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LIFESTYLE

Dad starts support group for parents with special-needs kids in East Orlando

9



SPORTS

Timber Creek Wolves' stand-out players shine after going far in season play

8

INSIDE

Calendar 12
Aladdin Coloring Contest 15
East Orlando valedictorians 16
Cooking column, recipe 18
New Pet Life column 19

East scored well on FCAT

■ MEGAN STOKES
Sun Staff

Some East Orlando schools fared very well on FCAT, despite harsher grading.

Although the state relaxed its grading criteria in May after too many schools failed under the new rules, 82 percent of Stone Lakes Elementary fourth-graders and 71 percent of Avalon Elementary fourth-graders earned a 4 or higher on their FCAT writing exams. This year, the state is considering anything above a 3 passing.

Ginny Kennerly, Stone Lakes Elementary principal, said her kindergarteners can identify a noun, pronoun and adjective in a sentence and are well versed in punctuation so they never panicked when they heard about the new testing standards earlier in the year.

"I know that we were feeling very comfortable," she said prior to the scores being released. "Our curriculum is always rigorous, and we feel like we are always right on the mark."

■ Please see **GRADES** on page 6

Accessing nature



PHOTO BY MEGAN STOKES

Entering the 9,515-acre Hal Scott Preserve from Avalon Park is illegal. Orange County and the Orlando Utilities Commission are working to change that.

■ MEGAN STOKES
Sun Staff

Spending time in the Hal Scott Preserve, where there's no other sound than the crunching of land under his sneakers or the call of a nearby hawk, Avalon Park resident Cory Watkins relaxes from the stress of his job as a criminal justice teacher.

"I like to get out there. It gets you out of the daily rigamarole," he said of his three- to six-mile runs or 10- to 30-mile bike trips. "Some days I go out by myself and think or other times I'll go out with my girlfriend or get a bunch of buddies together."

It's not widely known that accessing the Hal Scott Preserve, a 9,515-acre property that sits between the Avalon and Wedgfield communities is illegal, at least from Avalon Park. The only legal entry point is from Dallas Boulevard in Wedgfield. The bridge that connects Avalon to the Preserve is owned by Orlando Utilities Commission, which won't grant public access because the bridge is currently only meant for OUC vehicles to maintain their facilities out there.

But that might change after Orange County District 4 Commissioner Jennifer

■ Please see **HAL SCOTT** on page 4

Other trail projects planned for East Orlando

The East Orange Trail, which will run east from UCF to Bithlo and Ft. Christmas Park along East Colonial Drive.

Innovation Way to UCF Trail, which will follow Alafaya Trail to Innovation Way and will tie into Moss Park Trail.

Azalea Park trail, which will run from the Avalon Trail to the Little Econ Greenway along Alafaya Trail and State Road 417.

All of these trails are planned to interconnect.

Commissioners approve homeless center

■ MEGAN STOKES
Sun Staff

After 12 years of feeding the homeless, four years of working to find a homeless service center and two years of offering services through the mobile Samaritan Resource Center, Karen Akers will finally have a dedicated location to help the homeless.

"I feel thrilled. We've been feeding the homeless since 2000. It's been quite a journey," she said after Orange County Commissioners approved a site for an East Orlando homeless service center on Tuesday, May 22.

Four years ago, Donna Wyche, mental health and homelessness manager for Orange County Family Services, secured two grants totaling \$1 million to buy land and equipment for a center that would provide a long list of services to the homeless, including employment assistance, showers, food stamps, identification services, clothing, food, housing assistance and

more.

Commissioners approved a contract on 40,000 square feet of land at 9833 E. Colonial Drive, which is currently Blue Haven Pools & Spas. The county will pay a little more than \$1 million for the property plus \$460,000 in renovations to the building, which county staff said will be paid for using Community Development Block Grants. In total, the site will cost \$1.73 million.

"We have always assumed that with the grant funding we had, it would be difficult to buy land and renovate the property," said County Administrator Ajit Lalchandani. "I don't believe we could buy this without additional costs unless we found something super cheap, and everyone here has seen that has not been the case."

After sifting through 60 different sites over the last four years, Orange County Administrative Services Director John Terwilliger said he was happy he



PHOTO BY MEGAN STOKES

Pending closing, the Blue Haven Pools building on East Colonial will become East Orlando's homeless service center. The opening is planned for November.

could help make a difference in the community.

"We believed this to be the best option and obviously they agree," he said about the Commission's decision. "Now we can move forward and help get people out of homelessness."

Not everyone was happy with

the approval. Maria Palo, owner of Louie and Maria's Italian Restaurant, located across the street from the Blue Haven site, worried the center would affect her business.

"I hate to be inhumane, but my whole life is here. What this

■ Please see **HOMELESS** on page 4



Volume 17, Issue 22
3680 E. Avalon Park Blvd. Ste. 120
Orlando, FL 32828
Fax 407-658-6246

PUBLISHER
Tracy Craft
407-515-2605
tcraft@turnstilemediagroup.com

OWNER
Beat Kahli
bkioff@eosun.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Megan Stokes
407-658-2404
megans@eosun.com

MANAGING EDITOR
Jenny Andreasson
407-563-7026
jandreasson@turnstilemediagroup.com

DESIGNER
Jonathan Gallagher
407-563-7054
jgallagher@turnstilemediagroup.com

COPY EDITORS
Isaac Babcock
Sarah Wilson

STAFF WRITERS
Sarah Wilson
Brittini Johnson
Alicia DelGallo

ADVERTISING SALES
Linda Stern
407-376-2434
LStern@turnstilemediagroup.com

INTERN
Dave Carriere

LEGAL NOTICES
Ashley McBride
legal@FLAlegals.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS | CIRCULATION
Katie Reyes
407-563-7073
kreyes@turnstilemediagroup.com

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Coffee with Beat

Beat Kahli



Political differences strengthen democracy, enmity weakens it

I'm certainly not the first to lament the sad state of political discourse in America. And I won't be the last.

Democracy isn't supposed to be easy. It's the most demanding and difficult form of government. In theory, we can govern ourselves better than any king, emperor, dictator or oligarchy. But that means we all have to work at it.

Despite its demands, for the average human being living here in East Orlando, democracy is far and away the best model to accommodate a peaceful, prosperous life.

Democracy thrives on political differences. Opposition strengthens us. Democracy provides the means to sort out our differences and find solutions that most often dissatisfy both opposing sides the least or, on rare occasions, satisfy both sides equally.

And that's the whole point.

When political differences turn absolute, democracy wanes. When there is only room for my way of thinking, chances are you aren't going to be very happy.

One of the many brilliant ideas America's founding fathers enshrined in the U.S. Constitution is tolerance of opposing viewpoints.

That tolerance is enshrined in the First Amendment.

The First Amendment is one of history's most valuable and, hopefully, enduring declarations.

By stating clearly that all religious expression is officially protected in America, the authors proscribed the sort of intolerance that led to the Holocaust half a century ago, and the sort of extreme discrimination we hear about in news from backward countries all across the world today.

That idea — that we are all free to worship, to speak, and to publish our ideas — applies to every political debate we hear about today.

Whether you are a red hot liberal or an ice-cold conservative or anywhere in between, your lifestyle, your security and your family's opportunities to survive and thrive are strengthened by the diversity of thoughts, ideas, proposi-

tions and arguments that emanate from our political discourse.

When our ideas turn absolute — when we demonize our political opponents and attempt to shut out

Disagreement is vital, disagreement makes democracy stronger the same way business competition leads to innovation.

their arguments — we are only harming ourselves.

If we give any one political faction ultimate control over our affairs, we will destroy the precious democracy 20 generations of Americans have fought and died to preserve for us. And every time we demonize our political opponents, we chip away at democracy's foundation.

Unfortunately, our news media is more attuned to controversy and

conflict than consensus or compromise. That's the nature of the beast — the happy family that sleeps safely at night doesn't make for a good news story.

But as intelligent, well-informed adults who share a strong desire to see democracy work for us, we must look beyond the news to understand that civil, thoughtful political discourse is necessary to our well-being.

I'm not saying we should all agree. That will never happen. I'm saying just the opposite. Disagreement is vital, disagreement makes democracy stronger the same way business competition leads to innovation.

But when our disagreements turn absolute, when we leave no room for compromise or consensus, we abandon democracy for ideology. History has shown us too many examples of societies whose ideological absolutists have brought about destruction and ruin.

That's not a future any of us want to contemplate.



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John F. Kennedy

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*- June 30, 1961
John F. Kennedy*

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2. It is the male counterpart to gynecology.

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See also **An·drol·o·gist**

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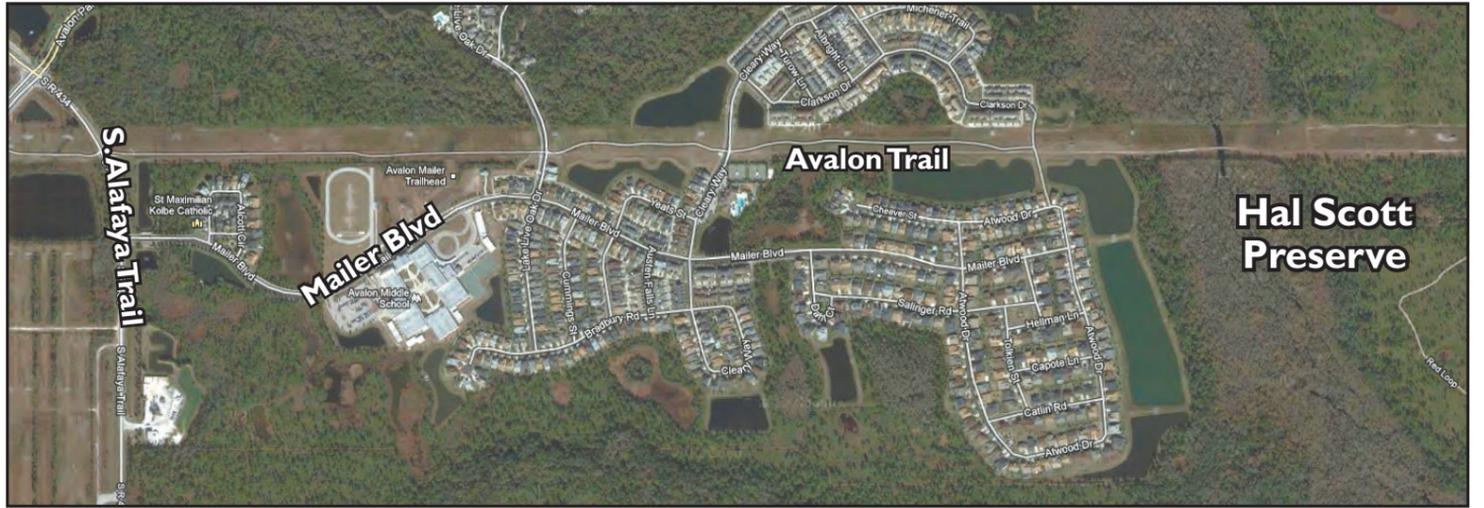
■ CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Thompson got Orange County Parks and Recreation, which owns the Preserve and wants public access, and OUC talking — something that hasn't happened since 2008.

"I'm putting a lot of pressure on. I'm trying to get access for pedestrians. If you access [Hal Scott] now over the bridge out there you are breaking the law," Thompson said. "We are trying to get that 'no trespassing' lifted."

Orange County bought the Hal Scott Preserve with the St. John's River Water Management District specifically so that residents could enjoy the expansive nature on the property.

"We want to open it up so people can see the nature that's associated with the parks — the flora and fauna and the wildlife, plus the beautiful water that runs through with the [Little Econlockhatchee River]," Orange County



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Parks and Recreation Project Manager Bob Goff said. "There are several hundred acres that you can traverse and look at and hike through. It's a gorgeous piece of property."

OUC spokesperson Tim Trudell said they are open to possible solutions but they want to make sure it's safe for residents.

"We need to see if that bridge

is safe for our traffic and theirs," Trudell said of the trucks OUC uses to maintain the power lines that run through the Preserve. "We asked the county to look at that, to see if there's a way to do some sort of add-on within our permit. If that's reached, then we can move forward."

Goff said county engineers are looking at several possible solu-

tions, including sharing the existing bridge and installing stop signs for safety and building other access points.

"I'm the eternal optimist," he said. "I think something can be worked out and it should be worked out. We all work for the citizens of Orange County and they expect us to come up with agreements for access to these

kinds of property."

Jim Perry, Eastside Cycling Club president, said the preserve would provide a safe place to ride bicycles — something East Orlando's lacking.

"I talked to people who have ridden out there and I think it would be a great resource. It would also be a great selling point to Avalon if we did have access to it," he said.

East trail plans

A \$500,000 trailhead building, funded with federal grants, was completed last month off of Mailer Boulevard in Avalon Park. Orange County's plan is to eventually surround that building with a 2.5-acre park — part of St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Church's future plans — and a paved trail that will run west through Avalon to Innovation Way and east to the Hal Scott Preserve.

But with no funding in sight to build the trail and issues with acquiring the needed land and easements, the building will stand alone.

"There's that beautiful trailhead but I don't understand where [the trail's] going to go," Watkins said. "We have a nice building sitting there and it looks like there's nothing behind it."

Thompson said all she's focusing on now is acquiring access to the Preserve.

"I'm not thinking about paving or connecting it to the Cady Way Trail, right now it's just having access to a site Orange County owns," she said. "There are hiking trails there now that people have carved out over the years — you can ride dirt bikes at least two miles back. It's a nature area, that's all I envision right now. It's truly like old Florida."

In July, the county's Parks and Recreation department will submit a master parks plan, which connects all of the current trails, to the Orange County Board of County Commission so that as funding does become available or as developers move into the area, the county can identify where trail connectors should be incorporated.

"Because of the situation with the economy, our trail program had to be put on hold for the most part. We try to get grants. We recently applied for a grant to connect the Little Econ Trail to the Cady Way Trail, but if we get it, it would probably be five years into the future before we actually get those funds," said Bill Thomas, a planner with Orange County Parks and Recreation.

"Now that grant money is becoming available again and developers are building again, we want to have plan in place," he said.

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HOMELESS

■ CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

will do to my business, it's my life savings," she said, adding that her customers dining alfresco have issues at times with homeless people harassing them.

Dennis Harmeson, pastor of Orlando Wesleyan Church on North Chickasaw Trail, said the homeless service center will eliminate the issues businesses may have with panhandling.

His church has been offering computer, phone and food stamps services as well as breakfast and lunch Monday through Friday to the homeless since October 2010. They served 865 people last month, which Harmeson said was a slow month. The funding comes from donations from their 35-person congregation. Since the church started these services, Harmeson said the panhandling in the direct area has stopped.

"We invested in their lives and asked them, 'What do you need?'" he said. "We eliminated the need for panhandling."

After the meeting, Palo tried to convince county staff to purchase her restaurant for the homeless service center, saying it's been on the market for two years. They declined since the Blue Haven deal was already done and her asking price was higher. She said she would have offered the property sooner but was never informed of the county's intentions in the area.

"I am disappointed with the way they dealt with it as far as notifying the public," she said. "If you don't read the papers,



PHOTO BY MEGAN STOKES

The homeless service center will have a partial opening in November; renovations will continue through the year with a full opening planned for July 2013.

there wasn't one piece of information out there."

Palo also complained about the approved site's proximity to Union Park Elementary and Middle schools. District 4 Commissioner Jennifer Thompson echoed those concerns.

Thompson championed moving the homeless service center into the Orange County Community Center on East Co-

lonial Drive, saying more private/public partnerships should be vetted. But staff said that option was too costly with a \$3.3 million to \$4.8 million price tag.

Mayor Teresa Jacobs said she reached out to the Orange County School Board to make sure they did not have an issue with the approved site and said that they did not, as long as the hours of operation are enforced and the facility is properly maintained.

"Creating this center is only going to help the children who are currently homeless," she said.

Jessica Rivera, aide to John Martinez, commissioner in District 3 where the ap-

proved homeless center site is, said they've only received one email in opposition to the site from the public.

The expected closing date on the Blue Haven property is July 31 with a partial opening slated for Nov. 1 and a full opening on July 1, 2013.

The county has no dedicated funding to operate the center, so those charged with running the center—the Samaritan Resource Center, a nonprofit organization with seven members on the board—have a good deal of fundraising to do to get services started by the opening date.

"We have a lot of work to do now," Wyche said.

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GRADES

■ CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Orange County School Board member Daryl Flynn said the good scores were a tribute to the quality of the teachers and administrators.

"I'm pleased that our students maintained proficiency on our test. For those schools that did drop, I know those same teachers and administrators are going to work hard to see where their students are strong and are weak because not all students are alike," she said.

Earlier this year, Florida schools were told the FCAT writing test would have an increased focus on spelling and grammar. At the end of the 2011 school year, it was also announced that FCAT tests would be graded more harshly and students who speak English as a second language and ESE (Exceptional Student Education) students would be counted in the passing grade instead of scored on their year-to-year gains.

The result: Whereas the percentage of each grade tested — fourth, eighth and 10th — that performed at a level 4 or bet-

ter hovered in the low 80s last year, this year only 27 percent of fourth-graders, 33 percent of eighth-graders and 38 percent of 10th-graders earned a 4 or better on the FCAT.

Schools received an A-F grade based on the percentage of students who score a 4 or better. In May, the state announced that grades will now be based on the percentage who earned a 3 or better.

"There are some children who will do well, but you've changed the cut score and at the same time changed the rules of how you're going to grade me — that is a lot of change for the state of Florida," said East Area Superintendent Maria Vazquez. "I think you've seen a lot of response from parents and organizations. Our children didn't all of a sudden become dumb."

In East Orlando, most schools had around 90 percent of their fourth-graders earning a passing grade — a 3 or higher — on the writing exam. East Orlando eighth and 10th graders fared similarly well, with the number of students earning a 3 or higher on the writing exam hovering just below 90 percent.

In comparison, most schools

in the area had percentiles in the 50s and 60s of students earning a 4 or higher on the writing exams, which last year would have been considered passing.

An audit is being done to make sure there wasn't a problem with the scoring.

"They need to look into why there was that significant of a drop," Vazquez said. "Any time an organization has that kind of drop in performance, whether you're looking at test scores or sales revenue, that would cause you to stop and say, 'Wow, what happened?' Something's wrong."

Vazquez said there's been a huge response from the public, complaining about all sorts of possible repercussions lower grades can have: decreased property values, making areas less attractive to businesses and lower graduation rates if children fail and cannot move up in a grade, or can't graduate.

Corner Lakes Middle parent Angie Gallo said she mainly worries that the children and teachers who worked so hard all year will still have to live with that grade, no matter what the state bases its grading system on.

"It hurts the kids. The kids know it — they know that if the

Most of the changes affecting FCAT were made to the writing portion of the test. Below is the percentage of students in East Orlando schools that passed with a 3 or excelled with a 4.

SCHOOL	3+	4+
Grade 4		
Camelot	.90	.33
Avalon	.97	.71
Waterford	.72	.43
Sunrise	.90	.63
Castle Creek	.77	.32
Timber Lakes	.87	.59
Stone Lakes	.94	.82
Grade 8		
Discovery	.89	.69
Corner Lakes	.80	.57
Avalon	.87	.76
Grade 10		
East River	.88	.62
Timber Creek	.89	.66



state hadn't changed the score, they wouldn't have passed," she said.

"I'm afraid our kids will keep failing these tests and get so discouraged that they'll give up."

Before the scores were released, Avalon Elementary Principal Pam Sanders said her teachers would be upset if they saw the low scores because of how hard they and their students worked.

"They were worried that their students would be devastated if their scores came back very low but since the state's made an adjustment, we'll be OK," she had said during an interview in May. "It would be terrible if the kids worked so hard and then they were told they didn't meet the mark."

Sanders said the school put a stronger emphasis on studying grammar and spelling, but that didn't have to deviate too much from previous years since she said her teachers always focused on these lessons.

"We've always tried to teach very rigorously. It was not fair to raise the bar so dramatically in one year's time," she said.

Vazquez said those schools with a large population of students who speak English as a second language and ESE students will be penalized by the new grading system.

"We know we have to be responsible for the education of all students but we're saying you should be fair and stop changing the rules on us," she said. "This

child is learning a second language, how are they expected to be proficient on a test that is not in their language?"

The reason the state raised the bar so much so fast was to prepare for the move to Common Core testing, where Florida will give students a national assessment test and be compared to other students around the country. This will come in phases, starting next year with kindergarten and first grade.

"There's a big transition right now and I think when they (the DOE) set this up, they were preparing for this transition, but they did not work it out correctly. It's not like every teacher in the state did not teach writing," Sanders said.

"The DOE made a mistake in the way they aligned the grading scale to the writing, and they tried to correct that."

Flynn said testing our students has been a moving target for years and will stay that way for at least another few years as the state phases in Common Core.

"Essentially what they're going to end up doing along the way is all the standards, all the expectations are going to be elevated. Kids are going to have to learn more quickly," she said, adding that she thinks adopting the national test will be good for the schools and students.

"We certainly don't want to run away from high expectations but always changing the target is frustrating."



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Rotary Business of the Month

Carl Black of Orlando

June's Rotary Business of the Month is Carl Black of Orlando, a Chevrolet, Buick, Pontiac and GMC dealer in East Orlando. Owner Omar Rodriguez and his business are involved in a seemingly endless list of charities. Carl Black sponsors about one golf tournament a month, including Rotary of Avalon Park and Timber Creek High School's Booster Club. It sponsors East Orange Little League by buying their equipment each year, several local schools' band programs, the local Pop Warner programs and many local school and community events, such as Avalon Park's Movie Under the Stars and Orange County Commissioner Jennifer Thompson's annual Backpack Giveaway. Rodriguez is also on the voting committee for the Orange County Teacher of the Year and Carl Black gives the winning teacher a new car to drive for a year annually. Carl Black is located at 11500 E. Colonial Drive, Orlando. For more information, call 407-426-3000 or visit carlblackorlando.com

(Left to right) Carl Black Owner Omar Rodriguez and Rotary of Avalon Park's Bob Ewald.

Co-sponsored by the Rotary Club of Avalon Park, the East Orlando Sun and Pinnacle Awards & 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. Nominate a business at facebook.com/avalonparkrotary.

The Scoop

Jose Santana, an East River senior, took third place overall in the 400 meter sprint at the recent state track meet. During the school's Senior Night, Santana was awarded a \$400,000 scholarship, which includes all expenses plus pay, from West Point and will run track there this fall.

Timber Creek lacrosse and football player **Jacob Rooney** was named Athlete of the Year at the recent Bright House Sports Network Breakfast of Champions - Orange County High School Sports Awards.

East River's 2011-2012 All-Metro Conference champions were recently recognized at a breakfast in their honor. The students were: Bret Rutledge, Daniel Mojica, Wilfredo Rodriquez, Micah Cross, Adam Duckett, Ryne Rankin, Tito Rodriquez, Griffin Soderquist, Jose Santana, Corey Ray, Dshawn Dexter, Keith Clements, Jessica Kainer, Chelsea Brooks, Frangelyca Brito, Taylor Smith, Brooke Myers, Kaela Harmon, Bailey Wise, Kyle Johnson and Tanner Meadows.

Timber Creek girls basketball team forward **Brittany Cross** signed a letter of intent to play for Eastern Wyoming College.

UCF football earned an all-time high NCAA graduation success rating of 79 — 12 points above the national average — for the 2011-12 season under **Head Coach George O'Leary**. Ten returning football student-athletes earned their degrees this year and a total of 20 players from last year's team have already graduated or expect to graduate this summer.

Avalon Middle School boys track finished sixth overall while the AMS girls team placed seventh overall in the Orange County Middle School Track Fest held at Showalter Field on Saturday, May 12. AMS was one of 37 schools participating. Top honors were given to Brandon Marquez who set county records in both the 800- and 1600-meter runs.

The No. 16 **UCF baseball team** had a program-best seven student-athletes earned All-C-USA awards on Tuesday, May 22. This season was UCF's most successful season since joining Conference USA in 2005.



Jacob Rooney



Jose Santana

Knights head to NCAA tourney

■ **ISAAC BABCOCK**
Sun Staff

Knights baseball may have one of the best road records in NCAA baseball, but it'll be put to the test as No. 16 UCF takes off for the NCAA regional tournament on Friday, June 1, to face a former College World Series team.

Hitting the tournament on the road will bring a dose of familiarity for the dominant Knights (43-15), who enter the regional seeded No. 2 for the tournament, just like last year when they played in Tallahassee. This time they're heading to Coral Gables to take on Missouri State, a team that made it to the 2003 College World Series. That's also the last time Bears (39-20) made it to the postseason.

The Knights will have their work cut out for them on the mound, as the Bears are rarely at a loss for runs. And with longtime coach Keith Guttin, who hit the 1,000-win mark this season, at the helm, they'll have plenty of postseason experience coaching them through the tournament.

For the Knights, who have struggled at the plate against strong pitching, it'll be a question of finding clutch hits when

they've previously failed to deliver. But the Knights have a knack for coming back, as shown in the Conference USA Tournament in late May. They'll rely on clutch hitting all around, particularly from the cleanup bat of D.J. Hicks, though he's acted like more of a leadoff hitter in key games. During the Knights' 6-2 pummeling of Tulane to close out the C-USA tournament, he drew four walks.

UCF baseball shrugged off an embarrassing 15-1 loss to C-USA backmarker UAB to come back with a pair of wins to take the final two games of the C-USA Tournament. The two wins were just as big a blowout as their one loss in the tournament, with the Knights lighting up East Carolina pitching in an 11-1 win on May 24. In that game, they left less than one runner per inning on base.

Depending on how far they go, the Knights could have the chance to play Miami, Florida State and University of Florida, though the Knights won't see the Gators unless they make it to the College World Series. They'll have one shot at redemption if they fall in the double-elimination first round, which starts this Friday, June 1, in Coral Gables.



PHOTO BY ISAAC BABCOCK

Cleanup hitter **D.J. Hicks** has given the Knights a boost in on-base percentage going into the postseason.



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A team of winners

■ ALICIA ROSE DELGALLO
Sun Staff

Four-year-old Branden Castro was never caught without a baseball and bat in his hands.

From the time he started playing t-ball, his father, Vincent, could tell the boy was going to be a good player.

"Just by the way he was swinging the bat, and also his body language," Vincent said.

Now, 14 years later, Castro is the Most Valuable Player on Timber Creek High School's baseball team, and committed to play at Alabama State University in the fall. However, Castro didn't rely on the talent of that four-year-old boy. He made sure he worked harder than the next kid to get what he wanted.

"I guess because I knew that I could make a future out of it, and I always had the support of my parents and my brother," Castro said. "It was just something I always wanted since I was a little kid."

"He was always practicing," Vincent said. "We have a batting cage in our back yard and he was always in the batting cage working out. I used to make sure that he knew how important it was to work hard. Talent can only take you so far, but your work ethic is what is really important."

Castro took that lesson from his father with him when he became a Timber Creek Wolf. The shortstop ended his four-year

varsity career this season as MVP and captain, leading the wolves in batting average (.475), RBIs (19), homeruns (3) and defensively, making only one error the entire season.

"Hitting for hours after practice with our hitting coach...I think that's what made me the hitter I am," Castro said. "We would just hit and hit and hit. Practice would end about 4:30, and I would get out around 6:30 or 7:00 with him."

Although his batting average is impressive, Timber Creek head coach Scott Grove thinks that his fielding statistic is what really stands out.

"At shortstop he didn't make an error," Grove said. "I think he had one error the whole season, which is pretty incredible with all the chances that he had."

Work ethic like Castro's is the reason why the Timber Creek baseball program has been so successful. Close to 90 percent of the program's athletes have gone on to play professional or college baseball, and the teams have won 20 games or more almost every year the school has been open. They have made it to the state playoffs six of those years, won the district championship the last two years, and made it to the final four in the state tournament this year as well as in 2010.

"We really feel that nobody works as much as we do," Grove said. "We have a great summer program with a camp that we do,

and we're just going to continue to work as hard as we can. And ya know, I think we'll win one, one day."

Grove has been coaching baseball at Timber Creek since the school opened 11 years ago. He spent seven years playing professional baseball after being drafted by the Atlanta Braves out of high school, and later traded to the Toronto Blue Jays.

The Wolves (21-7) are used to winning, but May 19 they had to handle a disappointing loss. The team succumbed to Port Orange Spruce Creek (29-5) in the Class 8A state semifinal. Spruce Creek went on to win the state championship.

Losing a semifinal game may seem like a huge disappointment, but the path the Wolves took to the final four was filled with victories.

"Going to the final four is incredible," Grove said. "Especially when it's a single elimination like Florida has."

Not only did they end the regular season with 21 wins, but to advance to the semifinal they took down Tampa Wharton, which was ranked first in Class 8A.

"We're a young team, but just the hard work, the ethic that we have as a team is second to none this year," said senior pitcher Zachary Barrett.

Barrett, who committed to Bethune-Cookman in the fall, transferred to Timber Creek from



PHOTO BY GABRIEL HOLT
Senior Cody Sharp comes in for middle relief in the state tournament versus Spruce Creek. This is the second time the Wolves have made it to the final four.

Spruce Creek, and had a unique perspective having once played for the team that ended the Wolves' season.

"We're out there for hours upon hours and just getting stuff done and making sure we're positioning ourselves in the best way we can to win games day in and day out," Barrett said.

Beyond hard work, Castro said that a special bond between the players is what gave the Wolves an advantage over other teams.

"We play like a family," Castro said. "We're a family; we're not really a team. Everything we do we're always together...we talk to each other like we're brothers, not really like friends or teammates."

Castro knows a lot about family bonds since he shares a special connection with his older brother

Vinny. Vinny was also a four-year varsity player for Timber Creek and went on to play at the collegiate level for Bethune-Cookman.

Castro was looking forward to following his brother to Bethune-Cookman on a baseball scholarship, but when the head coach Mervyl Melendez accepted a position at ASU, he decided to follow his brother's coach.

He hopes to be drafted by the MLB his junior year, but to back up that dream he will head to Alabama as an occupational therapy major.

"I'm excited - a little nervous - feels a little weird to be leaving Timber Creek, but I'm ready," Castro revealed.

"It feels good to know that I worked hard and I got what I wanted."

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Resource for parents

Man fills gap by starting an East Orlando group to offer support for parents with special-needs children

■ **BRITNI JOHNSON**
Sun Staff

Troy Edwards' daughter had been sick for more than two years, but only a few months ago did it really feel real. He hit rock bottom, finally coming to terms with the buildup of feelings of loss, sadness and anger. The realization that his Olivia would never do what most little girls grow up to do overwhelmed him. She'd never go off to college or bring a nervous boyfriend over to meet her dad. His child, born totally healthy, would never live a normal life.

"Now she'll never do that, she'll never be able to walk down the aisle," Edwards said.

Olivia has Rett syndrome, a very rare genetic disorder that affects one in every 10,000 to 23,000 girls. For most born with the disorder, they appear healthy, learning to walk and talk as Olivia did, and then the regression starts. At age 2, Olivia's parents were worried when she started having seizures, with more investigating doctors diagnosed her with Rett syndrome. Now almost 5, she's already losing her ability to walk, use her hands, has lost weight and is back in diapers.

Feeling alone

Olivia lives in Boston with her mother, Edwards' ex-wife, where top doctors treat her, but that leaves Edwards very far away from his daughter. He flies up to see her once a month, but that only makes it harder because each time he's there she's so much worse.

"It's a heartbreaking condition," he said. "I'd be depressed, I'd be a wreck, just feel-

For more information about the Parent Resource Group, visit facebook.com/parentresourcegroup or call 407-382-5551. The group meets every first Tuesday of the month at the Blanchard Park YMCA, and will have its next meeting June 4.

ing helpless."

"It's tough to be put in that situation as a parent and have to hold that little hand," said family friend Don Shipley. "You realize quickly that you are not as tough as you think you are."

But once Edwards finally felt as terrible as he thought he could, the Clermont resident and retired senior detective felt a spark of anger — with himself and the system. He searched and searched for someone to talk to, and found nothing. Friends and his own parents tried to offer their help, but they just couldn't relate.

"I didn't have anyone that I could talk to and vent to in private that could appreciate it," he said. "Literally I felt alone."

Creating a support system

So he decided to create his own support group. The Parent Resource Group (PRG) had its first meeting in April, and will continue to meet the first Tuesday of every month at the Blanchard Park YMCA. Edwards said his group offers an atmosphere of trust and comfort, where parents can cry if they need to, and can talk about anything. The group is open to any parent who needs support, but is great for parents going through tough times, including those of special needs children, having trouble



PHOTO COURTESY TROY EDWARDS

Troy Edwards and daughter Olivia only see each other once a month, but when they do they make the most of it. Olivia has Rett syndrome, a rare genetic disorder affecting one in 10,000 to 23,000 girls.

connecting with their adopted children, or sick children.

"It's a sanctuary — it's a safe place for you to come and talk and cry and vent and just listen and share and not be judged," he said.

Alicia Braccia is a licensed school psychologist and the president of the Providence Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to helping families with special needs children, and the organization Edwards contacted to guide and oversee his group. She said relating to others is a key part of dealing with the emotional aspect of having a special needs child. When their child can't have the future they dreamed of, the parent goes through a mourning process, she said.

"I think parents supporting each other in that grief process is really important, and that they understand each other and that they're not alone, it gives them support in knowing that there's other people out there who are going through similar things," Braccia said. "It's not just coming from a doctor or a therapist, but someone who lives it every day is really, I think, an important piece in healing."

Abi Rutledge, the aquatics director at the YMCA who works with special needs kids there, said this group can serve as a great outlet for local parents.

"Any chance that parents can be together and not only just vent and let the stress

■ Please see **SUPPORT** on page 11

The 8 Secret Reasons Students that Study Music are more Successful in life!

By John Kolbrich, The Avalon School of Music

Many people don't realize how powerful playing a musical instrument really is in a person's life, and especially in school age children. We take for granted when we see a young student or an adult playing or singing. Our modern technology has brought us all so much more music, than past generations, and of such variety and genre, that we are overwhelmed, and just assume music is something to be taken for granted, something that only a few "talented" children or adults do. Scientifically though, Music is for everyone



ability of children who have dyslexia and other reading problems.

— We live in a country where everyone has the potential to become successful, jump economic ladders etc. Fact: students of lower socioeconomic status who took music lessons in grades 8-12 increased their math scores significantly as compared to non-music students. But, just as important, reading, history, geography and even social skills soared by 40%.

— A Columbia University study revealed that students in the arts are found to be more cooperative with teachers and peers, more self-confident and better able to express their idea

— Students at risk of not successfully completing their high school educations indicate that arts participation motivates them to stay in school, and that the arts create a supportive environment that promotes constructive acceptance of criticism and one in which it is safe to take risks

— The skills gained through

sequential music instruction, including discipline and the ability to analyze, solve problems, communicate and work cooperatively, are vital for success in the 21st century workplace regardless of the type of work the students chooses or is given to do.

— New forms of entertainment, from hip-hop and rock & roll to film and video games, are being created as we speak and will continue to evolve. Experts say that over the next ten years, jobs in art, music, culture and entertainment will grow twice as many, as jobs in engineering will. Those who've been educated in the arts will have a great advantage over those who have not.

The bottom line: Music is an investment and key educational cornerstone that should be a part of every young person's life!

Sources: VH1 Save the Music, SupportMusic.com, The National Association for Music Education, National Association of Music Merchants, AMC, and Music American For the Arts

The Avalon School of Music teaches thousands of private music lessons each year to students of all ages and backgrounds. Our schools have a long-term vested interest in the promotion of music in our community for the well-being and success of all our young people. For more information contact us at 407-567-7776 or visit our website at www.AvalonSchoolofMusic.com

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SUPPORT

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

out, but get ideas from other parents, I just think it's a great thing," she said.

The PRG is also a place to learn. Each month there will be a different speaker who specializes in issues related to raising a special needs child, from an accountant teaching how to deal with trusts and budgeting medical expenses, to a lawyer advising about living will planning, and a therapist answering questions about behavioral issues. It's a

place to really talk frankly with experts and get answers, for free.

"Where can you go to the doctor without paying an insurance bill and just pick the doctor's brain?" said Laura Burk, Edwards' girlfriend and partner in organizing PRG. "It's a place to be completely transparent in a safe environment."

But there's hope still for Olivia. This year she will be one of only 10 girls worldwide to be part of a clinical trial aimed to at least stop the regression associated with Rett syndrome. And through that journey Edwards will have

the help from friends and family, and he'll be able to heal himself by guiding others through the tough times. As a retired senior police detective, he was always the strong one, and now he can do that with PRG.

"For over a decade my job was to help the people who couldn't help themselves and speak for the people who couldn't speak for themselves ... it was the most rewarding thing I've ever found in my life, and now that Olivia is where she is, I've actually kind of looked for that fulfillment again," he said. "I'm almost meant to be where I am right now."



PHOTO COURTESY OF TROY EDWARDS
Olivia plays with her iPad, which has learning games. The iPad was purchased using donations made by Navy SEALs.

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Calendar

JUNE 2

A Magic Curtain Theater musical production of **"Charlotte's Web"** will be at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday, June 2, at Discovery Middle School, 601 Woodbury Road, Orlando. For more information, call 407-282-8368 or visit mcptheater.com

East River High School will hold its graduation ceremony at 10 a.m. on Saturday, June 2, at the UCF Arena, 50 N. Gemini Blvd. Doors open at 9 a.m. Parking will cost \$5. For more information, visit ucfarena.com

JUNE 3

East Orlando's semi-pro basketball team The **Florida Flight's season home opener** is at 5 p.m. Sunday, June 3, at Avalon Middle School, 13914 Mailer Blvd, Orlando. A portion of the proceeds from each ticket will benefit the "Bithlo Needs a Bus" campaign, which will help purchase a bus for the Bithlo community. Tickets are \$10. For tickets, call 407-592-9841 or visit flighthoops.com

JUNE 4

The Audi quattro Cup Golf Tournament will be held at 8:30 a.m. on Monday, June 4, at Lake Nona Golf and Country Club, 9100 Chiltern Drive, Orlando. **Amateur golfers and recreational players are welcome** to compete in two-person teams for various prizes and a spot in the 2012 U.S. Audi quattro Cup finals at the Pebble Beach golf course. Registration is \$150 per golfer and all proceeds will be donated to nonprofit Best Buddies Central Florida. Register by Friday, June 1, at bestbuddiesflorida.org/quattrocup or call 407-898-0787, ext. 107, for more information.

JUNE 7

The Valencia College Theater presents "The Laramie Project," a play about the real-life **murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard**, at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and at 2 p.m. on Sundays, June 7-10 and June 14-17. Valencia's Performing Arts Center is located at Valencia Community College, 701 N. Econlockhatchee Trail. General admissions tickets cost \$10. Tickets for seniors and Valencia faculty, staff or students are \$8. Call 407-582-2900 or visit valenciacollege.edu/arts to purchase tickets.



Aladdin

JUNE 9

Avalon Rec Soccer League will host its UEFA Euro 2012 Tournament at 9 a.m. Saturday, June 9, at the downtown Avalon Park Amphitheater. It costs \$20 to enter. There will be trophies and prizes for winners. Register at avalonrecsoccer.com

JUNE 10

More than a dozen student rock bands will perform in Avalon and Orlando School of Music's **free live concert Avalon Rocks** at 3 p.m. Sunday, June 10, at the Timber Creek High School Performing Arts Center, 1001 Avalon Park Blvd., Orlando. There will also be a special 45-minute rock guitar clinic before the show at 2 p.m. (Registration required). Call 407-567-7776 or visit AvalonSchoolofMusic.com for more information.

JUNE 14

Magic Curtain performs **"Aladdin"**

Charlotte's Web



at 7 p.m. June 14-16 with an additional 2 p.m. show on Saturday, June 16, at the Timber Creek High School Performing Arts Center. Tickets cost \$10 in advance and \$12 at the door. All seats are \$5 during an opening-night special for students. Kids younger than 3 see the show for free. For more information, call 407-282-8368 or visit mcptheater.com

The following are **free events** at the **Alafaya Branch Library**, 12000 E. Colonial Drive, Orlando:

Learn about **Vietnamese cooking** techniques and ingredients from chef

Avalon Rocks



and author Ha Roda. The cooking workshop is from 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday, June 13. Registration is required. Call 407-835-7323 to reserve your spot.

"**Hunger Games**" fans can meet at the library to dress as their favorite character, compete in "Hunger Games" challenges or test their knowledge of trivia from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday, June 16. The event is recommended for teens ages 13-18. Call 407-835-7323 for more information.

"Groovy Genetics: Unlocking the

Unique You" is an hour-long **science program designed for children** that will be held at 11 a.m. Monday, June 18. Registration is required and seating is limited. The program is recommended for children ages 9-12. Call 407-835-7323 to register.

Music Together is at 11 a.m. Wednesday, June 27, and Saturday, June 30. Marla Stevenson will teach an hour-long, interactive music class for parents and children. The class is recommended for children age 5 and younger. Registration is required. Call 407-835-7323 for more information and to register.

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Florida paintings over 100 years

Now to July 15 – “Reflections: Paintings of Florida 1865 – 1965”

Drawn from the largest collection of Florida art in the world, the Orlando Museum of Art (OMA) continues celebrating Florida art and artists with “Reflections: Paintings of Florida 1865 – 1965” from the Collection of Cici and Hyatt Brown. Running through July 15, Reflections includes masterworks by artists who worked in Florida over a period of 100 years including Herman Herzog, Thomas Hart Benton and N.C. Wyeth. It’s a spectacular collection presented as beautifully as only OMA can do. Highly recommended. Call 407-896-4231 or visit omart.org

June 5 to 10 – La Cage Aux Folles

Three Tony Awards, three Drama Desk Awards, four Outer Critics Circle Awards and this production stars George Hamilton. Need I say more? It’s wonderful, touching and funny all at the same time. “La Cage Aux Folles” the musical comes to the Bob Carr PAC for five days only from June 5 to June 10. Ah, but there is more! “La Cage” recently made Broadway history as the first show to ever win the Tony Award three times for Best Production. This 1984 classic by Jerry Herman brought down the house nightly on Broadway with the anthem, “I Am What I Am.” It’s about ‘family values’ in a home with two daddies and the right to love. Sound familiar? Yes, but it’s all singing, and all dancing *fun*. Call 1-800-982-2787 or visit FloridaTheatrical.org

Now through Sept. 9 – “FloridaScapes”

Scott Maxwell of the Orlando Sentinel just made a case for the fact that those of us who live along the infamous I-4 corridor are truly in line to elect (or re-elect) our next president. In a bit of timely good fortune, the Orange County Regional



Josh Garrick
Culture worthy of your calendar

History Center has opened an exhibit that invites us to “rediscover I-4 and the cities and towns that surround it” in the exhibit “FloridaScapes: I-4-The Exits Less Traveled,” now through Sept. 9. Images by Sherri Bunye invite us to discover the beauty of the area while also showing us how these towns have been affected by the I-4 experience. The History Center is located at 65 E. Central Blvd. in downtown Orlando. Visit thehistorycenter.org or call 407-836-8500.

Now through Sept. 23 – “Parisian Affair”

For those who long for a visit to Paris, the Albin Polasek Museum at 633 Osceola Ave. in Winter Park transports us there in their new exhibit “Parisian Affair: The Art of Andre Renoux” all summer through Sept. 23. Renoux’s art introduces us to the real Paris as his paintings open a window on the everyday sites Parisians love. Renoux (1939-2002), the father of the Urban Realist movement in France, depicts the intimate landmarks of daily life, such as a private courtyard or a pastry shop. Honored within his lifetime, Renoux’s award-winning work has been exhibited around the world, and this summer the Art of Andre Renoux can be our passport to Paris. Call 407-647-6294 or visit polasek.org

June 13 and monthly – Summer Concert Series

Art & History Museums – Maitland (A&H) has launched a ‘meet your neighbors’ Summer Concert Series outdoors in

A&H’s beautiful gardens at 231 W. Packwood Ave. in Maitland. The series, called “Art. Music. Food. Architecture.” takes place the second Friday of each month through September. Perfect for summer evenings under the stars with music, poetry and an array of food truck fare, guests bring blankets or chairs, and a bar is available for those who would like a drink or two. The museums stay open, and the atmosphere is welcoming and full of talent. Call 407-539-2181 or visit ArtandHistory.org

June 21 to July 13 – B-Side Artists at the City Arts Factory

Central Florida is rich in talent, and the diversity of our painters is particularly evident in a group who call themselves the B-Side Artists. The fact that these artists are drawn from the ranks of street graffiti painters doesn’t begin to tap the depth of talent overflowing from these urban pioneers. B-Side’s seven original members, including Best Street Artist Winners Swamburger, Trez Harris and Chris “Tobar” Rodriguez, will bring their talent inside the City Arts Factory with an opening on June 21 from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. This is serious and innovative art from urban artists who continue to amaze with their unique style, content and willingness to create in atypical situations. On exhibit through July 13, City Arts Factory is at 29 S. Orange Ave. in downtown Orlando. Call 407-648-7060 or visit cityartsfactory.com

June 22, 23 and 24 – Annual Harvest Festival

If you can remember Lucy and Ethel’s grape stomping debacle, and you want to see just how that questionable entertainment might feel on your toes, come out to Lakeridge Winery’s 22nd Annual Harvest Festival on June 22-24. This outdoor event features live music, (real) grape stomping, an arts and craft show and award-winning Lakeridge Wines. Grape stompers may test their fortitude (for prizes) in the sweet and slippery grape barrels to race against one another, while other guests attend free winery tours and



Parisian Affair



Summer Concert Series

wine tastings, and food vendors offer solid food. Visit lakeridgewinery.com or call 352-394-8627.

June 23 to Sept. 8 – “The Tsars’ Cabinet”

One hundred years later, and our fascination with the czars of Russia endures. Now, the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Daytona will open a summer exhibit of “The Tsars’ Cabinet: Two Hundred Years of Russian Decorative Arts under the Romanovs” illustrating the decorative arts of Russia from the time of Peter the Great in the early 18th century

to that of Nicholas II. Many of the pieces in the exhibit were designed for exclusive use by the tsars, and even the pieces for everyday use demonstrate the richness of Russia during the long reign of the Romanovs. MOAS is at 352 S. Nova Road in Daytona Beach. Call 386-255-0285 or visit MOAS.org

Josh Garrick is a writer, photographer, educator and fine art curator. He is a member of the Curatorial Council for the Museum of Florida Art. Garrick can be reached at joshgarrick9@gmail.com or 407-522-3906.

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Reception: Sunday, June 17th
5pm – 8pm

A silent auction will be conducted at a reception hosted by the Ferris family on Sunday, June 17th, from 5 – 8 pm. A selection of art works will be for sale and a portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Jane Goodall Institute.

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Ruling Rollins

East Orlando resident overcomes the odds to become Rollins College valedictorian

■ SARAH WILSON
Sun Staff

Every Friday for nearly 10 years when she was growing up, Traci Campana would gaze out the passenger side window of her mom's car, her sights set on the familiar landscape of Rollins College.

They would pass the campus, the steeple of its chapel peeking above the other Spanish-style buildings and thick canopy of trees, on their way to and from their home off Dean Road in East Orlando to Winter Park where Traci participated in show-dog agility training classes.

"I'm going to go there one day," she would remind her mom frequently as they drove by. "It could happen," her mom would say, if Traci worked really hard.

"It was never a negative thing, but it was a realistic thing," Traci says, looking back, sitting in the student center of her now alma mater.

"But it was Rollins or nothing," she continued. "I didn't want to go anywhere but here."

For the girl who was told in middle school she'd likely never graduate high school with a standard diploma, let alone even think of ever making it to college, it seemed reality was stacked against her.

But Traci wasn't ready to give up without a fight.

Diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a variety of learning disabilities, and a high functioning degree of autism, learning didn't come easy. But she learned how to be a student in her own way, and

finished high school early in 2004 with a 4.0 GPA, earning the standard diploma she'd fought so hard for.

Eight years, two surgeries, a brief stint at Valencia College to get her associate degree, and thousands of hours of studying later, she graduated in May from Rollins College with a degree in psychology and minor in leadership, and again, a 4.0 GPA.

"Not only did I reach my goal, but I surpassed it by graduating," she said.

Leading up to this graduation, she wasn't fighting to be just standard; she was working her way into the running for valedictorian.

But it seemed she was swimming upstream. A 150-page book her classmates could read in a day or two took her all week. Others would go to class, take notes and move on, while Traci would be home poring over her digital recorder, transcribing the professor's every word, knowing she'd have to listen to it a few times for it to actually sink in. She'd regularly be up until 10 p.m., 11 p.m. or midnight still transcribing, knowing she'd have to get up and do it all over again the next day.

"It was a process, but well worth it," she said. "I probably could have done less, but I wouldn't have gotten the 4.0."

She balanced this with research and volunteer projects, as well as raising her 7-year-old daughter. She commuted from her East Orlando home to the Rollins' campus for her evening



PHOTO BY SARAH WILSON

Traci Campana was told she'd never graduate high school and she went on to become valedictorian at Rollins College.

classes multiple days a week.

James Armstrong, the professor for Traci's last class at Rollins, Dostoevsky, the God Problem and Self Understanding, said Traci was there every lecture sitting in the front row to his right. He said she was always an active participant without being dominating, and got straight A's the whole class.

"Through some of her written work I was able to get to know her a little more," he said. "And there were things that happened to her early on that would have crushed other people, but she was able to overcome them. And as I indicated to the entire class on our last day together, she had been an inspiration to all of us."

Her academic advisor for all her years at Rollins, Teresa Cole, said Traci's journey wasn't always easy, having to take weeks or semesters off for medical rea-

sons, but was amazing to watch.

"She's done amazing, and she is amazing," Cole said. "She's risen to the occasion and done it well."

As graduation started to loom, talks of who would be valedictorian swirled. At Rollins, instead of choosing the student with only the highest academic standards, administrators choose someone who exemplifies the best of Rollins all around.

"As much as I wanted it, I wasn't sure I'd get it," Traci said. "But when I found out I did, we were bouncing off the walls."

Named "Outstanding Graduating Senior" and valedictorian, Traci was given the opportunity to speak at graduation on May 13.

"I was so excited to have that opportunity, not for my moment of glory, but to speak for all of my friends," she said. "...People will come up to me and tell me

that my story was their story, and even if they couldn't relate to all of it, they still could feel a connection to what I've been through."

Two weeks after graduation, she poses outside the same chapel steeple she used to gaze at from afar, dreaming of one day going to the school it represents, wearing her cap and protectively clasping her freshly printed Rollins College diploma.

"I just love it here," she says, sighing as she admires the campus she now knows both inside and out. She's pleased to say she'll be staying a little while longer, set to start Rollins' Crummer Graduate School of Business to get her MBA next spring.

"I think I've proved that even if you're told over and over again that you can't do something, if you work hard enough," she said, "you can do anything you set your mind to."

School News

Avalon Middle seventh-grader Amy Pho was selected as a Disney Dreamers and Doers Shining Star for her dedication to helping others. Pho was selected over all middle school students in Central Florida. Mickey Mouse, her family and the Disney prize patrol recently surprised Pho during her science class.

Timber Lakes Elementary School participated in Relay for Life of Avalon Park, an 18-hour walk sponsored by the American Cancer Society to help those who are fighting or who have lost their battles with cancer. Timber Lakes raised approximately \$11,000, making it the top earning team. The school raised the money through Coins for Cancer fundraising, the selling of plastic bracelets, a Congo River golf night, and donations from family and friends of the Timber Lakes faculty and staff.



Madeline Loyd and Xavier Pagan of Avalon Middle School participated in the Level II Modern Woodmen Oration Contest. Loyd won first place and will advance to the Level III state competition held May 29.

Hai Nguyen of East River High

School won the Orange County English Language Learner Spirit of Excellence Award. Nguyen arrived in the U.S. three years ago without any understanding of English. He currently has a 4.0 GPA for the year, and hopes to attend dental school after he graduates next year.

Avalon Middle's music students earned straight superiors at their Orange County Music Performance Assessment—the highest ranking that can be achieved. In addition, 21 of the school's orchestra students participated in an assessment known as Solo and Ensemble. In total, Avalon orchestra musicians received three superiors with distinction, seven superiors and five excellents.

Timber Creek High School students Alexis Soto and Julie Silvers



were awarded best appellate high school attorneys in the state after competing in the 2012 Florida Moot Court Competition. The students traveled to Tallahassee to give oral arguments to actual appellate judges.

A student engineering entrepreneur team from the University of Central Florida won the top prize of \$100,000 and a summer trip to the White House in a competition

sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy. The team won the \$100K ACC Clean Energy Challenge, a competition of student business plans for companies focused on renewable energy and other "green" energy solutions. UCF's team bested nine other southeastern regional finalists. The UCF team will now compete in the National Clean Energy Business Plan Finals in Washington, D.C., June 12-13.

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CONTEST INSTRUCTIONS: Color in the above photo, then mail or deliver it to the East Orlando Sun offices, 3680 E. Avalon Park Blvd., Orlando, FL 32828. All entries must be received by Friday, June 8, and the winner will be announced the following week. Be sure to provide contact information, including name, phone number and email address. Your contact information won't be displayed with the artwork.

First, second and third-place winners will receive four tickets to Magic Curtain Productions' "Aladdin," playing June 14-16 at the Timber Creek High School Performing Arts Center. The first-place winner will also have their coloring appear in the next issue of the East Orlando Sun and will be recognized at the show. All contestants' art will be on display in the lobby of the TCHS PAC during showtimes. For more information, visit www.eosun.com

NAME

PHONE NUMBER

EMAIL ADDRESS

East Orlando's top students

Timber Creek and East River high schools' valedictorians and salutatorians in 2012

EAST RIVER:

VALEDICTORIAN

Mackenzie Chase

GPA: 5.34
Throughout high school, Mackenzie was involved in the marching and symphonic bands, Student Government Association, National Honor Society, and was the president of the senior class. Her GPA is 5.34. She spent her "extra-time" volunteering with Children's Home Society, the HOPE foundation, Christ to the Nations Church, and Freedom Ride. She plans to attend the Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida with a major in biomedical sciences and a minor in international studies. After achieving an undergraduate degree, she hopes to attend medical school and strive for a career in pediatric oncology, one day practicing medicine in the international community. Her biggest accomplishment is being a three-time recipient of the Disney Dreamer and Doer award for her work with Child Abuse Awareness.



Shelia Serra

GPA: 5.106 weighted, 4.0 unweight
Sheila has been involved in numerous extracurricular activities. Most notably, she was the vice president of the Pre-Med Club, on varsity in flag football, a member of Mu Alpha Theta, on the Quiz Bowl team, and served in College Club, Beta Club, and the National Honor Society. She plans to attend the University of Central Florida to pursue a possible career in mechanical engineering.



Ashley Howell

GPA: 4.9 weighted, 4.0 unweight
Ashley will be attending the University of Central Florida and hopes to pursue a career in engineering.



Briana Garcia

GPA 5.1 weighted, 4.0 unweight
Briana will be attending Brown University to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering. She was a historian in Mu Alpha Theta, and the treasurer of the Pre-Med Club and National Latin Honor Society. She also finished third place in the regional Science Olympiad Competition.



Kim Esotesta

GPA: 5.1 weighted, 4.0 unweight
Kim will be attending the University of Florida and will major in digital arts or pharmacy. Her major achievements were becoming president of Beta Club and earning the National Beta Club scholarship. She was an officer for National Honor Society and a Girls State representative.



Kinsey Lopez

GPA: 4.95 weighted
Kinsey will attend Brigham Young University and plans to study nursing. Throughout high school, she learned a lot about becoming a leader and getting involved in the community. Just this year, Kinsey was senior class vice president and National Honor Society secretary. She had the honor of managing all four blood drives this year. She said it was one of the most fulfilling experiences in high school.



Charles Spears

GPA: 5.05
Charles will be attending the University of Florida to study industrial engineering with a minor in French. He hopes to find a career in project management that involves travel. Charles was an active member of the orchestra, drama club and wrestling team.



Sean Toner

GPA: 5.1
Sean served as Public Forum Debate captain, earned ninth place speaker at the Yale Debate Invitational, and was a finalist at the University of Pennsylvania Round Robin. Sean is a member of the National Forensic League Speech and Debate Honor Society. He was president of the National Latin Honor Society. Sean will attend the University of Florida Honors College as a biology/pre-med major. He hopes to become a surgeon.



Natalie Parra

GPA: 5.2
Natalie has been involved in five clubs at Timber Creek and held leadership positions in four of them, including president of the senior class and co-founder and president of Schools for Schools, which raises money for children in Uganda who have been affected by the country's civil war. She will attend the University of Central Florida with a focus on civil or mechanical engineering.



Ahmad Abdel-Aty

GPA: 5.4189
Ahmad served as vice president of Beta Club and National Honor Society, secretary for the Spanish National Honor Society, and was on the water polo team. He was also a National Merit Scholar. Ahmad plans to attend the University of Central Florida, and hopes to become a doctor.



Michael Cat

GPA: 5.1579
Michael has been an active member of the Timber Creek Regiment, Beta Club, National Honor Society, Tri-M Music Honor Society and Pre-Medical Club. He plans to major in biomedical sciences at the University of Central Florida, and hopes to become a doctor.



Veronica Prado

GPA: 5.1
Veronica was a member of the AP Choice Program and was involved in numerous clubs and community service activities during high school. She plans to attend the University of Central Florida and hopes to become a veterinarian.



Alexis Soto

GPA: 4.7
Alexis was a member of the Beta Club, National Honor Society, Speech and Debate Team, and Mock Trial Team. She recently won the State Moot Court Competition. Alexis has been a martial arts instructor and personal development coach for girls to develop self-esteem. She was Miss Timber Creek 2012 and Miss Teen United States Beautiful 2011 with a platform on breast cancer awareness. She plans to attend the University of Central Florida with a major in political science.



Antonio Prado

GPA: 5.0
Antonio was a state qualifier for the Wrestling State Championship and has passed all AP exams he has taken. He plans to attend the University of Florida and become either an economist or mechanical engineer.



Chris Leary

GPA: 5.02
Chris has been a member of Timber Creek's thespian troupe since freshman year. He has won several awards, including a Cappie Award for Best Supporting Actor in all of Central Florida. He will be attending Florida State University in the fall with a major in film production.



Brianna Wilkes

GPA: 5.0
Brianna participated in National Honor Society, Beta Club and College Club. She took part in many service activities, including providing lunches and dinners for the Ronald McDonald House. She plans to attend Florida State University and pursue a career as a nurse practitioner.



SALUTATORIAN

Michael Jarrod Moseley

GPA: 4.96
Michael Jarrod Moseley was a member of the National Honor Society and volunteered as a math tutor at East River. He earned most of his volunteer hours at the Veterans Hospital in Orlando. He began taking classes at Valencia Community College as a dual-enrollment student during his junior year at East River and has earned more than 50 credit hours toward his AA degree. He plans on joining the U.S. Navy as a military officer after studying computer/electrical engineering and cyber/network security at UCF. Michael is also interested in science, history, politics and aeronautics.



TIMBER CREEK:

Alex Torres

GPA: 5.3
Alex is our highest weighted valedictorian. He co-founded an organic garden at Timber Creek that grows food to feed the needy in our community. Alex serves as the head coach of a YMCA youth soccer club. He will be attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology majoring in mechanical engineering.



Spencer Flaniken

GPA: 5.1 weighted, 4.0 unweight
Spencer will be majoring in mechanical engineering at the University of Florida. He was president of the National Honor Society, captain of the water polo team, involved in choir and was awarded the Best Buy and Fairwinds Credit Union scholarship.



"KIDS' QUOTES"

We asked Avalon Elementary students, "What are your summer plans?"



"I think I'm going to Iowa. I'll go to the Oviedo splash pad a lot and I'm going to clean my house."

— Owen, 9



"I wanna ask my mom if we can go on vacation. Vacations are fun. You get to go to the mountains. You get to go hiking. I'm going to walk through the woods. It's my most favorite thing."

— Devon, 6



"Well, I'm doing a lot this summer. I'm going to Ripley's Believe it or Not. It's a really scary place."

— Macy, 9



"I'm going to a camp called Camp Ogle. It's a social studies camp but it's really fun. It's not even like learning social studies. It's like a game."

— Drew, 10



"I am going to the beach. We usually go out to the deep end and find really big shells and make sand castles."

— Kiersten, 8



"I am having a sleep over with my best friend Megan. I am going to the west coast to play at the beach. There's really low waves there so we can swim. I like it."

— Kaytlin, 9

4TH Of JULY CELEBRATION

at Avalon Park

Wednesday, 5-9 PM

Presented by Leland Management

- ★ Apple Pie Bake-Off
- ★ Hot Dog Eating Contest
- ★ Bike Parade
- ★ Wet/Dry Bounce Park
- ★ Community Performances
- ★ Home Run Derby



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Ted Edwards
Commissioner's Corner

Property crimes up in East Orlando

My focus this month is on property crimes in Orange County. At the beginning of May, the annual Uniform Crime Report was released by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. It provides statistical data on rates of occurrence of various types of serious crimes among the counties in Florida. While murder, rape and assaults all declined in Orange County and statewide by 0.08 percent, crimes against property continue to challenge law enforcement.

The FDLE reports Orange County's rate for property crimes increased 5 percent in 2011. This is juxtaposed against an overall decrease in crime generally. Burglary incidents rose from 13,783 in 2010 to 14,504 in 2011. Already, for the first quarter of 2012, the trend has been similar. While many property crimes are considered to be crimes of opportunity where thieves simply grab items left unguarded and in plain sight, or gain access through unlocked doors to cars and houses, others, are more sinister and organized burglaries take place. Certainly every citizen should do all they can to make sure their belongings are secured. But unfortunately theft is a statistical probability sometime in all of our lives. It leaves us feeling violated and unsafe. Having had my own home burglarized in 2011, I relate well to all who have fallen prey to these thieves.

Elected and appointed officials of Orange County have the responsibility to oversee the resources that keep all of us safe from those who would violate the law. In response to discussions I have had with other elected and appointed representatives and in concert with reports we have received from residents concerning their own encounters, I have asked for additional resources to further examine this vital issue.

With the support from the Board of County Commissioners and various law enforcement agencies, crimes against property will now be assigned a top priority by the Orange County Criminal Justice / Public Safety Coordinating Council. Members of the Council include the Orange County State Attorney, the Chief Judge of the Circuit Court, and the Director of the County Jail. The Council meets once each quarter to discuss various topics related to law enforcement. They are also in charge of determining where inner governmental coordination and cooperation can occur and best serve the residents of Orange County. It is my hope that the work done on this issue by this prestigious group will assist in bringing down or eradicating recent waves of property crime.

As Orange County continues to grow, we as elected officials we don't want to see crime climb in proportion to our growth. This is just one of the challenges we face every day. Certainly, it affects the quality of our lives and our vital tourist industry, but even more it affects our future as a community. We live here now, and we want our children to live here in the future. We need to be secure in the knowledge that we have done everything we can to make Orange County a safe place to live. My position as County Commissioner allows me to assist in the development of policy that will help law enforcement coordinate and develop resources to that purpose. It's past time to tackle this problem with renewed commitment to our community.

As always, my staff and I are available to assist you should you have any questions or concerns. Please contact Dana Boyte or Lynette Rummel at 407-836-7350 or email district5@ocfl.net

Ted Edwards is the commissioner for Orange County District 5. Contact him at 407-836-7350 or district5@ocfl.net

Swap bad-for-you ingredients with healthy ones in recipes

This is the first in a series of columns detailing and describing the easy and delicious ways to change out some of the fatty, unhealthy foods you have been eating for foods that are amazing in flavor and health friendly.

In this series, I am going to give you alternative food ideas to use that are going to deliver on flavor as well as health. The philosophy when making changes like this is to get a similar effect without the harmful side effects.

For instance, the reasons we put mayonnaise on a sandwich is to create a water-proof barrier so the bread doesn't get soggy, as well as providing moisture and flavor. What if we were to switch out the mayonnaise and replace it with a soft, ripe mashed avocado? You will get the same results except that when using the avocado, you get a product that can provide in excess of 25 essential vitamins, as much potassium as three bananas and fat that is good for the heart.

There are dozens of other healthy products that can be swapped in recipes where bad food reigned, such as sweet potato, pumpkin or any hard squash mash, apple sauce, fresh fruits and fruit purees, as well as grains and legumes. Once I show you all the possibilities that can be created with some culinary knowhow, your health will become better by leaps and bounds, without sacrificing any flavor.

In this recipe, I am going to indulge



Richard Rosado
Chef Rich's Kitchen

your sweet tooth. We are going to make an oatmeal pear cookie, where most of the sweetness and flavor of the cookie will come from the pears. However, don't be limited to pears. Interchange it with one of your favorite fruits. If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please feel free to email me or join me for one of my cooking demonstrations at chefrich@healthyflame.com

Chef Rich lives in Avalon Park and owns Healthy Flame, a cooking school dedicated to fighting obesity. He has been cooking and teaching professionally for more than 14 years. Email any questions or comments to chefrich@healthyflame.com

The Substitutes series will continue running online. Chef Rich's Kitchen column is published online every Thursday at www.eosun.com

Oatmeal Pear Cookies

5 oz. brown sugar
4 oz. honey
1/2 oz. butter, soft
1 oz. egg whites
1/2 fl oz. evaporated milk
1 tsp. vanilla
5 oz. oats, quick cook
4 oz. flour, all purpose
4 fl oz. pear puree
3.5 oz. diced pears

Method:

Cream the sugar, honey and butter together until the mixture becomes light and fluffy.

In a separate bowl, beat together the egg whites, milk, and vanilla, then mix it well with the butter mixture.

Mix the oats and flour together until they are incorporated well.

Then mix the oats mixture with the egg white mixture until it's incorporated well.

Fold in the pear puree and pears again until incorporated well.

Using a portion scoop (ice cream scoop), portion out about 1 oz cookies on a cookie sheet and bake at 350 degrees for about 10 minutes. Remove and let cool before enjoying.

Chamber event a success

As always, we've been keeping busy at the East Orlando Chamber of Commerce, working to help grow business for our members and educate the community about all the wonderful things going on in our region.

Last week we held our ninth annual Vision Event at the University of Central Florida's College of Medicine, made possible by our generous sponsors: Florida Hospital East, UCF, Suburban Land Reserve, Cross Fernandez & Riley, LLP, Primrose School at Lake Nona and HHCS Health Group of Companies and our corporate seating sponsors. It was a phenomenal event with more than 150 people coming out to hear our expert panelists Dr. Tony G. Waldrop, Dr. Kathleen Plinske, Randolph E. Berridge, Rick L. Weddle and Moderator Marc Middleton discuss the talent supply and education opportunities of East Orlando, and how they ultimately drive innovation and economic development.



Gege Venant
From the Chamber

Our next large-scale event is the upcoming East Side Regional Hob Nob on Tuesday, June 26, at Bright House Networks Stadium at UCF. For this event, we partner with the Oviedo-Winter Springs Regional Chamber of Commerce and give attendees the opportunity to come out and meet the candidates in all levels of local govern-

ment running for election in the fall. Attendees will also get a chance to vote in our two county straw polls. If you're interested in registering to attend, or would like more information on the event, visit ESRHobNob.com

ment running for election in the fall. Attendees will also get a chance to vote in our two county straw polls. If you're interested in registering to attend, or would like more information on the event, visit ESRHobNob.com

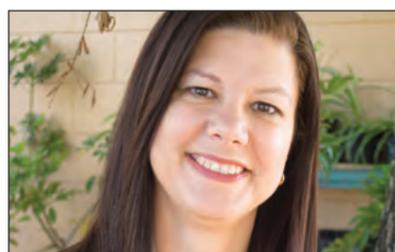
Lastly, I have a personal challenge for everyone who has never been to one of our events. Head to our website, EOCC.org pick out an event and join us. What have you got to lose? If you're up for the challenge, I can guarantee you'll enjoy quality networking, and you might even have a laugh or two with a few new friends while you simultaneously grow your business. Sounds like a win-win doesn't it? That's because it is! I hope to see you soon.

Gege Venant is membership director for the East Orlando Chamber of Commerce. Visit eocc.org

More jobs open as economy betters

The unemployment rate is going down and more jobs are being advertised. Yeah, the recession is over and we can all rest easy. Well, not exactly. It is true the market seems to be opening up. Recently, at the Mayor's job fair, we saw more companies and more positions available. There were not only seasonal and hospitality positions, but longer-term opportunities with major companies like FedEx and Coca-Cola as well.

It is not time to let down your guard by any means. Competition is still tough. I recently posted five positions for AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers and the resumes I am seeing are amazing. I am so impressed with the talent still available in the market. (To see the positions go to CFEC.org) This tells me the market is



Sandi Vidal
Ask Sandi

still really tight.

The other thing I am seeing is very little slowdown at my office in the number of jobseekers coming in for assistance. We generally see about 40 or 50 people a day. The Tuesday before the job fair we saw more than 80 people.

The good news is we are seeing

more people landing good jobs. We started a job skills boot camp about a year ago and we are seeing a high percentage of our "campers" get jobs. The next class will start June 14 from 6:30-8:30 p.m. at my office in Casselberry. RSVPs and three to five years of computer skills are required, and space is limited. You can RSVP to me.

If you are one of the long-term unemployed, or newly unemployed don't give up! There are jobs out there. You have to be persistent and at the top of your game.

Sandi Vidal, an Avalon Park resident, is the executive director for Christian HELP and the Central Florida Employment Council and has more than 15 years of recruiting and human resources experience. Visit www.cfec.org

Get kids, pets outdoors this summer

Summer is right around the corner, and for many parents it's a stressful time balancing work, play, and kids. There are many cool summer camps in Orlando — some more traditional in nature and others that are a lifetime experience for kids.

As kids, our summers were filled with all sorts of fun. Growing up in Kenya, a typical summer break for our family was doing outdoor activities in Masai Mara, Amboseli National Park, Lake Naivasha, Kericho or Mombasa. Being outdoors and among animals and nature is how our family spent almost every summer.

For many youths, participating in camps that involve animals, wilderness, camping, and other forms of outdoor activities are more than fun, they provide an experience that helps them learn about themselves, their impact to the environment and evokes compassion and caring



Teena Patel
Pet Life

for animals. These types of camps foster tremendous team building exercises and out-of-the-box thinking; they help build innovators, initiators and leaders; they are compelling because of the nature of the camp and the type of youth that want to participate in them.

When thinking of a summer activity for your child, don't be limited to camps and

activities that are within your reach. Make the investment to make this opportunity count for your child, and engage him or her in an activity in which they can be free and imaginative. These are the times for youths to grow and do a lot of self learning, not just buy time. I hear often from families who have children who love animals, and especially dogs. There are some awesome dog-related summer camps, some right here in Orlando.

Take into consideration the activities your youth has shown interest in and take the time to help them develop these skills. Prepare them for their future and provide them with the relevant experiences so that they can lay their path for a successful future. Summer camps and activities are a great time to help mold your child's future, giving them a sense of the goals they need to accomplish while giving them

a small taste for reality.

Teena Patel, certified dog trainer and canine behavioral counselor, has over 14 years of experience working with dogs, birds and children. She and her husband, Nimesh Patel, reside in Avalon Park and own University of Dogland, a dog training and boarding campus in East Orlando, and Groom Grub and Belly Rub, a pet grooming, sitting and supply store in Avalon Park. They are parents to three dogs.

Pet Life will run in the weekly East Orlando Sun online edition at www.eosun.com, informing of pet-related events, trends and a featured dog of the week from a local pet rescue.



Letters to the editor

Keep teen drivers safe

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety recently released a study showing a strong association between the number and age of passengers present in-vehicle and the risk of a teen driver dying in a traffic crash.

The study found that the likelihood of a 16- or 17-year-old driver being killed in a crash, per mile driven, increases with each additional young passenger in the vehicle. The fatality risk increases 44 percent when carrying one passenger younger than 21, doubles when carrying two passengers younger than 21, and quadruples when carrying three or more passengers younger than 21. This study had no older passengers in the vehicle.

Conversely, carrying at least one passenger 35 years old or older cuts a teens driver's risk of death by 62 percent, and risk of involvement in any police-reported crash by 46 percent, highlighting the protective influence that parents/guardians and other adults have in the car.

Carrying young passengers is an enormous risk, but it's also preventable. These findings should send an obvious message to parents and guardians repudiating them from riding in a vehicle with other young people, whether they're in the driver's seat or in the back seat.

This research clearly demonstrates the strong connection between carrying young passengers, and higher crash fatality rates for teen drivers. Armed with this data, you can understand why it's so important that Florida's graduated driver licensing program adequately limit passengers for new teen drivers. The Auto Club Group is working with parents, teens and other partners to promote policies and programs that will increase the safety of all drivers.

AAA suggests to parents the following steps they can take to improve their teen's safety as they learn to drive on their own:

-Keep passengers out: As previously stated above, teen drivers' crash risks multiply with teenage passengers in the vehicle. Set limits and enforce them consistently.

-Practice, practice, practice: Once teens have their actual license, continue to practice to-

gether to ensure that basic skills are mastered, and to introduce varied driving conditions (snow, heavy traffic, rural roads) with an experienced driver in the passenger seat.

-Limit night driving: Reduced visibility makes night driving riskier for drivers of all ages. For inexperienced teens, it's even harder. Allow new teen drivers to drive at night only if truly necessary, or to practice with a parent.

-Keep setting rules: Parents/guardians can and should set and enforce rules above and beyond their state laws. In addition to night and passenger limits, set rules for inclement weather, highways, cities, or other driving conditions in which a teen has not gained enough experience. Find a parent-teen driving agreement on TeenDriving.AAA.com that can help.

— John Pecchio
Traffic safety manager with AAA

National spotlight on Bithlo

U.S. Congressman John Mica recently took a lengthy tour of Bithlo. Due to redistricting, if re-elected his newly drawn district will cover part of Bithlo. Congresswoman Sandy Adams, who currently represents Bithlo and will face Mica for re-election in what is already a nationally watched, hotly contested GOP race, has also taken a brief tour of Bithlo and attended a public meeting on the community's water issue.

Bithlo is hot. I mean that in a good and positive way. Not only is correcting the wrongs in this community the morally right thing to do, it is the politically smart thing to do. Why? Because of you, the neighbors, churches, civic organizations and corporations surrounding Bithlo and throughout Orange County have stepped up by the thousands to say, 'We care.'

Ironically, I started full speed ahead to work on Bithlo's positive transformation effort during the last election year—2010. I had the opportunity to meet candidates, elected officials and other people of influence often at public events, debates and other venues. This gave me the unique opportunity to present to them issues and possible solutions that had been long overlooked

and ignored in this community of thousands in east Orange County.

It was shocking and disturbing to learn about the things that prevented Bithlo as a whole for decades from being a healthy community. Deep generational poverty; low high school graduation rates; lack of safe transportation down an extremely busy East Colonial Drive, which cuts the Bithlo community in half; sub-standard housing made up primarily of old trailers; the lack of even one medical clinic or dentist; lack of the most fundamental necessities of life such as adequate food, clothing and shelter; poor quality, if not contaminated, drinking water in an environment filled with junk yards, illegal dumps and leaky gas stations, intermingled with what I am told is the highest concentration of septic tanks in the state. This is all within what is the Econlockhatchee River basin—a "sacred" Florida waterway.

Recognizing that these problems, though big and complicated, were solvable, motivated me to begin the process to effect real positive change. Personally, I believe that individuals should be responsible for their own success and destiny. That being said, I was struck by the obvious discrimination Bithlo residents had faced at the hands of those governments and individuals charged to represent them. It does not take a degree in political science to see that an equal standard had not been applied to Bithlo relating to basic infrastructure, utilities and public health, as has been provided to other communities and citizens in Orange County, even those also facing extreme poverty.

So in 2010, having the opportunity to get on the radar of so many officials, influential people and public entities helped lay the foundation for the progress we have seen so far in Bithlo's positive transformation effort. Including: a new medical clinic serving both the insured and uninsured; improved county maintenance of streets, ditches, etc. (though there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done); some private well testing; renewed attention to the A-Z illegal dump in a Bithlo neighborhood that the county has neglected action on for many

years; more focused attention on leaky gas station contamination; and Lynx working to address new public transportation options.

Federal and state-level politicians are not the only ones with Bithlo on their radar. Commissioner Ted Edwards' opposition for County Commission District 5, Gina Duncan, has not only taken a lengthy tour of Bithlo, but has been working on an aggressive plan, I am told, to address many of the issues there she recently learned about. Chief Judge Belvin Perry, a life-long resident of Orange County, like me, called the other day and is working to schedule a tour.

There is an open invitation for every interested politician, candidate or any other person of influence who wants to join the Bithlo transformation effort to come out and see the issues first hand. Many are responding.

I will conclude with this: You matter! This election year, your power, influence and care has the ability to cause real, positive action by our elected officials and those desiring to be elected. Let's remind them all that they are servants of the people...ALL of the people.

— Tim McKinney
Orlando

Stay close, get creative, save more this summer

With summer just around the corner, families are still thinking about their travel plans—and what's in their bank accounts. Tight budgets might have families staying closer to home, especially as the average family vacation can easily run \$4,000 or more for a week for a group of four. But staying closer to home can still be fun. CredAbility, one of the leading nonprofit credit counseling and education agencies in the United States, offers a host of ideas for families considering a creative, cost-saving "staycation" this summer:

• Day trips. Sometimes the best fun is less than an hour from home. Consider local theme or water parks, festivals, gardens, zoos and sporting events. A quick Google search of "things to do in your city" can produce dozens of ideas. Check out all the local newspapers and websites for a calendar of upcoming

events in your area.

• Go abroad, at home. Pick a destination and create it in your own home. Visit the library and check out books and DVDs on that country. Have fun with the family making an itinerary of places to go, research and make foods native to the country and even make costumes based on the country's culture. It's a great educational and fun concept!

• Consider house swapping. House swap with a family or friends in another town. It's a getaway to a new place and destination without having to dole out the dollars for a hotel stay, airfare and more.

• Fun dining. Plan an elegant picnic at a local beach, lake, park or in your backyard. Get out your nice dishes and glasses, and pack a tablecloth and linen napkins. Bring some fun outdoor games, such as bocce ball or badminton and make a day of it.

• Throw a party. Plan a theme party, like a luau, beach night, or the 50's and invite friends, neighbors and relatives. Plan the menu and ask everyone to bring an item. Visit local thrift stores and garage sales ahead of time for decorations and clothing. It not only saves you a ton of money, but we all love to rummage for a great deal! You can also have it at a local city, county or state park. After the theme party, pack up all the items you purchased and sell them as a lot on eBay so you can recoup some of your expense and pass the idea on to someone else.

• Save on your staycation. You don't have to spend a lot of money or go far from home to find good old-fashioned family fun. A family of four can bowl for two hours or head to a movie matinee for about \$50. Spend an afternoon roller-skating or ice-skating. Take a golf lesson or go horseback riding. Get a few families together and field a couple of teams for a softball game.

Sign up for Groupon (Groupon.com) and Living Social (LivingSocial.com) to get daily deals in your city. Most offers are at least half off regular costs and you can easily plan a week's worth of activities at a discount. They are also a great resource if you are looking to save on summer day camp for your kids.

— Judy MacKenzie
Grants Manager, CredAbility

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