the resales have been very active driving the inventory down. As of Dec. 21, Avalon Park had only 32 homes for sale. Stoneybrook had 23, Eastwood 15 and Waterford 37. We have also seen homes selling very quickly with multiple offers on homes. In the past three months, 63 homes were sold in Avalon Park, Stoneybrook sold 10, Eastwood sold 19 and Waterford Lakes sold 62 homes. I can see why some buyers are looking at new homes. New construction offers more “energy efficient” homes, which result in lower utility bills, something most buyers and homeowners are concerned with. The new homes are priced competitively with some good builder incentives for the buyers. Buyers can sometimes get more land and the buyers get to choose their own selections to personalize their homes. Another benefit to building a home is that most builders offer financing packages, which include contributing toward the buyer’s closing costs. So there are a lot of advantages to buying new construction.

PAMELA: I have also noticed an increase in buyers that do not want to make a lot of repairs that are required when they purchase a short sale or a bank-owned property. Many buyers want a “turn key” home and they get just that when they purchase new construction.

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Wednesday, July 4th, 5-9 p.m.

Oktoberfest

Friday, October 12th, 2012, 6-10 p.m.

Saturday, October 13th, 2012, 6-10 p.m.

Spooktacular

Saturday, October 27th, 2012, 5-9 p.m.

Avalon Jubilee

Friday, November 16th, 2012, 3-10 p.m.

Saturday & Sunday, November 17th & 18th, 10 a.m. – 10 p.m.

Avalon Aglow & Holiday Parade

Saturday, December 1st, 2012, 3-9 p.m.

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Check www.AvalonPark.com for Up-to-date Listings

Hosted by Avalon Park Merchant Association. For more information on this and other events visit avalonpark.com or call 407-658-6565.
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