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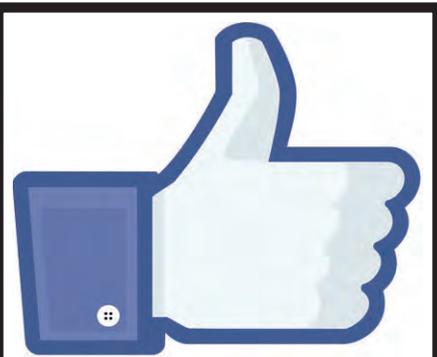
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## Lutz News

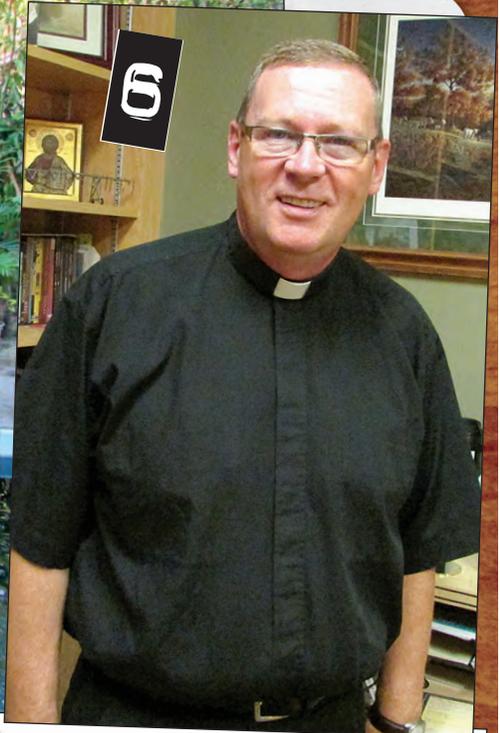
GREATEST

HITS

The best  
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The lyrics, the harmonies, maybe the singer — there's always something special about that song we enjoy hearing time and again, cranking up the volume when it's broadcast across the airwaves. Some would say the same about community stories. You can't have a community without people, and as we look back at the Greatest Hits of 2013, people — our community artists who make the world a better place — are our focus. Put those earphones on, and let us take you on a journey back through 2013.



# Looking back, instead of ahead, this New Year's



**By Diane Kortus**  
Publisher

Today is Jan. 1. Which means you're probably making a list of all the things you hope to do, improve or change in 2014.

But let me stop right here before you turn the page. I promise — this is not another column about New Year's resolutions that are almost certain to go unfulfilled.

Instead, I want to look back, instead of ahead, much like this week's paper that profiles our favorite stories of 2013. So here, in no particular order, are 10 achievements of the past year that I'm most proud of professionally and personally.

### 1.) More readers than ever

In March, we learned that our 2012 circulation audit reported that 80 percent of households in Lutz regularly read The Lutz News. And in Pasco, The Laker is read by 75 percent of households in our distribution area. This is an increase of 8 percentage points in just two years — a statistically remarkable accomplishment.

### 2.) Better business coverage

Our business reporting really took off after Michael Hinman joined our staff in July. In par-

ticular, his focus on growth and development — topics readers told us they wanted more of in a readership study — have added more depth and analysis to our news coverage.

### 3.) Breaking news reporting

In early November, we reported that the long-stalled outlet mall at State Road 56 and Interstate 75 had finalized a permit with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, clearing the way for construction approvals. We were the first to report this story, which was later picked up by just about every other news outlet in Tampa Bay.

As a weekly newspaper, it is never our priority to be first with a story. We leave that to the immediacy of television and the daily newspapers. But it sure felt good, and made me proud, that our small news staff broke such important regional news.

### 4.) More faith and worship stories

One of my favorite stories this year was about the Rev. Garry Welsh, a new priest assigned to Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church in Land O' Lakes. It was one of many religion stories written by B.C. Manion, a subject she does a superb job exploring and writing about.

### 5.) Redesigned website

A redesign of our website makes it easier to read and find stories in our archives.

Check it out at LakerLutzNews.com, for everything from things to do this weekend to stories you want to share with friends and family.

### 6.) An active Facebook page

It took us a while to join the conversation with an active Facebook page. But we're finally there, thanks to the combined efforts of Suzanne Beauchaine of our advertising staff, Michael Hinman of our editorial staff and Stefanie Burlingame of our design staff. This threesome makes our Facebook presence engaging and fun. See for yourself at [www.facebook.com/TheLakerLutzNews](http://www.facebook.com/TheLakerLutzNews).

### 7.) Three employees celebrate 10 years

For a small business like ours, it's quite remarkable that three out of 12 employees celebrated their 10th year with our company. Terri Williamson in sales, Carolyn Bennett in customer service, and Mary Eberhard in accounting are outstanding individuals whose commitment to our customers and company are much appreciated. Another employee, Mary Rathman, also has played a valuable role in our company for more than a decade, with a brief break in service. She's the one who makes sure our t's are crossed and our i's are dotted.

### 8.) My daughter turned 21

I know my daughter, Rachel Mathes, has

technically been an adult since she was 18. But there was something about her turning 21 that has solidified our adult mother-daughter relationship. Rachel graduates from Stetson University this spring, and I am so proud of her perseverance and commitment to completing her degree in four years.

### 9.) My son's engagement and marriage

It was a huge year for my son, Andy Mathes, a first lieutenant in the Marines. He became engaged to Erin Morgan on Labor Day and married her Nov. 2, a week before his deployment to Afghanistan. I never imagined I would be marrying off my son last year, and couldn't be happier with the daughter-in-law he chose for me.

### 10.) Zeke dies, Jonas lives

On March 27, my family lost Zeke, our 14-year-old yellow lab. We never doubted our decision to euthanize Zeke, but that didn't make it any easier to say goodbye. Zeke left behind Jonas, our 8-year-old Airedale, who has flourished with all the extra attention and elevation to alpha dog.

Sadly, Jonas had a cancerous spleen removed in September, and we were told he had only one to three months to live. Four months later, Jonas is proving the vet wrong and is livelier than ever. We're beginning to call him our miracle dog.

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# Winning a huge jackpot poses challenges, experts say

## Huge Powerball win in Zephyrhills creates buzz

By B.C. Manion

Originally published May 29

The sale of the winning \$590.5 million Florida Powerball ticket at a Publix in Zephyrhills created quite a stir — but experts say that such instantaneous wealth comes with its own set of problems.

As of press time in late May, the winner of the single-largest Powerball prize in U.S. history had not stepped forward to claim the winnings, but that is expected at any time. Florida law requires the winner to file a claim within 60 days of winning, in order to receive a lump-sum cash payment.

When the winner comes forward, he or she will be stepping out of the shadows because once the claim is made, the winner's identity is public record.

Winning such a huge financial windfall is like flipping a switch in life, said Rhonda Cameron, a psychologist at Premier Community Healthcare Group Inc., in Dade City.

"It's the old, 'Be careful what you wish for,'" Cameron said.

"All of us have fantasies," Cameron said, but becoming instantly wealthy won't solve all of life's problems and, indeed, it creates some new challenges. Suddenly, the winner's privacy will be gone.

"Their picture is going to be emblazoned across every newspaper," Cameron said, not only in the United States, but in other countries, too.

An ordinary trip to the grocery store will be a thing of the past, she said. "People will pay attention to you. They'll point at you and talk about you."

Some winners wind up moving to a new locale, changing their way of life and going underground, she said. It's not unusual for

people who encounter such a major change in life to undergo a range of emotions.

In some cases, Cameron said, "They're grieving their former life, when they were just a regular, normal Joe."

In other cases, they encounter hostility from people who are not happy that they won the huge cash prize.

"Some people are going to hate your guts," Cameron said. "It's the envy turned into anger (response). Maybe they don't view you as a good person," she said. They'll wonder: "Why did it happen to you and not me?"

Winners also will find themselves viewing people in a different way than they did before, Cameron said. They'll have to be more guarded to make sure that people who are interested in being close to them are interested in them, not just their money.

"Your phone is going to ring off the hook," Cameron said. The calls asking for help will come from family, friends and strangers, alike. People will line up, vying for a piece of the action.

"You are going to have to figure out a way to protect yourself," Cameron said. "There are gold diggers of every stripe."

There are also those who will feel guilty about coming into so much money, Cameron said. "They'll ask, 'Why me?'"

They can address that guilt by sharing their wealth, but then the question becomes with whom do you share your fortune, and how much should you give?

The winner will have to think about the consequences of actions in virtually every arena of life, including emotional, spiritual, financial and legal, Cameron said.

"How do you deal with your kids? How do you deal with your grandkids?"

"The ones who do the worst are the ones who are very impulsive. They have no game plan. They go out and buy five cars. They fritter it away. They end up worse than they were before," Cameron said.

Cameron's No. 1 piece of advice? "Come

up with a game plan."

Planning is essential, agreed Christine B. Cooper, a retirement income planner who has practiced in Tampa Bay for 19 years.

Cooper, who is president and owner of Cooper Financial Services in Land O' Lakes, said she routinely tells clients to call her cell phone or text her within the first five minutes of learning they have received a financial windfall.

She wants to make sure they take steps to protect their best interests.

"You need to have the right kind of specialists on your team," Cooper said, noting in that case it would likely include a financial planner, an attorney and a tax specialist.

The winner will have to pay taxes when he or she claims the prize, but the idea is to take steps to pay no more than legally required, Cooper said.

The specialist's role is to help the client achieve his or her dreams, Cooper said.

To use a football analogy, she said: "We're the coaches on the sideline. You're the quarterback."

When the winner works out a plan, he or she should be addressing such questions as: "Why are we doing this? What is our goal? How are we going to get there?"

Most people don't even consider the possibility of needing to have a plan for handling millions of dollars, Cooper said.

She thinks one reason many people who come into sudden wealth wind up losing it is because they lack a plan.

It's also hard to resist helping others, Cooper said.

"It's human nature to give," Cooper said. "We all, deep down underneath, we want to help one another. We put everyone else's needs before our own."

Jeff Aman, an attorney in Lutz, said he wouldn't rely entirely upon himself if he won a huge cash windfall.

"I wouldn't want to try to figure it all out," said Aman, who specializes in estates,



### FOR THE RECORD

All the mystery surrounding the winner of the Powerball was finally revealed in early June when Gloria C. Mackenzie, 84, shared how someone let her step ahead in line and buy the winning ticket at the Zephyrhills Publix.

Mackenzie ended up with \$278 million in her bank account, after taxes and a lump sum payout penalty.

In July, she bought a \$1.2 million home in Jacksonville, according to published reports. She also reportedly split the prize with her son, who also lives in Jacksonville.

trusts and real estate.

What the winner should do depends on the winner's goals and desires.

"It's a very individual kind of thing," Aman said.

It's important to understand tax consequences and to protect assets.

"If you're doing serious tax planning, you're also doing asset protection. It goes hand in hand," he said.

Hiring a team of experts is important, but requiring that team to be accountable is essential, too, Aman said.

"You still need to maintain your personal sense of responsibility," he said.

Stories about lottery winners who go broke. Aman doubts they had a team of specialists helping them manage their money.

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# Old car, pay phone booth per fect for this gar den

By B.C. Manion

Originally published Nov. 13

Maryhelen Zopfi gets a kick out of finding new uses for old stuff.

The avid gardener's green thumb is on glorious display at her North Mobile Villa Drive home in Lutz, where she grows roses, orchids, crotons, fruit trees, orchids, grapevines and all sorts of other plants.

But her enthusiasm for gardening is perhaps outdone by the funky stuff she has all over her place.

Recent additions to her eclectic outdoor décor include the front end of 1997 Buick that she's converted into a waterfall for her koi pond in her backyard. The pond, by the way, is a former swimming pool, which is partially covered by a deck.

The deck, it turns out, is the perfect cover for the koi — should a hungry bird swoop down to try to grab a quick bite to eat.

The Buick's front end is raised up on blocks, spilling water through its grill into the pool below.

Meanwhile, out front, Zopfi has added an old-fashioned telephone booth amidst her plants, just for fun.

She also has a smaller waterfall in her front yard, which, by the way, she thinks would be a perfect candidate for the front end of a Smart car.

Zopfi, who describes herself as a "stay-at-home gardener," always is thinking up stuff she can do to keep adding interest to her yard. Besides being full of whimsy, her yard also is environmentally friendly, too.

She won Hillsborough County's 2012 Florida-Friendly Landscape Water-Wise Award for the many water-conserving practices she observes.

For instance, she catches rainfall in a barrel to water a portion of a garden. She diverts runoff from her rooftop and pipes it



B.C. MANION/STAFF

Maryhelen Zopfi has added another point of interest to her eclectic collection of yard art that embellishes her garden and koi ponds at her home in Lutz. This 1997 Buick front end makes a perfect waterfall, she said.

into areas of her garden. She also uses landscape beds to keep storm water from spilling out of her yard. And, she uses micro-irrigation to apply water where needed without wasteful spraying.

Zopfi gets a kick out of showing off her handiwork. She welcomes garden clubs to come take a tour of her yard. She's also been known to set up tables in her driveway, to let garden club members have a meeting and eat lunch.

Her generosity does have its limits, though.

The garden club members have to bring their own lunch.

If your garden club would like to schedule a visit to Zopfi's garden, you can email the request to [mhmango@msn.com](mailto:mhmango@msn.com).



B.C. MANION/STAFF

Zopfi thinks this small waterfall would be the perfect spot for the front end of a Smart car.



## FOR THE RECORD

The front end of the 1997 Buick, that serves as a waterfall into the koi pond in Maryhelen Zopfi's backyard, now has working headlights. The avid gardener also plans to form a group in the latter part of 2014 for people who share a mutual interest in gardening.



B.C. MANION/STAFF

Zopfi recently added this pay telephone to the whimsical yard art, scattered lavishly around her property in Lutz.

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# Comics publisher finds magic in Wesley Chapel writer

By Michael Hinman  
Originally published Sept. 18

When the last book in J.K. Rowling's bestselling series, "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," was released in 2007, Jason De La Torre was in line ready for his copy.

But once he finished the book, the Wesley Chapel resident realized a troubling fact: There was now a magical void in the world of literature.

So using his own money, De La Torre created "Star Mage," an enchanting story told in comic book form that takes a young wizard out into space. He wrote the story and hired an artist to ink it. And then shopped it around to all the major comic book publishers.

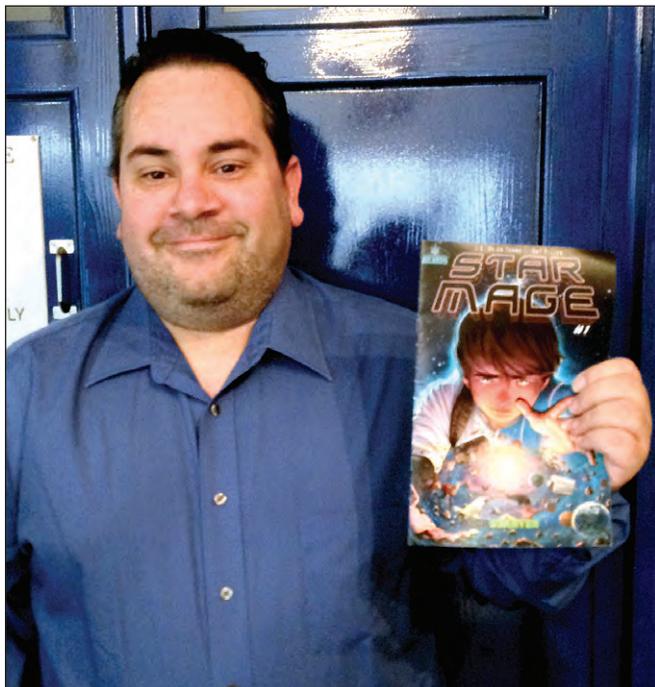
De La Torre's work has paid off. In September, he signed a deal with IDW Publishing in San Diego that will put his story on the shelves of bookstores all over the country next April.

"I grew up reading comics, and I've always had a love for them," De La Torre said. "At one point, in 2011, I just started wondering what goes into being a comic book writer. I knew I couldn't draw worth a lick, but I knew I could come up with an interesting story."

"Star Mage" centers around Darien Connors, a 14-year-old boy who discovers he has magical abilities. That discovery, however, pulls him into a war that involves not only his family, but the entire galaxy as well.

"You don't want to be a cheap rip-off of Harry Potter," De La Torre said. "You definitely have to be sure the ideas you're going with are original. That is what I try to do, come up with the most original story I could, but keeping some of the familiarity with what I love and what is successful out there, too."

Darien's skills do have a much different explanation. It is part of a practice known as



COURTESY OF JASON DE LA TORRE

The next Harry Potter could come right from Pasco County. Writer Jason De La Torre has signed a deal to publish his comic book series 'Star Mage' with the nation's sixth-largest distributor.

Kishpu, and he's not the only one that can do it. He quickly teams up with three young friends — Anthaar, Tirwa and Unura — and soon find themselves in battle with a hated enemy, Orasmas Xul Sarrum.

"Star Mage" has all the elements young comic book readers are looking for, while developing a story that will give them something completely new, De La Torre said.

De La Torre was born and raised in Tampa, and moved to Wesley Chapel with his wife Rita in 2007. During the day he's a tech guy with a healthcare company. His evenings, however, are spent writing the first six issues of "Star Mage," which IDW will release as a limited series in the spring.

If all goes well, and sales are strong, it could lead to a regular monthly series for "Star Mage" by the end of next year.

Each comic issue takes about 90 days to create from start to finish, with most of that time devoted to the art. Ray Dillon inked the first issue, previously making a name for himself with projects based on Peter Pan and the HBO series "Game of Thrones." Franco Cespedes takes over after that, continuing a world where science fiction and magical fantasy collide.

IDW is a newer company, founded in 1999, but it already is the nation's sixth-largest publisher for many popular franchises like "My Little Pony," "True Blood," "Star Trek" and "Transformers." IDW has even had some of its comics optioned for films by studios like Paramount Pictures and Dimension Films.

With comic book adaptations making billions of dollars at the box office, De La Torre said he can't help but dream of seeing "Star Mage" on the silver screen.

"If there was a movie, I definitely would want them to respect the original material,"



## FOR THE RECORD

Jason De La Torre is expecting to hear from his publisher any day now on when the comic book series will premiere, but they hadn't told him by the time The Laker/Lutz News went to press. But those anxious to see "Star Mage" will likely see the first issue coming out later this year.

De La Torre said. "But I understand that comics and the actual movie business are two different things, they have to appeal to a much broader audience. That is a part of life."

And that life could change for De La Torre pretty quickly if "Star Mage" becomes a success. It could mean full-time devotion to writing, and possibly even adapting some of his other independently published novels to the comic form as well.

"I can guarantee you, I will be taking pictures the minute my comic book shows up on the shelf," De La Torre said. "I have a lot of ideas I'm ready to work on, and I'll always be focused on things that I would enjoy, and maybe others will enjoy as well."



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# Fire inspires priest to transform ministry

By B.C. Manion

Originally published Oct. 9

It happened more than a decade ago, but the Rev. Garry Welsh said the event was a turning point in his life as a priest.

"I woke one night to the sound of wood burning," recalled Welsh, then pastor of St. Ludger Catholic Church, a parish in the small town of Creighton, Neb. "The rectory caught on fire."

Welsh descended from his second-floor bedroom to search out the source of the fire.

"I saw a kind of glow at the end of the hallway, and when I walked down toward it, I discovered the kitchen was on fire," he said.

The black smoke was so thick that Welsh became disoriented. He suffered burns on both of his hands and feet.

"They tell me — I don't remember much about the night — that I did walk across a floor that was on fire. It was a laminate floor, so it was hot and it burnt the bottom of my feet," Welsh said. "I was in the hospital for quite a while. I had to learn how to walk again."

Investigators traced the cause of the fire to a candle that Welsh had left burning on the stove, he said. The rectory had just been renovated, and it and all of its contents were destroyed.

Recovering from his injuries kept Welsh away from full-time ministry for quite some time. Now, however, he's on loan to Our Lady of the Rosary Church in Land O' Lakes. And despite the fire's destructive nature, Welsh said it held lessons for him.

"I think what it gave me, as I look back now, is that it gave me a better appreciation of the struggles people go through," Welsh said. "I was in a wheelchair for quite a while. I think it made me understand (the impacts of) when people start to lose their mobility."

The experience gave him a greater appreciation of being able to do things independently and changed his perspective on life, people and the priesthood, he said.



B.C. MANION/STAFF

Father Garry Welsh is on loan to the parish of Our Lady of the Rosary in Land O' Lakes. He says a fire that destroyed the rectory where he was living in Nebraska transformed his ministry.

"It changed my outlook on ministry, entirely," Welsh said.

Before the fire, Welsh said he was a priest that was driven by a schedule. The experience of the fire, and recovering from it, however, softened and mellowed him. Welsh became more aware of the value of savoring the gifts that God bestows.

"Before when I would visit with people, it was very much an in-and-out, I've got other things to do," he said. "Now, I take more time. I'm more liable to sit with people and listen to people a little bit more."

Before the fire, Welsh said he was an ambitious priest. That changed, as well.

"As a priest, I used to try to be the best," he said. "I discovered that when I try to be the best, it's all about me. What I try to do now is that I try to be the priest that people need today. So, when someone comes to me, my prayer always is: 'What do you need from me as your priest, now?'"

"That might be a listening ear. That might be some advice. It might be a pat on the back to say you're OK. It might be that you need me to sit and listen to your joke and laugh at it, even if it's bad."

Welsh said he asks himself: "What does this person, or these people, or this group — what do they need from me, now?"

"They don't need me to be the best priest. They need me to be their priest, their priest who loves them," he said.

Welsh was born in England to Scottish parents, but grew up in Ireland. He came to the United States in 1998, and was ordained three years later in Nebraska. Welsh said spiritual needs are universal, people need to know that spiritually, they're loved.

When fellow priests and brothers are struggling, Welsh reminds them that "we make priesthood difficult because we think it's about doing," he said. "It's more about being."

"When we're ordained, we're ordained to be in the image of Christ. And we forget that and we're lost in our own image," Welsh said. "And we get disappointed, and the people get disappointed. We don't get fulfilled, and the people don't get fulfilled. And we all end up in this bad place."

Instead it should be more about the image of Christ. "What did Christ instruct us to do?" Welsh said. "He said, 'Love one another, as I have loved you.'"

"That's the key, I think, to all faith," he said. "No matter what we do, we have to do it with love. People will respond to love."

When Welsh officiates the mass, he begins with a reminder that those present are on a journey together. As such, they are bound to stumble and fall. But they are there to help each other and to continue together on the journey, he said.

When he prepares his homilies, he consults a number of sources and draws on his personal experiences.

"As a priest, I struggle like you struggle," Welsh said. "I have good days and bad days. I have high moments and low moments. We're journeying together."

When others hurt him, he said, he realizes he is unable to forgive them. "I ask God to forgive them," he said.

Like commentator Bill O'Reilly, he enjoys being pithy.

He also recalls this bit of advice offered by a professor when Welsh was learning to write homilies: "In three minutes, you'll move hearts. In 10 minutes, you'll freeze butts."

Welsh, who has been an associate and a pastor at several churches in Nebraska, said he has never requested a particular assignment, trusting the Holy Spirit will lead him to the right place to use his skills.

Currently, he is on loan to the Diocese of St. Petersburg, from the Archdiocese of Omaha. He's not sure how long this assignment will last.

"When I came down here, my archbishop said, 'This is for three years.' And, I said, 'Well, let the Holy Spirit decide that.'"

## Moore-Mickens to stay open

By B.C. Manion

Originally published March 20

Pasco County Schools superintendent Kurt Browning has dropped the idea of closing Moore-Mickens Education Center in Dade City.

Browning had been considering a move that would have closed the center and relocated its programs. That proposal would have saved about \$1 million to help plug a \$23 million budget shortfall the district is facing.

Browning shifted gears on March 12 after hundreds of supporters attended a community meeting on the previous evening in a show of support at the center.

"I have heard the heartfelt pleas from Moore-Mickens students, graduates, staff and supporters, and I cannot in good conscience move forward with the recommendation to close the school at this time," Browning said in a release.

While Moore-Mickens will not close, the district will shift the Early Head Start prekindergarten program to Pasco Elementary School beginning in the 2013-14 school year.

"The pre-k program belongs at an elementary school with students of that same age group," Browning said.

The Cyesis teen parent program, FAPE 22 program for Exceptional Education students from age 18 to 22, Adult Education and the Support our Students last-chance program all will remain at Moore-Mickens.

Even before the meeting began on the evening of March 11, it was obvious that people had rallied to do what they could to keep their beloved Moore-Mickens open.

Supporters stood at the center's gate, holding signs and chanting, "Save our

school," and, "Give us our school back."

The center's parking lot was jammed with people parking on the grass and near the school.

Hundreds crowded into the cafeteria.

Speakers from all walks of life approached the microphone during the meeting, which lasted more than two hours.

At times, the meeting felt like a pep rally — with people singing the school's alma mater and chanting, "More Moore-Mickens. More Moore-Mickens."

At other times, it was like a political rally, with speakers chastising Browning for his proposal and criticizing the school district for what they consider to be unequal educational opportunities on the east and west sides of Pasco.

There was a spiritual element, too, as Margarita Romo — a widely known advocate for migrant workers and social justice — lifted the issue up in prayer. She asked God to intercede to find a way to not only continue to provide programs at Moore-Mickens Center, but to expand them.

Browning said despite rumors to the contrary, the district had no intention of closing down the building and bulldozing it. He told the crowd that part of the rationale for shifting the programs to Pasco High School would be to enable the young women who are pregnant to enroll in programs such as Advanced Placement and dual enrollment classes, which would enable them to earn college credits.

But speakers told Browning and school board members that it wasn't just the building they were worried about. They didn't want to lose the environment that exists at Moore-Mickens.

Dozens weighed in.

Some talked about how Moore-Mickens



B.C. MANION/STAFF

Protesters stood at the gates of Moore-Mickens Education Center urging officials to drop the idea to close the school. Superintendent Kurt Browning said he heard the community and the center will stay open.

staff members had helped them to get their GED diplomas. Others said staff members encouraged them when others had written them off. Some talked about being welcomed at the center when they'd been shunned or bullied elsewhere.

Speakers urged Browning and the school board to find another way to plug the budget gap.

Charlene Austen of Dade City wondered why the district "selected the most vulnerable sector of the student population. These students do not easily adapt."

"You can move students. You can move furniture," she said. "You cannot move environment."

Moore-Mickens employee Chris Barber said he previously worked with special needs students at John Long Middle and Wiregrass Ranch High, both schools in Wesley Chapel.

"Here's the thing," Barber said, special needs students at those schools "were falling through the cracks. This is a very unique place."

Lisa Ciganek, a teacher at Moore-

Mickens, said "a raise is not worth it to me to see these students lose what is working for them. They choose to come here. We see the potential in them. This environment is what gives our kids their future. Please don't take that away from them."

Sister Roberta Bailey, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Saint Leo, urged the crowd to voice its support for the school in writing. She urged them to focus on the positive — why Moore-Mickens should be kept.

"Moore-Mickens is a chance for change," Bailey said. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

That sentiment drew a standing ovation from the crowd.

It turns out those letters of support won't be needed now. Browning and the school board must now find another way to come up with the nearly \$1 million that would have been saved with his previous proposal, if employees are going to get any type of raise next year.

District staff has not received pay increases in six years.

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# Oscar Cooler leaves lasting legacy

By B.C. Manion  
Originally published June 19

Chances are, if you don't live in Lutz, or haven't been to the community's giant sports complex off Lutz Lake Fern Road, the name Oscar Cooler may not ring a bell.

But for thousands of athletes and their families, Cooler's contributions left a permanent imprint, said Mitch Wilkins, president of the Lutz Leaguettes.

"Being able to bring all those families together to interact makes him an icon," Wilkins said.

Cooler, 84, died on June 13 and was laid to rest on June 18 with a memorial at Loyless Funeral Home in Land O' Lakes, followed by a graveside service at Lutz Cemetery.



Oscar Cooler

Those who knew Cooler described him as a tenacious man, with a heart for the community's children — all of the community's children.

The Rev. Alan Burner of the First Baptist Church of Lutz officiated at the memorial.

"Oscar's family told me that he got what he wanted 99.9 percent of the time," Burner said. "And, for the Lutz community, that worked out very well. And for young people, that worked out very well."

Boddie Osteen, Cooler's friend for a half-century, recalled the retired flooring salesman's determination to get a Little League ballpark for the community.

"He didn't take no for an answer," Osteen said.

Before Cooler got involved, Lutz had one Little League field behind Lutz Elementary School. Cooler wanted more opportunities for the community's youth, so he spent two years lobbying the Hillsborough County Commission before he finally persuaded the board to buy an orange grove to give the children additional fields.

After they purchased the land, commissioners said it would be a couple of years before the ball fields could be built.

Cooler refused to wait. He marshaled an army of volunteers to get the job done.

"We had engineers, builders, painters, everything we needed to build a park," Cooler said in a 2008 interview with The Tampa Tribune. "We had people who didn't mind getting their hands dirty. Everything that was done, laborwise, was done voluntarily. Within nine months we built this thing."

The Lutz Park Youth Complex, later renamed in Cooler's honor, opened in 1975 with three baseball fields. Over time, the complex, at 19045 Crooked Lane, has vastly expanded, now featuring fields for baseball, softball, football and soccer. It also has a playground, restrooms and concession stands, as well as an adjacent nature park.

Osteen, who coached Little League for some five years and umpired for about 35 years, said Cooler's sole motivation was to provide a wholesome outlet for kids.

As Cooler put it in a 2010 interview with

Continued on next page

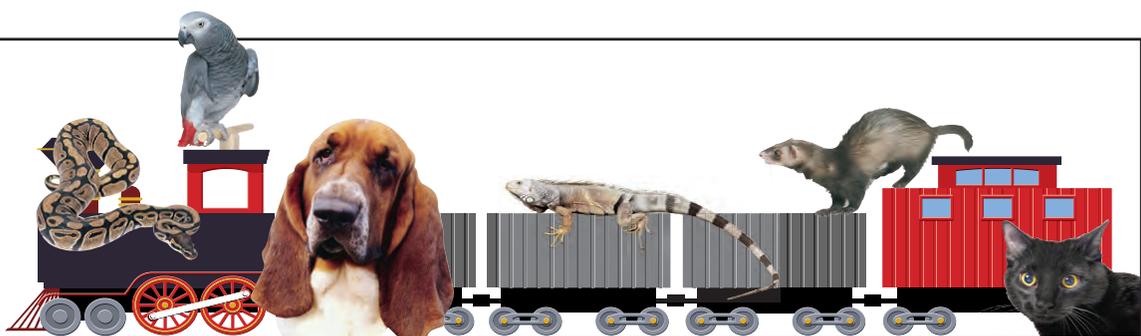


FILE PHOTO

Cheerleaders help rev up the fans at Lutz Chiefs football games.

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FILE PHOTO

The Lutz Chiefs play at the Oscar Cooler Youth Sports Complex in Lutz.

The Laker/Lutz News, "I think kids need to have a safe place to learn about teamwork ... If kids don't have something like this, then they usually get into a lot of things they shouldn't be doing."

For Cooler, it was all about the kids — not about having a park named in his honor, Osteen said.

Over the years, generations of families have flocked to Oscar Cooler Sports Complex, with athletes swinging for the fences, scoring touchdowns, making penalty kicks and striking out batters, all while families and friends cheered from the bleachers.

"All of our kids played there," said Dorry Osteen, Boddie's wife. "The kids played for the Leaguerettes. That was the main entertainment, going to the ballpark."

She recalls Cooler's kind heart.

"If (the children) didn't have the money to play ball, he would see to it that they got to play ball," she said.

Danny Neeley, a longtime family friend, grew up with Cooler's sons, Romney, Marc and Craig. He recalls playing at the ballpark when it was still surrounded by orange groves. To this day, the scent of orange blossoms still conjures mental images of baseball for Neeley.

He said he was 6 when he met Cooler. He recalls going over to the Coolers' house, and if the boys were working, Cooler would



### FOR THE RECORD

Oscar Cooler was preceded in death by his wife, Sara. He is survived by a daughter, Sondra Turpin, and her husband Allan, and by his son, Romney and his wife Debbie; his son, Marc and his wife Melody; and his son, Craig and his wife Lynn.

Cooler's survivors also include seven grandchildren. They are Ashley Beasley and her husband Adam, Jamie Cooler and her fiancé Doug Coogle, Sierra Matheson and her husband Ryon, and Cassie, Tyler and Amanda Marshall.

tell Neeley to pitch in because the boys couldn't play until they finished their chores.

That dedication to work and family were themes in Cooler's life, said his granddaughters, Jamie Cooler and Ashley Beasley, who spoke at his memorial.

They painted a picture of a man who was devoted to his family, enjoyed country music and could move mountains when he set his mind to it.

They said their grandfather was always deeply interested in what they were doing. They also noted he was never too busy to take time for them, and he would brag about his kids and grandkids to anyone who would listen.

Cooler had the same kind of zeal for the sports complex, Wilkins said. Even as Cooler he grew older, Wilkins sometimes bumped into him at the complex. Cooler would be standing there surveying the softball fields, much like a proud homeowner inspects the front lawn, Wilkins said.



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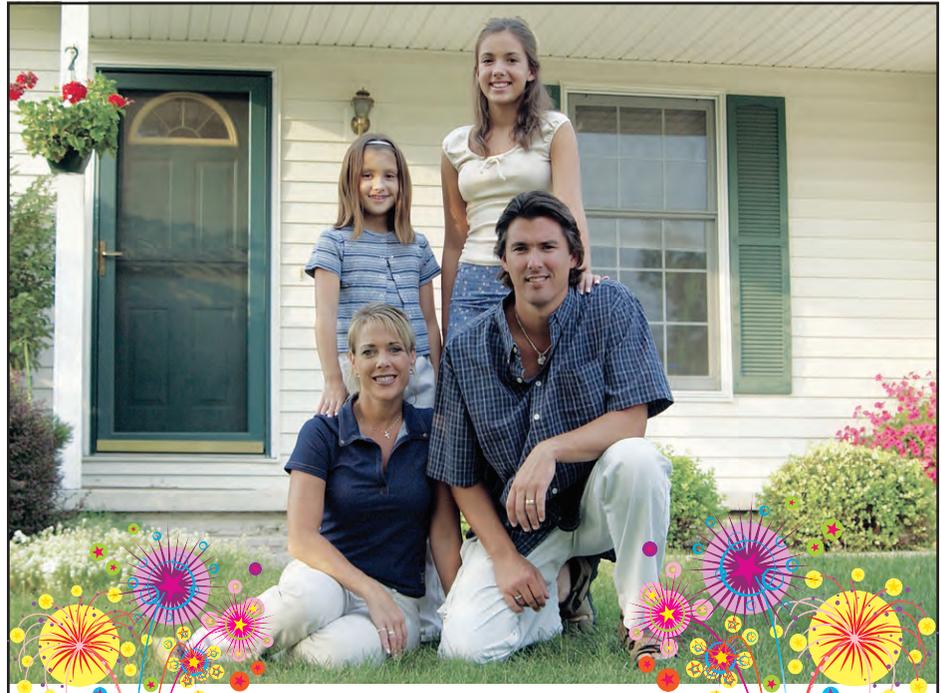
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# Private school lays the groundwork for its future

By Michael Hinman  
Originally published Aug. 14

Academy at the Lakes, central Pasco County's private school that hugs both sides of Collier Parkway off State Road 54, is getting a lot larger, growing by more than 46 acres.

The school has purchased a large chunk of land near its existing campus that has belonged to the pioneer MacManus family for decades, with an eye toward a major campus expansion in the coming years.

The land grab is four times larger than the school's existing campus, and allows Academy at the Lakes to extend its reach to 20 Mile Level Road with a total of nearly 60 acres of land.

"About six years ago, my sister and I, and our brother, started talking about what we wanted to do with this land," said Dr. Lou MacManus. A retired surgeon who lived for decades in Ohio and Tennessee, MacManus grew up in a modest house built a year before she was born on the property now owned by Academy at the Lakes. She shares many memories of her childhood on the land with her sister, University of South Florida professor Susan MacManus, as well as her late brother, Dr. H. Cameron MacManus, who was killed in a plane crash last spring.

"There's been a lot of changes here since we were kids, and many of them good changes," MacManus said. "But we didn't want to see a bunch of homes on this land."

## MAKING IT WORK

Academy at the Lakes had plans to expand for the last two years, but the deal to purchase this piece of MacManus land came together only recently, thanks to the work of the MacManus family, as well as the Academy's head of school Mark Heller and then board of trustees chair Cynthia Miller.

"The MacManuses have been very interested in seeing the future of their parents'



Dr. Lou MacManus, right, shares stories about growing up on the land she recently sold to Academy at the Lakes, with former Academy board chair Cynthia Martin and current headmaster Mark Heller. MacManus' childhood home looms in the background.

MICHAEL HINMAN/STAFF

and grandparents' land used for something productive and positive for the community," Heller said. "They could've easily sold this land to a developer for a lot more money. But instead, decided that they should take a philanthropic route, and dedicate this land to the same thing they have always dedicated their lives to: education."

Academy at the Lakes is paying slightly more than \$2 million for the land, equating to a little less than \$44,000 per acre. MacManus set up a charitable remainder annuity trust, which holds the 16-year mortgage for the property. Excluding any interest or other fees, that will cost the growing school approximately \$10,500 per month on average.

While it might seem high, Heller sees it as an investment in the future for a school that is key to the economic growth in cen-

tral Pasco County.

"The north side of the county is growing so fast, certainly now that construction and homebuilding is picking back up again," Heller said. "The north side is going to be burgeoning again, just like it did 10 years ago, and we're going to be able to grow with that community, and provide resources to that growing community."

There are no immediate plans to build on the land, but it is something the school expects to do at some point to accommodate student needs, Heller said. In the meantime, some of the older students will tend to the land and learn how to grow oranges and take part in other agricultural activities. Food raised will be donated to local charities.

Heller talked about expansion in August 2011 when he said Academy at the Lakes

should explore ways that would set it up for the next 100 years.

"This is something that could absolutely transform the footprint and the presence of the school," Heller said at the time.

What happens is up to the school's board of trustees, but there are many possibilities. One could include integrating the entire campus into one site, instead of having the younger and older students divided physically by Collier Parkway. The land could also become a sports complex center, among other things.

"There's just so much that we can do that we haven't really even talked about yet," Heller said.

## NEVER FORGET HISTORY

The matriarch of the MacManus family had always pushed education on her children, explaining why Lou MacManus and her siblings all reached doctorate levels in their schooling. Knowing that the farm she worked so hard to build would now be used for educating hundreds of young people — not just three — would make her mother proud, MacManus said.

"Education was so big for us growing up, and we were always out learning everything," MacManus said. "We spent a lot of times outdoors, and didn't watch much TV. We were doing sports, riding bicycles, and I even had a horse."

The 2,200-square-foot house that served as the MacManus home for more than half a century still stands on the property. There are trees in front where the young MacManus children would hang their wet clothes after swimming in the nearby lake.

"We were together and outside from dawn until dusk," MacManus said. "We spent our days swimming in the lake and roaming around the orange groves."

And while the lake may no longer be a place where young people can just jump in, the land will be there to help educate many generations to come.

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# Historic Jeffries House seeks place in 21st century

By Michael Hinman

Originally published Aug. 7

It has a small yard begging for some tender loving care. Overgrown bushes, untrimmed trees, brown grass desperate for water.

The house that it surrounds, empty for the past few years, could almost find a place among neighborhood children's haunted house legends, if it weren't for the bright yellow paint that still shines through Zephyrhills downtown.

Built in 1912, this is the original home of Capt. Harold B. Jeffries, the Civil War veteran who settled Zephyrhills in the hopes of bringing other war veterans with him. It's been everything from the home of prominent city residents over the years, to a commercial office in what was once a bustling downtown area.

Today, however, the Jeffries House is spotted with warped wood. The white wraparound porch is sagging in a few places. And the main entrance that once welcomed Capt. Jeffries home each night is now capped with a "No Trespassing" sign.

The home is almost out of place in what would later become the commercial nerve center for Zephyrhills. And as community business leaders work to revitalize the downtown section, questions abound on what to do with the Jeffries House after it suffered through a foreclosure two years ago, and has been abandoned ever since.

"I think the Main Street Zephyrhills office would look great there," said Gina King Granger, executive director of the city's Main Street group. "Our board had actually discussed that at one time, but our funding was so tight, there was no way we could make it work."

CenterState Bank of Florida owns the house, but is looking to get back the nearly \$280,000 it lost when the previous owner defaulted on the mortgage. However, Main



MICHAEL HINMAN/STAFF

**Capt. Harold Jeffries made this his home for years after founding Zephyrhills, but now this historic structure in the middle of the city's main street business district is suffering from neglect. City officials are looking to buy the house, but it still leaves the question of what they will do with it once they sign the deed.**

Street may get another shot at the building if city officials move forward with plans to buy the house from CenterState, and then possibly leasing it out.

Such a move would make the site much more attractive from a financial standpoint for potential tenants like Main Street.

"There's a lot of interest in it," Granger said. "Folks are just shying away from it because they think there is a lot more involved in terms of restoration and what would be needed to get it back into good shape."

While the house itself would likely not be a strong anchor to help draw other businesses into the downtown district, there are a number of other possibilities for the Jeffries House as well, ranging from bed and breakfasts to restaurants, even to becoming a residence again.

That's exactly how Jerry Pricher remembers the Jeffries House growing up.

"That house was the only residence on that block for many, many years," said Pricher, who is vice president of the Zephyrhills Historical Association. "I walked by that house all the time when I was a kid, pretty much whenever we would walk down to the Home Theater to go to the movies."

The Jeffries House is hardly the only house with local historical significance in Zephyrhills, but it gets the most attention because of its location right in the middle of town, Pricher said. Because of that, and its place in the city's history, it could be the perfect place for a museum.

The only drawback to that idea is that Zephyrhills already has the Depot Museum on South Avenue.

"The Depot Museum is slap full, so (the Jeffries House) could be nice as a secondary museum," Pricher said. "We could always use more room to display some of the many historical items we have."

Vicki Elkins, who runs the Depot Museum, says they do regularly have to switch out exhibits because of space constraints in the old railroad depot. However, she may need some more exhibit donations before they can think of a second location.

"We don't really have an overflow right now, but certainly at some point we might," Elkins said. She feels that the Jeffries House could be turned into a nice museum remembering the school history of the city. Or, "it would make a wonderful Main Street office."

"It's historic, and it's what Main Street is all about," Elkins said.

No matter who might end up in the Jeffries House, chances are it won't be as expensive to move in as many might think, Main Street's Granger said. A city inspection of the house showed that despite some exterior issues, the interior is struc-



## FOR THE RECORD

After receiving its appraisal, the Zephyrhills City Council tasked Mayor Danny Burgess to sit down and negotiate with house owner CenterState Bank, which he has been doing ever since. Burgess tells The Laker/Lutz News that he hopes to "reach an acceptable number to then present to the City Council at a later date for their approval or disapproval."

However, Burgess did not offer a timetable on when those negotiations might yield results.

turally sound.

And outside money might be available to convert the historic house into a new business.

"A lot of work would be needed to bring it up to code, but it could be done," Granger said. "There are a lot of grants for restoring these old properties at both the state and national levels, but money like that might not be available for a few years."

And that could be a death knell to the Jeffries House if it remains empty and is not properly maintained. As passers-by have already noticed in recent years, a house like this can deteriorate fast.

"Obviously, to those of us who love the history of Zephyrhills, we would rather not lose it," Pricher said. "Something needs to be done with that building, and we need to do it right now."



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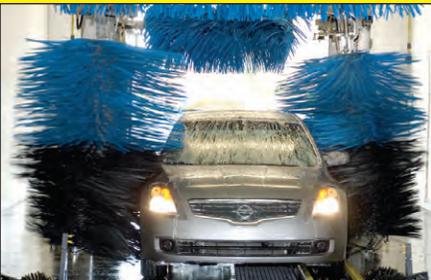







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# Pasco conference proves education is worldwide concern

By Michael Hinman

Originally published Aug. 7

Dominic Mukwaya arrived in Pasco County ready to learn. When he left his village in Uganda in July, more than 30 members of his extended family joined him at the airport — nearly all of them watching a plane take off for the very first time in their lives.

Not only was it his first plane ride and his first trip to America, but it was also the first time Mukwaya has ever left the Kyotera region of his country, where running water was just introduced last spring, and electricity is still a future goal.

Despite that, Mukwaya has schooled more than 650 orphans whose families were ravaged by the HIV epidemic there. He has pushed for more adult education as well — especially for women, who traditionally did not go to school when they were younger.

“Some of the people in my district went to school and were not doing good, and others could not afford to pay for the school fees,” Mukwaya said. “We started a sustainability project where, in the long term, we can help those who might not be able to learn otherwise.”

Mukwaya returned home in August after his two-week trip to Land O’ Lakes, partici-

pating in the annual International Leadership Fellows Institute from the National Educator Program. That program, based in Denver, chose the Pasco County Schools out of more than a dozen national applicants to host this institute. It’s designed to empower teachers to become strong leaders, and give students equal access to success.

The seminar itself, which also included 20 handpicked Pasco educators, lasted two weeks. It’s part of the overall institute program designed to operate for the next year, connecting participants not only with face-to-face visits, but also technologically through online communication services like Skype. It’s meant to be a give and take, where these administrators learn from each other, and take all of it back to incorporate into their own classrooms.

“What we have found so far that whether you’re teaching in a major metropolitan area or in the jungle by the lake, it’s remarkable the similarities on how schools and classrooms operate,” said Mark Thompson, executive director of NEP. “We found much more in common than we thought.”

The recent conference in Land O’ Lakes was led by Diane Varano, principal of the Cultural Academy for the Arts and Sciences in Brooklyn. She makes the trip each year to

help form new bonds among the education leaders, giving them tools to reinvigorate classrooms.

It’s a much-needed wakeup call for many teachers, who in recent years have complained about being forced to teach to state-mandated tests like the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Instead, the learning process must be more experiential, said Mark Xing, who is the director of teaching affairs for a 2,000-student school system in Shenzhen, China.

Located just north of Hong Kong, Shenzhen is a city of more than 10 million people that was an early adopter of capitalism in the traditionally communist country. Because of that, the school there has been working to include both Chinese and American curriculums.

“In China, a lot of parents would like to send their children to study in the United States,” Xing said. “They want their children to know more about American culture, and we actually started this program to meet the parents’ needs.”

There was some concern that requiring both Chinese and American studies for elementary school-aged students might be too much. Instead, Xing has found his students embracing both equally, and that will give them an edge as technology continues to shrink the world and China plays an ever-ex-

panding role in world economics.

Mukwaya’s curriculum also is experience-based, but not quite the same way. In his region, English is being taught as a third language — behind the local Luganda and the regional Swahili. But while math and reading are essential in the learning process for both children and adults, so are vocational skills that will help not only make money for his students, but save money as well.

“We started with writing and reading, and now they are going up to do more functional things like how to weave mats from palm leaves and make bags from banana fibers,” Mukwaya said. “We’re also teaching many of our women how they can save money, and how they can be sustainable financially.”

Both Mukwaya and Xing will return to Land O’ Lakes next year to share progress on changes they’ve instituted because of the program and report back on how well they have worked, with the goal of helping the district’s program to grow and evolve.

“This isn’t just about someone coming here and learning things. We are learning a great deal from them,” Thompson said. “We can teach them some of our best practices when it comes to education, but they are not just learning ours, they are teaching us theirs, too, and that’s the kind of dialogue we want to have.”

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# Romo makes Florida Civil Rights Hall of Fame

By B.C. Manion

Originally published April 10

Margarita Romo will be the first to tell you that she is a flawed woman, and that some people simply do not like her.

But the path she's traveled led her to advocating for farm workers, immigrants and the poor. Her work has been recognized by Gov. Rick Scott, who selected her to be inducted into the Florida Civil Rights Hall of Fame.

The honor goes to people who have made significant contributions to improving the lives of minorities and all Floridians.

Romo, 76, founded Farmworkers Self-Help in Dade City, a nonprofit organization that has focused on education, advocacy, and addressing the needs of migrant farmworkers and immigrants for more than three decades.

The organization helps with immigration issues, gives bread to the poor, advocates for legislative changes, and seeks to improve conditions for the impoverished. It has been particularly active in seeking improvements for Tommytown, a community northwest of downtown Dade City.

"It wasn't anything that I purposely went out to do," Romo said.

Her involvement began when she was asked to translate church services at migrant camps. Her commitment grew from there.

Romo said she didn't have a strategic or systematic method for helping people. They came to her with a need, and she explored ways to help them.

As time went on, Romo became more knowledgeable and established more relationships — making it possible for her to help more people.

"In my wildest dreams I never thought I'd be doing this, especially with the history that I had. It seemed like there was just disaster after disaster," Romo said.

Romo was born in Texas, and at age 3, her mother died. Her father placed her in an orphanage and sent her three brothers to another orphanage. They stayed there a couple of years until he remarried.

"I went in as Margarita and I came out as Margaret," Romo said, and she was no longer speaking Spanish.

She joined the convent when she was 15, and left two years later with the hopes of mending a strained relationship with her stepmother, which never happened.

Romo has been divorced three times, and along the way she had six children.

She believes her personal failings and the challenges she's faced have helped her become more compassionate.

"We all have issues, and we'll always have issues. There's no one who is ever going to be perfect, but I think knowing your own imperfections causes you to be more understanding about others," Romo said.

She also understands despair.

She was so despondent after her first divorce that she attempted to take her own life, she said. She'd taken some pills and someone found her — otherwise, her life would have ended then.

"I'm a real miracle, walking," Romo said.

That experience made her realize how important it is for people to seek counseling when they need it. "I'm a real champion about mental health," Romo said.

She also understands poverty.

Romo needed help after one of her divorces, and a woman from a migrant camp

understood that need.

"I'll never forget," Romo said. "She gave me some of her food stamps."

While she is being honored for her work, Romo is quick to give credit to those who have helped her to help others.

"It's not about me," Romo said. "If it hadn't been for those undocumented farmworkers, we wouldn't be here. They're the ones who walked with me. They went to Washington, D.C. They went to Tallahassee."

She also said mentors she's met have helped her to be more effective.

Romo views herself as an activist, but uses a different approach than many young organizers whom she sees as being more aggressive and eager to take on the world.

When she goes to Tallahassee to advocate for changes, she said she reads scripture to lawmakers and prays for God to guide them.

"We need God to go in front of us," Romo said. "We need to do battle with the Bible in our hand. I really believe that God has to be called in, and I believe God hasn't been called into the middle of all of the crises. God has got to be in the middle of everything we do."

Sometimes she feels conflicted.

"Being a pastor and being an activist organizer is just a real difficult place. You have to constantly forgive, and at the same time you're in the middle of a battle," said Romo, who became an ordained minister 10 years ago.

She was reaching out spiritually to children in her community even before she was ordained.

\* \* \*

Romo was inducted into the Florida Civil Rights Hall of Fame on April 24 along with Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore and Judge James B. Sanderlin.

They were among the nominees the Florida Commission on Human Relations recommended to Scott.

"As Florida marks its 500-year anniversary, we want to honor individuals who have stood for equality in our state's history even in the face of adversity," Scott said in a release. "These champions of freedom have paved the way for equal rights among all Floridians."

Romo said she's not really sure what the induction means.

"If they really want to do something, then give us (Florida) KidCare for legal immigrant children," she said, talking about the low-cost or free health insurance program.

She'd also like to have a conversation with lawmakers about the negative impacts she believes "zero tolerance" has on kids. She also thinks the state should allow immigrants who arrived here before age 16 and who have no criminal record to attend Florida colleges at in-state tuition rates.

"You can pick enough oranges to pay in-state tuition, but you cannot pick enough oranges to pay out-of-state tuition," Romo said. "That's just the bottom line."

Romo could go on and on about injustices that need to be addressed and opportunities that need to be offered.

She tackles what she can in Tallahassee, in the community and her office, a humble white house on Lock Street.

Photographs on the walls of her office serve as constant reminders of the work that remains.

One photo shows a smiling girl who died before she reached age 5 because she could not get the medical care she needed quickly enough.

Another photo shows an old man stand-

ing in a dumpster. He'd rummage around wherever he could to find cans he could sell, Romo said. When he died, it cost \$800 to buy his ashes so his life could be honored.

There's also a photo of a young man who died from AIDS-related complications, and another of a man who died from prostate cancer.

Romo said she remembers those people when she thinks about the work she needs to do.

She also thinks about tragic things that have happened because of dangerous working conditions. She thinks of workers who have "lost their eyesight because of pesticide" or "fallen off ladders and broke their back and got no compensation."

Romo aims to help people help themselves.

"If we're really about teaching people to be free, then you've got to give them the tools to do that," She said. "To help us learn to think for ourselves is where the real work comes in and the real love."

Romo's organization encourages students to attain their GED diploma, enroll in college and seek job training.

She said she feels blessed to do the work she does.



## FOR THE RECORD

Margarita Romo intends to keep pushing for health care insurance for children of immigrants who are legally here, but cannot qualify for insurance for five years. She also will continue efforts to persuade lawmakers to grant in-state tuition rates for immigrant students, who arrived here before age 16 and have no criminal record.

"When you're a community organizer and you help organize your community, then that community grows and it becomes a whole different place and everybody who received the benefit of that growth takes it with them and plants it somewhere else, and it never stops growing," she said.

No matter how dark things can get at times, Romo hangs on.

"Thirty-three years, and we're still here," she said.

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# Elevated road proposal finds lessons in history

By Michael Hinman  
Originally published Oct. 23

The deadline is here for groups wanting to convince the Florida Department of Transportation to part with valuable road rights of way in Pasco County's State Road 54/56 corridor.

The FDOT asked for the proposals after it received an unsolicited request to lease the rights of way to build a 33-mile elevated toll road that could possibly shorten the trip between Zephyrhills and New Port Richey to less than 30 minutes.

Gerald Stanley and International Infrastructure Partners LLC piqued the interest of state officials and the county, as a whole, with the request in June, and it's created debate on not only if it's good for the county, but if such a project is even feasible.

Those answers are yes and yes, said John Hagen, president and chief executive of the Pasco Economic Development Council. The fact is, Pasco County is growing quickly, and even an expanded State Road 54 struggles to accommodate the traffic it receives.

"You either have to build a bunch of new lanes and widen it out, or you have to build up," Hagen said. "And in some places, (widening) just won't work very well. You have stores and neighborhoods right up to the road. If you end up widening with new lanes, you're going to be bulldozing."

Some business owners, however, disagree. In an August meeting with Pasco County Commissioner Kathryn Starkey, a few members of the Greater Wesley Chapel Chamber of Commerce expressed opposition to the road, fearing it would allow traffic to bypass their businesses.

"Things are going to get congested if we keep going the way we're going," Hagen said. "The idea that you're going to attract more business somehow as we turn the place into a parking lot is something to re-think here. A way for local businesses to get more business is to separate out the people who are not planning to stop anyway — who are just wanting to get across the county — and opening up the surface roads to local traffic."

## Following the money

If built, the elevated expressway would be the first privately owned toll road in Florida. Cost estimates weren't shared, but using the elevated road built for Tampa's Lee Roy Selmon Expressway in the early 2000s as a model, builders could be looking at a cost of \$70 million ... per mile. That would bring the total price tag of this project to around \$2.3 billion.

Stanley's group, IIP, would raise the



MICHAEL HINMAN/STAFF

**International Infrastructure Partners have proposed building a 33-mile stretch of elevated road, like this one built over the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway in Tampa, to help move traffic from one side of the county to the other. But some observers warn that state officials should keep some hand in any project that gets approved.**

money through private sources like hedge funds, and then try to recoup that investment — with the necessary profit — through toll revenue collected by travelers who choose the expressway.

Yet, that profit model could be troubling.

Last year, toll roads in Florida collected revenue of \$616 million from travelers. That's broken down to \$1.3 million per mile. Applying those numbers to this project would generate prospective revenue of \$44.2 million each year. Even if IIP never spends another dime on the road, it would take the company 52 years to recoup its investment.

But that might be OK. Neil Gray, director of government affairs for the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association in Washington, D.C., says investors in projects like this know what they're getting in to, and many are willing to play the long game.

"We're talking as much as 99 years," Gray said. "A 99-year concession is patient money. It also allows them, from the private side, to make these things happen that might not be viable on the state level. They can pool that money together right now, and build it right now."

Not accounting for inflation or other increases and variables, a 99-year agreement on a Pasco elevated roadway would generate revenue of \$4.4 billion — doubling the initial investment.

## Learning from others' mistakes

The FDOT, however, should be very careful about such long deals, says the U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund, an independent advocacy group that

has spoken out against road privatization.

In a 2009 report authored by Phineas Baxandall, any agreements between the government and a private entity should clearly spell out expectations, and leave some of the decision-making — like toll rates — to the public. On top of that, no deal should last longer than 30 years, because even if the toll road fails, the structure will still be there, and the county will have to deal with it.

Toll roads really can fail, by the way. Just look at the Camino Colombia Toll Road in Texas. Built in 2000 at a cost of \$90 million, the 22-mile road between the Mexican border and Interstate 35 north of Laredo was expected to generate \$9 million in its first year alone based on the traffic created by the North American Free Trade Agreement, U.S. PIRG said. Instead, the road that charged tractor-trailers \$16 each earned just \$500,000.

Within a few years, the road was sold at auction to an investment company for \$12.1 million who in turn shut it down. The Texas Department of Transportation needed that road in operation, and it cost the government entity \$20 million to buy it and reopen it.

"No matter who runs it, the physical structure is going to be there, and it never goes away," said Gray, adding that lessons are being learned to prevent another Camino Colombia debacle. "Each time these transactions are done, the government side is getting smarter and smarter and smarter. Now you have governments that negotiate contracts that include a series of performance metrics. If you fail to maintain those level of standards, you will breach the contract, and the government gets the road for free."

## Something has to be done

Florida has a big problem on its hands when it comes to roads, and it may depend on private proposals like IIP's to grow the state's infrastructure.

By 2020, Florida is expected to be \$47 billion short in funding transportation improvements, like repaving, lane expansion and new roads.

"Our gas tax funding that pays for the highway system is no longer sustainable," said Christa Deason, a spokeswoman with Florida's Turnpike. "People are driving less, they are using transit more, and buying hybrid cars. There is not a ton of money pouring into the coffers anymore to build these roads, or even to maintain the ones we built 50 years ago."

Pasco County has hit a similar wall. Commissioners had proposed a local gas tax



## FOR THE RECORD

After hearing some negative feedback from county leaders, International Infrastructure Partners asked for and received a delay until early December to submit their proposal.

When the proposals were opened on Dec. 9, only IIP had submitted. Details of that proposal won't be released until early January, however.

Just a week before, the Pasco County Commission unanimously approved a resolution supporting the elevated road concept along the State Road 54/56 corridor, even though the final decision will be up to the Florida Department of Transportation.

increase to help fund road maintenance and construction for the coming year, but it failed under public pressure.

"We need to look at progressive ways to move traffic on 54," Commissioner Starkey said.

During its presentation last week to county officials, the Urban Land Institute — the independent growth and development analytical group — strongly suggested Pasco stay away from the elevated road, and instead concentrate on reducing the need for more roads in the first place. That means developing communities that have live, work and play all within walking distance, or easily accessible through public mass transit.

"What ULI was trying to say is that we need to reduce trips so that people don't have to go all the way across the county to get to a Wiregrass mall for instance," Pasco EDC's Hagen said. "We should create shopping experiences that are close by, that people can walk to."

No matter what someone's position is on the proposed elevated road, the conversation must continue, he said.

"People are just reading a small article in the paper, or they see a 30-second thing on television, and it doesn't really explain the full complexity of how to do traffic planning, and how it fits into good community planning," Hagen said. "Trying to get people engaged to create some light rather than heat, that would be a good step."

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# For Lutz man, it's not junk ... it's art

By B.C. Manion

Originally published Sept. 11

When Andy Hamilton goes rummaging around at a swap meet or flea market, he's always on the lookout for the makings of his metal works of art.

What might look like a colander to most instead looks like a turtle shell to Hamilton. Pot lids and air-conditioning gauges are eyes. Hedge clippers and rakes make good wings. Rusty pipe wrenches bounce back to life as grasshoppers.

Hamilton sees possibilities everywhere. "These two bikes here, they came from a flea market," said Hamilton, 62, outside his workshop in Lutz. "The guy was just trying to get rid of them. Five dollars a piece. I'll take the front forks off of them, use them for legs. Chains, I'll use for manes on a horse.

The satellite dish arm? "This is the neck of a horse." And the post-hole diggers? "These are the heads for alligators," he said.

"Potato forks are usually tail feathers for a bird."

Hamilton is a Lutz-based artist with Twisted Mind Rusty Metal, a company that specializes in recycling old metal and other objects into art. Where other people see obsolete car parts, rusted garden implements, empty bottles and old tools, Hamilton envisions whimsical works of art.

"Somehow, I can see something," Hamilton said. "People have asked me, 'What kind of drug do you take? Do you drink a lot?' It seems like the crazier I make stuff, the more people like it."

Bins and shelves in his workshop are



B.C. MANION/STAFF

Andy Hamilton uses his welder to bind pieces of metal together as he works on a crab, one of many creatures he creates from recycled materials.

chock-full of the raw materials of his artworks. He has another collection of salvaged goods that he plans to recycle outside next to his shop.

"You've got to have a stockpile," Hamilton said.

As he surveys his shop, there is stuff everywhere. "It's a disorganized, organized mess," he said.

Hamilton hunts regularly for old golf clubs, and often finds them for a dollar each at thrift stores.

"I just cut all of these off the shafts," he said, motioning to a stack of club heads. The steel pieces become ears for dogs and feet for pigs.

"A lot of people throw these away," Hamilton said, pointing to some empty helium tanks. "They end up in the trash and when I see 'em, I grab 'em."

The tanks become the bodies of pigs and other animals.

Hamilton, who has spent more than four decades working in masonry, started his metal art business more than two years ago. It started when he decided to make a couple of things for his wife's garden.

"A friend of hers had sold plants at plant shows," he said. "She told me to bring some along and see if they would sell."

They did sell, and the company was born — using a name his wife, Sheila, created.

Over the past couple of years, he has sold 700 to 800 pieces, ranging in price from \$35 to \$400.

He now spends nearly every evening out in the workshop behind his house, where he sandblasts rusted parts, welds pieces together and paints to create Chihuahuas, pigs, robots, weather vanes, sunflowers, birds and all sorts of critters.

On weekends, one can find Hamilton making the rounds — either to events where he's selling his art, or at swap meets, garage sales and flea markets where he's



## FOR THE RECORD

Andy Hamilton is still working away at turning metal parts into works of art. He sold 34 pieces at the Lutz Arts & Crafts Festival at Lake Park and soon will be offering his works of metal art at the Dade City Annual Kumquat Festival on Jan. 25.

picking up materials he can recycle.

"Starting September through basically March, that's the busy season," Hamilton said.

Over Labor Day weekend, for instance, he had a booth at the 13th annual Gulfport Geckfest on Saturday. By Sunday, he was at a swap meet in Bushnell. Monday, he hit the flea market in Webster.

During the off-season, typically November through March, Hamilton spends Saturday mornings in Dunedin at the Green Market. And the third Friday of each month, he's in Safety Harbor between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. He also does three shows a year in Lakeland.

He also attends the Lutz Arts & Crafts Festival Christmas show.

"Last year we sold like 26 pieces on Saturday, and at least 10 or 12 on Sunday," Hamilton said, adding he sells even more during the town's Fourth of July celebration.

Hamilton's wife is a big supporter of his artistic pursuits.

"She wants me to quit masonry for this," said Hamilton, who believes someday he will

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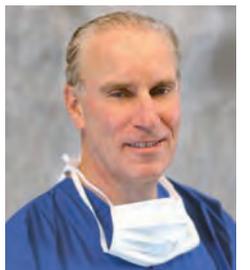
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# Sleeping Pasco communities reawakened with new homes

By Michael Hinman  
Originally published Sept. 25

Just a few years ago, if you built it, hundreds would come to line up wanting to buy it.

It was a housing boom like no other seen before, a bubble that popped so loudly, it almost took the nation's entire economy with it.

One of the states hit worst by the housing crash was Florida, especially Pasco County, which saw unprecedented new home growth right before the market came to a screeching halt. Suddenly communities that once had to figure out how to build homes fast enough were now trying to figure out how to sell the homes they already had. Life switched from community developers making huge profits, to just trying to survive.

And it was clear that not everyone was going to make it through — with all eyes on Connerton.

"There were a few times when we thought the market was getting better, only to find it didn't," said Stewart Gibbons, an executive-turned-consultant with Connerton.

The community, which was considered one of Pasco's crown jewel developments when it was first proposed in the 1990s, was designed to eventually bring 8,000 homes just off U.S. 41 just south of State Road 52. By the time of the crash, however, just 300 homes had been built, and there was tremendous concern by some there wouldn't be any more. Especially when Terrabrook, Connerton's original developer, pulled out in 2009.

"There was a lot of information out there, frankly some information that was incorrect and slanted, and naturally, when you're a large community, people are going to focus on you," Gibbons said. "We certainly saw the effects of that to some degree."

However, Connerton may be emerging from dark times. The construction industry,

dormant for years, has now returned. And since relaunching under a new owner last May — CoastOak Group and Hayman Woods LLC — Connerton has sold some 40 homes, and is poised to do even more before the year is out.

And Connerton is not alone. Some of Pasco's other large communities, which suffered during the downturn, are starting to come back. And the timing couldn't be better to see more people calling this part of the county home.

## Bright future?

"We love the Tampa market," said Barbara Kininmonth, sales and marketing director for Crown Community Development, which owns the WaterGrass development off Curley Road. "We love it so much that we sold out all our single-family lots at WaterGrass."

The community, designed for just under 1,200 homes, has more than 600 in the books already. With the first phase complete, Crown now has plans to start 356 additional homes using five builders — Standard Pacific Homes, Ryland Homes, Homes by WestBay, Bakerfield Luxury Homes and Arthur Rutenberg Homes.

Sales picked up briskly once the housing market returned because WaterGrass spent the money needed to maintain common areas, and to keep it attractive for any potential buyers who wandered in.

"We develop communities across the country, and our standards never decreased," Kininmonth said. "The level of upkeep for the community never changed. We worked to make sure lots were ready for builders, and we continued on plans for parks and other amenities, all as they were originally planned" during the boom.

The spring quarter has made many builders optimistic. Metrostudy, a company that tracks housing data across the country, said the Tampa Bay area experienced 1,838 housing starts during that time period, up

nearly 48 percent from a year ago. However, actual closings are down a bit compared to the same time in 2012, off by just less than 6 percent. That may be because of the lukewarm job growth in the area.

"We're very bullish on the whole Tampa market," said David Caillouette, the owner's representative for LakeShore Ranch off U.S. 41, not far from Connerton. "I would love to see job growth come back because housing is dependent on job growth."

Last spring, 33,300 new jobs were reported in the Tampa Bay region, according to the same Metrostudy report, up nearly 3 percent. However, unemployment rates are still fluctuating between 6.9 percent and 7.2 percent. Yet, it's a far cry from more than 9 percent unemployment, which is where Florida was a year ago.

## Help wanted

Some of the jobs coming back are construction. In fact, the only reason why the construction industry hasn't grown faster is because there aren't enough skilled people in the area to fill the jobs.

And that could slow housing growth in Pasco.

"We lost an awful lot of the labor force" after the crash, said Connerton's Gibbons, who also speaks on behalf of the Tampa Bay Builders Association. "They just wanted jobs, so many people moved on to other geographic areas like Texas, and others left the industry altogether, and probably won't be coming back."

Also possibly hurting some communities is the Pasco County Commission's recent failure to pass a gas tax hike. Such money could've been used to maintain worn roads, like those found in communities trying to get back on their feet. Connerton, for example, built its roads several years ago, but depends on the county to maintain them.

"If you don't maintain potholes, they only get bigger and more expensive to fix,"



## FOR THE RECORD

Sales continue to move forward strongly for Pasco County communities as the housing market continues to improve.

For example, Connerton has sold more than 75 homes since May, and Lennar recently announced it would build more than 100 houses on spec in its communities around the region, expecting most of them to sell before the construction is even completed.

Gibbons said. "The tax would've cost people an additional \$2 or \$3 a month, which seemed like a fairly modest number. The county has such a strong emphasis on economic development, but it's hard to do if the roads are bad."

Since the housing crash of 2008, there have been several starts and stops in the market that only teased a recovery. That has resulted in a cautious approach by builders, even as Pasco's demand for homes continue to grow.

"We don't want a repeat of a few years ago where everyone built far more homes than people were actually able to buy," LakeShore Ranch's Caillouette.

"People wanted to move to the suburbs before the economy went south, and Pasco was the next spot they were all going to. We expect we'll be picking up right where we left off."

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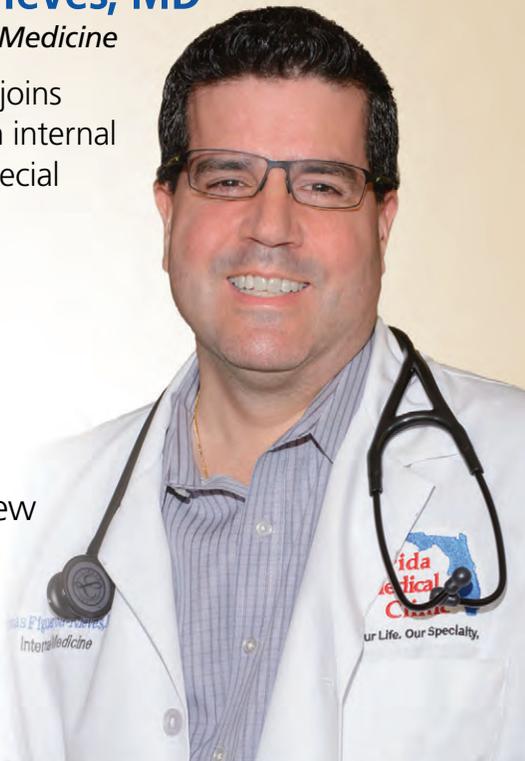
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# Lutz residents turn out to save trees

By B.C. Manion

Originally published Jan. 30

The trees in the medians on a stretch of U.S. 41 in Lutz are staying — at least for now.

Besides putting away the chainsaws, the county also offered an olive branch to pacify an angry crowd gathered at the Lutz Community Center on Jan. 24.

"I apologize that the county government didn't reach out to you earlier because it's not the way we want to conduct business," deputy county administrator Lucia Garsys told a crowd of roughly 100 to 150 people.

"Where did we goof? We goofed because we didn't get to you in advance to have this conversation way before these trees were marked," Garsys said.

She asked the community to give the county time to work things out, and she asked for the community's help in finding a solution.

"I am here to say that we need to figure out a way to work together," Garsys said.

For their part, speakers made it plain they oppose the removal of the trees. They also voiced skepticism about the county's sincerity.

The county's conciliatory tone followed its initial plan to chop down the trees without public input. Crews had marked trees within the medians of U.S. 41. Some trees have orange ribbons indicating they should be spared, and some have orange Xs to show they should be cut.

Lutz residents began asking questions when they noticed the markings on Jan. 11. The county initially planned to begin chopping down the trees on Jan. 14. But it put the brakes on that plan after residents found out what was going on and peppered the county with complaints. Instead of taking the trees down, the county scheduled the community meeting.



FILE PHOTO

**Trees in a median along U.S. 41 in Lutz will stay, at least for now. Hillsborough County officials pledged to work with the community on finding median maintenance solutions.**

the issue at the meeting.

The county signed an agreement roughly 15 years ago to maintain the trees, she said. At the time, the county intended to partner with volunteer groups to provide the maintenance.

That could not be accomplished, however, because the volunteers were unable to meet requirements set by the Florida Department of Transportation.

In November, the county decided it was going to return maintenance to the FDOT. When the FDOT learned the county was backing away from the maintenance agreement, it identified 80-plus trees that would need to be removed and about 50 that could stay, according to Jim V. Moulton Jr., director of transportation operations for District 7 of the FDOT.

"The Department of Transportation is not in the position to maintain those landscaped areas," Moulton said. "That's not what our budget covers. Our budget is for mowing grassed areas."

So, the county marked the trees and planned to cut down dozens before resi-

dents noticed and rebelled.

Their anger was apparent at the Jan. 24 meeting.

"I'm not a tea party guy, but I don't trust anything you all say," Lutz resident John Hodges said. "These people pay a lot of money in taxes. For the dollars, the people here in Lutz, they don't get their money's worth, in my opinion. ... You want involvement in government? You got involvement in government."

Mike White, founder and president of the Lutz Citizen Coalition, echoed Hodges' sentiments.

"There is a distrust, and truthfully there has not been a whole lot of effort on your part to resolve that," he said. "There's a huge disconnect on multiple levels."

Jan Smith recalled that the trees were planted to provide visual relief from the ugly six-lane highway that was pushed through the community.

Gaye Townsend, who has been active on Lutz issues for decades, insisted that the county has an obligation to maintain the trees. She cited an agreement made in 1997.

"It is legal and it's binding," Townsend said.

Ron Stoy, also active in Lutz issues for decades, urged community members to remain involved.

"This is a political problem. That's all it is," he said. "It's a matter of showing up here today and showing people we're serious about our community."

Mary Danielewicz-Bryon, a certified arborist, urged officials to keep the trees. She said the trees are planted in a large enough area, are doing well and were planted to replace trees that were removed to construct the road.

Beyond that, they provide many benefits, including beauty, she said.

"They create a sense of place. Don't remove our sense of place," the arborist said.

While the community appears willing to



## FOR THE RECORD

The community's outpouring of support for trees in the medians on U.S. 41 in Lutz prompted Hillsborough County officials to back away from a plan to chop them down. At a community meeting at the end of October, the county assured residents that the trees will stay.

help, using volunteers doesn't seem to be an option.

Moulton noted that the FDOT has standards for who can maintain the medians, with a focus on safety for the people doing the work as well as motorists.

Allowing teenage volunteers, or even older ones, to maintain the medians would not be wise, Moulton said.

"It's just not safe. You need to have professionals," he said.

State Sen. John Legg, R-Lutz, summed up the session, which lasted more than two hours, in this way, "You've heard the old saying, 'Don't mess with Texas.' Don't mess with Lutz."

He told the crowd that he heard the county, the community and the FDOT say that they want to work something out.

The crowd's reaction to Legg's assessment of the FDOT's attitude indicated that they didn't agree, but Legg pressed on that he thinks the state roads agency will cooperate.

Legg also told residents they shouldn't be too concerned about how long it takes to find a solution — as long as the county continues to maintain the median landscaping in the meantime.

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## ACCEPTING NEW PATIENTS!

# Here it comes: Outlet mall now on track to open next year

By Michael Hinman

Originally published Nov. 6

With the last environmental hurdle removed, it's full-speed ahead for a proposed outlet mall on State Road 56 and Interstate 75.

Simon Property Group and landowner Richard E. Jacobs Group have finalized a permit with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that had left in limbo their plans to build Tampa Premium Outlets on the Cypress Creek Town Center site for nearly two years, said Carol Clarke, the assistant planning and development administrator for Pasco County.

That means an outlet mall could be up and running on what is now acres of vacant land in the heart of commercial growth in Wesley Chapel by the end of 2014.

"We are very excited to be moving forward on this project, and are commencing meetings with the county to determine approvals and a schedule," said Danielle DeVita, senior vice president for development and acquisitions at Simon, in a statement.

The opening, if it stays on schedule, would come seven years after the Jacobs Group received county approval for the Cypress Creek Town Center, located just north of the Hillsborough County line.

Coleen Conklin, senior vice president of marketing for Premium Outlets and Simon, was not able to comment on the report ahead of publication.

If plans hold up, this would put the outlet mall portion of the site well ahead of its extended construction deadline of 2021 on the 510-acre site. The original plans were to build a 1.2 million-square-foot mall along with 600,000 square feet of retail space and 120,000 square feet for offices by 2011. Expanded plans included 350 hotel rooms, 230 apartments, and a 2,582-seat movie theater.

That extension, granted in 2009, was the result of legal issues, problems with environmental permitting, and the economic recession.

Yet, neither Simon nor Jacobs Group gave up, continuing work on the center they hoped would complement nearby projects like The Grove and The Shops at Wiregrass.

In May 2012, Simon said it had signed an agreement with Saks Fifth Avenue to open an Off Fifth-style store in its outlet mall. It's a retailer that is common in many of Simon's projects worldwide.



### FOR THE RECORD

The Laker/Lutz News was the first to break this story in early November, which was picked up by various media elsewhere.

Although Pasco County officials gave a timeframe of 2015 for a potential opening for the outlet mall, Simon Property Group insisted that it should be ready to go by this time next year.

At the time, Simon expected the Saks Fifth Avenue store to open by 2014, but its permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as well as a court battle with an environmental group had yet to be resolved.

A court rejected the Sierra Club's claims in 2011 that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers improperly examined the project's impacts to wetlands and waterways. However, it did move forward with concerns on how the project would impact the eastern indigo snake, a threatened species that moved across the land.

Kenneth Dodd, a herpetologist for the Office of Endangered Species, called the site an important "wildlife corridor," and that having its habitat "fragmented" could cause more of the snakes to die on area roads.

Now it's just up to Pasco County officials to approve final site plans, and sign the permits necessary to get construction going.

Pasco County's Clarke said her staff met with Simon Oct. 29, and "will be working with them to develop a coordinated schedule and get this project going."

Simon, headquartered in Indianapolis, owns or has an ownership interest stake in more than 325 retail properties in North America and Asia, comprising of 242 million square feet. In the past quarter alone, Simon has opened three new outlet malls in Toronto, St. Louis and Korea. It also began construction on four more in Charlotte, N.C.; Eagen, Minn.; Mirabel, Quebec; and Vancouver, B.C., according to the company's corporate filings.

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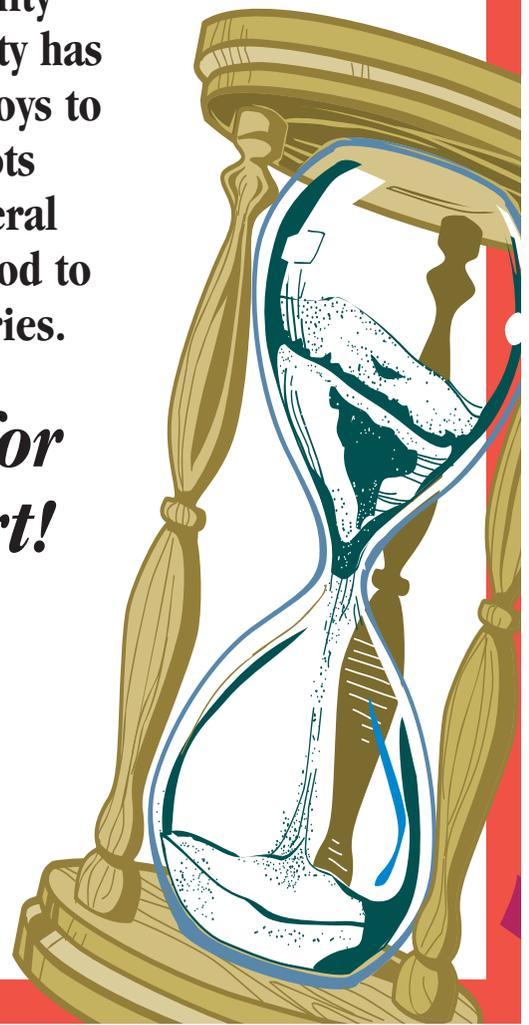


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## After cancer diagnosis, community runs for Keppel

By Michael Hinman

Originally published Oct. 2



MICHAEL HINMAN/STAFF

Land O' Lakes' girls cross-country coach Karen DeHaas, center, better known as 'Mima' to her runners, provided encouragement to Carolyn Estrella on left, and Mary-Kathryn Guenette, after they came up with the idea of selling T-shirts to support Coach Kris Keppel as he fights pancreatic cancer.

Kris Keppel is never one to give up. Always a fighter in his 20 years as a coach of the Land O' Lakes High School cross-country team, he now is facing an even tougher battle — pancreatic cancer — and his team, school and community are rallying around him to notch yet another big win.

"Life has definitely turned on a dime," said Karen DeHaas, the coach of the Gators' girls' cross-country team. Better known as "Mima" to the runners because of her granddaughter's influence on the team, DeHaas was one of the first to find out about Keppel's diagnosis just a little more than two weeks ago.

"I cried so much," DeHaas said. "You don't know how much I cried. I'd be lost without him."

Breaking the news to the rest of the team was hard, especially when Keppel could not be at his first cross-country event in the two decades he's been a coach. But he was still there, thanks to technology, as he watched the first runners cross the finish line thanks to a FaceTime video feed from someone's smart phone.

The runners, who have never felt abandoned by Keppel over all these years, were going to stand by him, too.

Two of DeHaas' runners, Carolyn Estrella and Mary-Kathryn Guenette, got together and designed "I run for Keppel" T-shirts. Complete with a purple ribbon, representative of those who are fighting pancreatic cancer, the girls have already raised more than \$1,000 for Keppel's family. And they plan to add even more.

"Coach Keppel always cancelled doctor's appointments in the past just so he doesn't

miss practice, so when he didn't cancel one appointment for a practice, we knew something was wrong," said Estrella, a junior at Land O' Lakes High School. "The next day after that missed practice, we found out he had cancer. It was hard for all of us."

Estrella and Guenette had 100 shirts printed right away, which the entire cross-country team donned in his honor last Friday, and DeHaas is confident that the two can actually sell more than 1,000 after it's all said and done. Each one costs \$15, and the proceeds go to Keppel.

"There are so many coaches that have already stepped up," DeHaas said. "We have this big invitational coming up, and I have had phone calls from coaches in Brandon, Tampa, Hernando, all the surrounding counties. I

can't believe all the compassion and support that I have received from all these coaches."

For Guenette, the cancer diagnosis hit closer to home. Her younger brother, Spencer, battled brain cancer at a very young age. But he also proved that the fight is quite winnable, and now at 14, is in remission.

"I know what the Keppels are going through right now, and it's a tough time," Guenette said. "My parents were really proud that we stepped up and made a difference (for Keppel). It's a good way of coping."

There is no such thing as an "easy" cancer to be afflicted with, but pancreatic cancer is aggressive. In 2013, the American Cancer Society estimates that more than 45,000 people will be diagnosed with pan-



### FOR THE RECORD

T-shirt sales continue to go strong, even two months later, with more than \$3,000 raised for Kris Keppel. Even more were sold during the 20th annual Flapjack 5k that Keppel hosts every year in Land O' Lakes.

Anyone wishing to get a shirt can still order them. Just reach out to Carolyn Estrella at carolyn011jr@hotmail.com.

creatic cancer, evenly split between men and women. Treatment ranges from chemotherapy and radiation to surgery.

All of that will require a lot of attention and energy on Keppel's part, but DeHaas knows that he'll still find a way to influence the runners he has led for so many years.

"He's hoping that even if he has to be pushed in a wheelchair, he's going to be out there watching regionals," DeHaas said. "I told him he could use my chair, which has a big umbrella on it to protect him from the sun. Either way, if there is any chance he can make it out there, he'll be there."

The "I run for Keppel" shirts are available to the general public as well, with proceeds benefitting the Keppel family. To order, email carolyn011jr@hotmail.com — that's "carolyn" followed by a zero, two ones and "jr" — or visit the athletics department social media page at Facebook.com/lohsgators.

## Runners take over for Keppel on the track

By Michael Murillo

Originally published Oct. 9



Kris Keppel

ing has been forced to miss practices and meets, leaving the team stunned and concerned.

"I was just shocked, and I think the rest of the team was, too," said Tyler Stahl, one of the team's top runners. "You feel like if you've been through something like this before — like with Steven — there's no way it could happen again."

"Steven" is Steven Barnebei, a cross-coun-

try athlete who was diagnosed with brain cancer in his junior season. After emergency surgery and dozens of radiation doses, Barnebei has returned to the sport in his senior year with a cancer-free diagnosis and a determination to compete at a high level.

That experience was emotionally taxing for the team last year. And now, after rallying around their teammate, the runners now have to rally around their coach. Since the diagnosis, it's the experienced runners who have stepped up to lead the team.

Stahl and Travis Nichols — seniors, team captains and state qualifiers last year — are getting a lot of support from parents and Rick Moody, a friend of Keppel's with experience coaching Olympic athletes. But they know that to keep things running smoothly, they have to demonstrate real leadership both on and off the courses.

"We've had to really step up in keeping our team focused on post-season goals, and keeping them from being discouraged from the setbacks," Nichols said. That means coaching teammates in practice and keeping them focused and upbeat during events.

Keppel still guides the team by sending out workouts and goal times via email, and the team leaders know that everyone wants to succeed for him.

"The team is staying pretty focused and we just keep saying that they need to work hard and perform well for coach," Stahl said.

Working hard and performing well was commonplace when Keppel was at every practice and competition, and it's carrying over in his absence. The team placed third in the 2013 Gator Invitational Oct. 5 at Crews Lake Park. At the event, the top times were nearly dominated by Land O' Lakes runners. Nichols took first place, Stahl took



### FOR THE RECORD

The boys cross-country team placed first all the way up to regionals. At the state meet, three senior runners — Travis Nichols, Tyler Stahl and Jake Poore — made it to the all-star team.

Coach Kris Keppel reportedly said that it's the best season he's ever had in all his years of coaching.

And not to leave out the girls cross-country team, they finished as runner-up in districts, falling short of first place by just four points. Most of the varsity team set their personal records at this meet, and finished strong at regionals.

third and teammate Jake Poore finished fourth. All three broke the 17-minute mark easily.

Both Stahl and Nichols share optimism for the rest of the year, and look forward to having their coach back as soon as possible. And while it might seem difficult to keep running and stay focused while missing their leader, nobody is letting up or lowering their goals because Coach Keppel isn't able to be there right now.

In fact, Stahl said he's been able to improve his concentration in the face of the team's recent adversity.

"I think it is actually easier to focus on running after hearing about" Keppel's diagnosis, Stahl said. "I have more of an incentive to work hard and do well than before. I want to make him proud."

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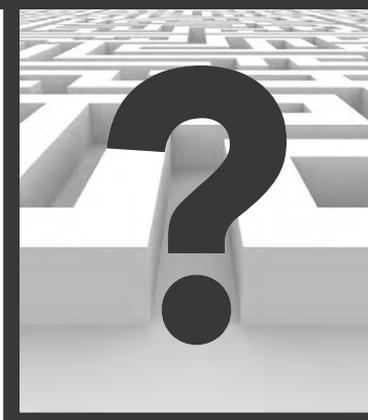
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FILE PHOTO

Repair work at Wesley Chapel District Park has gone on longer than expected, with the commute to Zephyrhills creating concerns about attracting new players to the various recreational sports there.

## Overcrowding creates challenges at park

By Michael Murillo

Originally published Oct. 2

When Wesley Chapel District Park opened in 2007, the county hoped that residents would use the 140-plus acres for a variety of activities.

And they have. Football, baseball, softball, basketball, lacrosse, cheerleading and soccer draw thousands of participants each year. The park has become a magnet for local youth sports, and that's considered a good thing.

Only now it might be too much of a good thing. Overcrowding is creating a difficult situation for concurrent activities, but a few fields also need repair, and that means even less space for everyone.

As a result, some participants have been pushed out of the area altogether until the repair work is done: Eight soccer teams and 120 players now have their practices and games at the Samuel W. Pasco Recreation Complex in Zephyrhills. That extra 20-mile round trip can be a challenge to participating families, despite the fact that they paid a convenience fee to park at the Wesley Chapel Park.

Jeff Olsen, a soccer coach whose daughter now plays in Zephyrhills, says the situation is anything but convenient.

"It places a burden on the families. There's lost time as a family, there's lost time for homework," he said. "There's an extra rush on the evening schedule and extra costs for gas. So there's a burden there."

The teams started their season on Aug. 1 and estimated they'd be displaced for about six weeks. But more than two months later, there's still no timetable for return.

Aside from the inconvenience, playing outside Wesley Chapel can impact the area's reputation regarding youth soccer. Gil Gonzalez, a coach who also leads public relations efforts for the Wesley Chapel Soccer Club, says local parents want their children to play locally. If their first taste of local youth sports is a lot of inconvenience, it affects their impression of the organization.

"I think the biggest impact, in my opinion, is for newer parents, who don't have the background in terms of understanding that this is really a temporary issue," he said. "But if we have new parents and new players, I think it creates a negative experience for them."

If word of mouth is negative as a result of those experiences, families might start considering competing programs for their children. If not resolved, those issues could affect recruiting and the program's ability to grow.

The displaced teams aren't the only ones dealing with issues related to overcrowding, Gonzalez said. The players and teams who are still at the park have to contend with their own problems.

Scheduling can be a challenge, with



### FOR THE RECORD

Relief isn't expected to come anytime soon. After a heated debate a few weeks after this story ran, the Pasco County Commission chose to move forward with the construction of artificial turf fields to help with tourism, rather than build several more grass fields.

"They would rather have five grass fields than two artificial fields," Commissioner Jack Mariano said of the people who use the park.

Yet, the county's tourist development administrator, Ed Caum, said he can't market grass fields to outside groups.

some teams dealing with later practices. The games themselves also are affected: Gonzalez said that matches are so close together that parents cheering at one game might have to duck incoming soccer balls from a nearby contest.

Throw in some long walks due to crowded parking lots, and it's a situation everyone hopes is resolved quickly.

Unfortunately, predicting how and when the county will provide a satisfactory resolution is a bit more difficult. Interest and participation in youth sports has increased since the park opened, while related budgets have decreased. According to the Wesley Chapel Soccer Club, the county has decreased park and recreational spending by more than 28 percent since 2006.

Still, Gonzalez — whose daughter also now practices in Zephyrhills — is hopeful that there will be both short-term solutions (resodded fields at Wesley Chapel District Park) and long-term solutions (more space) on the horizon, whenever that may be.

"I think what will happen is there will be continued discussions for the county to acquire additional property near the district park to expand it as well," he said.

If there's a silver lining, it might be that player interest in soccer hasn't really waned as a result of the extra challenges. Olsen said that even those who have to play in Zephyrhills still enjoy the sport and the competition.

"Do they mind? They like to play," Olsen said. "But nobody wants to take a 30-minute drive out there when the rains start coming down, then take a 30-minute drive home."

## All hands on deck: Swimmers scramble to compete at elite level

By Michael Murillo

Originally published Sept. 18

When Brian Vaile took over as coach of the boys swim team at Land O' Lakes High School this year, he saw a lot of things he liked: A dual-meet winning streak spanning more than a decade, a few very talented athletes, and an interest in maintaining a strong program.

But it was the one thing that was missing that worried him: Swimmers. As in, not enough swimmers to field a competitive team.

"Unfortunately, you could win first place in every event and still lose the meet," said Vaile, who has more than 15 years experience as a swim coach. In high school swimming, teams need more than just the fastest athlete in the pool. They need enough competitors to challenge for the second- and third-place spots and collect those points as well.

Otherwise, a team could win individual competitions but still lose the overall contest if their opponent takes the points associated with the other places. And without enough swimmers to challenge for those spots, Vaile knew his team would face a lot of disappointment no matter how fast they swam: The school's win streak would evaporate and be replaced with a season of frustration.

With just seven experienced swimmers on the roster — and needing to increase those numbers quickly — Vaile called upon his team to recruit others to join the cause. And the team responded; the Land O' Lakes boys swim team now has 12 members.

While Vaile would have liked 16 swimmers, the Gators have enough to compete in their meets. And he feels good about where the team is headed this season.

"I'm a science teacher. I look at it like an atom: We have a really good nucleus," he said. "You've got seven strong swimmers who can swim almost any stroke or event you ask them to." And with the added depth, they can work toward keeping their win-

ning streak intact.

That streak is important to the team, but it's a source of family pride for Cam Hilgenberg.

The senior has been with the team since his freshman year, but he's not the first of his family to swim for Land O' Lakes. His brother Craig was on the team when its dual-match streak began back in 2000. Another brother, Curt, kept it going after him. His mother, Robin, even coaches the girls swim team.

So a lack of numbers that threatened the Gators' winning ways had Hilgenberg worried.

"At the end of last year we weren't sure what was going to happen," he said. "Even at the beginning of this year, until the week before (the first meet), I was still pretty nervous." Hilgenberg is the youngest of his siblings to compete for the Gators.

"I'm the last Hilgenberg," he said. "I'm just trying not to blow the winning streak."

As one of the team's leaders and top swimmers, Hilgenberg did his part to boost their numbers: A member of the school's baseball team, he recruited one of the pitchers to compete in the pool as well. And along with the other experienced swimmers, he helps guide and advise the new members, working on techniques and providing pep talks when necessary.

That work has paid off. The team has won all their meets so far, and the members have confidence as they complete the schedule.

"I think if we keep on the same path as we're on right now, I think we'll do pretty well," Hilgenberg said.

Vaile wants to prepare the swimmers for conference, district and state competitions, but he still has an eye on the dual-meet schedule. He said they've defeated some quality opponents and still have challenges on the schedule, but he feels confident the streak won't end under his first season as coach.

"I think it's safe for the rest of this year," he said.

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SEE SOLUTION, PAGE 26

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| CANOE   | GRASP       | PASTRY  |

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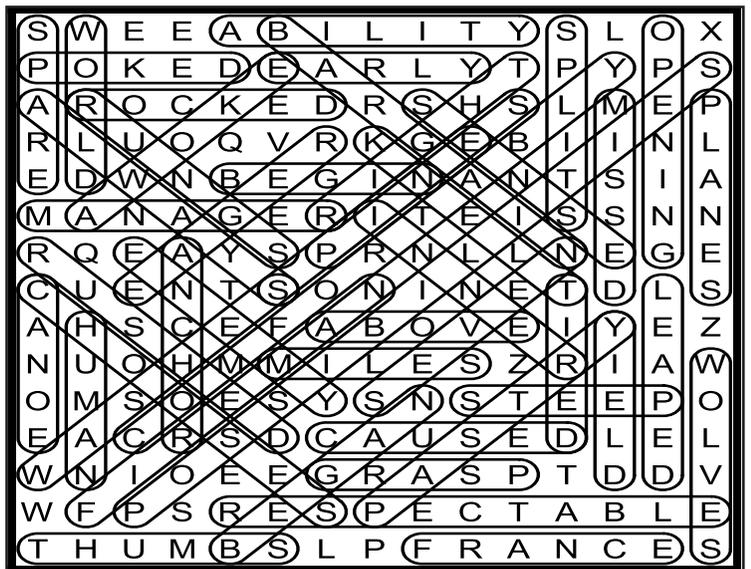
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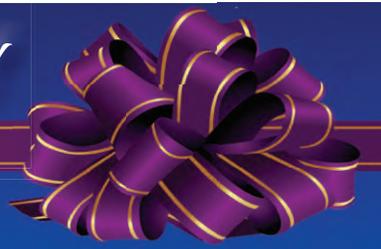
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