Wild@Heart sanctuary may reopen

By Chris Felker
Okeechobee News

The couple who took over the former Animal Adventures wild animal park in northern Glades County and renamed it the Wild@Heart Animal Sanctuary almost 15 months ago still are laboring to get it open to the public on a regular schedule.

“We are open now, but we’re open for private tours only,” said Jeremy Hargett, owner/operator of Wild@Heart along with his wife, Jamie. He explained that it’s been a huge project trying to engineer the rebirth of the dilapidated facility off Rucks Dairy Road that was cited in September 2016 for unsafe and unsanitary conditions as well as recordkeeping violations by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

Former Animal Adventures owner Mary Sue Pearce surrendered her wildlife permits and transferred all animals at the park to the Hargetts when she signed a deferred prosecution agreement after a Glades County court hearing Nov. 28, 2016.

See WILD — Page 5

Festival features combat demonstration

By Katrina Elsken
Okeechobee News

BRIGHTON – Osceola’s Warrior Legacy is part of the 80th Annual Brighton Field Day Festival, underway this weekend at Brighton Seminole Reservation in Glades County.

Charlie Osceola from the martial arts school at Big Cypress Reservation explained that the group trains with and provides demonstrations on the traditional weapons that were used in the Seminole Wars.

“Seminoles trained their children from a young age,” he said. “Their fathers had fought in previous wars. A young boy was expected to help protect the family.”

The Seminole warriors grew up practicing hand-to-hand combat with traditional weapons such as the knife, tomahawk, club and staff, Mr. Osceola continued.

Many of the Seminoles were fur traders. he explained. “They were given knives as children, and taught to use them.”

By contrast, the U.S. Army soldiers grew up mostly as farmers or children of shopkeepers. Many of those recruited into the Army were immigrants. They were taught to march and to use rifles, but the Army provided the soldiers with little combat training, Mr. Osceola said. Then they were sent down to Florida, “to remove a people who had been there 100 years.”

The soldiers were outfitted in heavy wool uniforms and leather caps. Their light blue uniforms with white trim made easy targets in the Florida brush.

The Seminoles, for the most part, fought in the nude, he said. A warrior who had a gun would use a belted pouch to carry powder and carry extra shot in his mouth. When the warrior ran out of shot, a Seminole woman would bring him more, he continued. The women were also trained to fight, he said.

“The soldier with all his gear was left vulnerable to attack,” said Mr. Osceola. The warrior could grab the soldier’s belt or coat. The Seminole Wars were a lot more brutal than people know,” he said.

He said he named the group after the legendary Chief Osceola, who refused to surrender.

“I like his story,” he said. “A lot of people think his legacy was because he was a war chief, but Osceola earned the respect of his people.”

He added that according to the information known, Osceola was likely not a full-blooded Seminole. He earned his place.
Easter cantata seeks singers

The Okeechobee Community Choir, in its 19th year under the direction of Sandy Perry, will begin rehearsing this Sunday, Feb. 18, at Okeechobee Presbyterian, 312 N. Parrott Ave. Rehearsals are on Sundays from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. and on Monday evenings from 6 to 8 p.m. in preparation for the Easter cantata, Hallelujah, What a Savior, Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus and other seasonal selections. Rehearsal attendance is suggested but not mandatory. All interested singers of any age, both locals and Northern friends, are invited to participate. Singers should be able to match pitch and read music a little. Rehearsals are stimulating and loads of fun! Music and rehearsal CDs with accentuated parts are provided for a nominal fee. Last year, singers representing 15 local churches participated. The cantata will be presented at Okeechobee Presbyterian at 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday, March 23 and 24, and at 3 p.m. on Sunday, March 25. For information, call Sandy at 863-634-7714.

2018-2019 Pre-K registration open for county schools

Will your child be four on or before Sept. 1? If so, your child is eligible to attend Pre-K at South Elementary School and the Okeechobee Achievement Academy (OAA). Registration began Feb. 1. Registration Flyers are available at all elementary schools, Okeechobee Achievement Academy and the Okeechobee County School Board office. For information, call 863-462-5000 ext. 235.

Okeechobee Forecast

Extended Forecast

**Monday:** Sunny, along with a few afternoon clouds. High around 83F. Winds ESE at 10 to 15 mph.

**Monday Night:** A mostly clear sky. Low 66F. Winds E at 5 to 10 mph.

**Tuesday:** Mostly sunny skies. High around 85F. Winds ESE at 10 to 15 mph.

**Tuesday Night:** Clear to partly cloudy. Low 66F. Winds ESE at 5 to 10 mph.

**Wednesday:** Partly cloudy skies. High around 85F. Winds ESE at 10 to 15 mph.

Join the OCSO team

The Okeechobee County Sheriff’s Office (OCSO) Recruitment Team offers interested members of the public an opportunity to discuss career opportunities at the sheriff’s office. The OCSO’s current work force comprises over 200 employees, with job opportunities ranging from civilian positions to certified law enforcement. The OCSO seeks to hire and retain a diverse work force to meet the needs of our community. Even if you have never thought of the sheriff’s office as a place to work, OCSO has a lot to offer. An application can be picked up from the sheriff’s office or by applying online at okeesheriff.org. For more information, contact Sergeant Michael Hazelif or Community Relations Deputy Jack Nash at (863)763-3117. The recruitment team includes (back row, left to right) Community Relations Deputy Nash, Sheriff Noel E. Stephen, Road Patrol Lieutenant Randy Thomas and (front) Detention Deputy Chris Dodd.
Okeechobee schools prepared for worst-case scenario

By Richard Marion
Okeechobee News

Following the tragic shootings in Parkland, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Feb. 14, Okeechobee County Schools Superintendent Ken Kenworthy sent an email to employees that included a flier from the National Association of School Psychologists titled “Talking to Children about Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers,” a two-page FEMA flier on how to prepare and respond regarding an active shooter incident, and a link to FEMA training titled “Active Shooter: What can you do?”

Mr. Kenworthy also encouraged all staff to remind students that if you “see something, say something.”

Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services Renee Geeting says more improvements are planned in the future.

“There are plans to install fencing and gates at all sites in order to create a single point of entry for school sites,” said Mrs. Geeting. “This has been accomplished at many sites already. Individual classrooms are locked, and this has been the process for numerous years. We continue to provide training for teachers and students regarding safety and reporting anything they see that is out of the ordinary.”

Furthermore, crisis counselors at the schools respond to threats made against others and follow up with those individuals. The Okeechobee County Sheriff’s Office has five armed school resource deputies, a sergeant and a lieutenant, covering 10 schools, including elementary schools in the county, as part of its School Resource Deputy Program.

The program is a proactive, innovative, problem-solving approach to assist in reducing crime by assigning specially trained, certified sheriff’s deputies to each middle school, freshman campus and high school in the county. The program follows a national trend in responding to the increase of violence on school campuses to not only students but to school administration. The goal is to offer a safe environment so students can learn and achieve without the fear of violence.

Meet the OCPD Officers: Michael Jordan

By Matteo Tullio
Okeechobee News

K-9 Officer Michael Jordan was born in Fort Pierce, raised and lived here in Okeechobee for 27 years of his life. He has two older brothers -- one a diesel engine mechanic and one a welder. When he was younger, he liked to hang out with the other neighborhood kids playing baseball or football.

Officer Jordan graduated from Okeechobee High School in 1999; his favorite subject was history. He also enjoyed playing football and played the trombone in the Yearling Middle School band. Officer Jordan stated that his favorite part about school was “being able to hang out with friends before and after class. Once you graduate, that’s all over.” During the interview, Officer Jordan emphasized that his least favorite thing about school was “math.”

Officer Jordan’s first job was as a stock person for U-Save from 1997 to 1999. He said that his worst job was as an emergency medical technician on an ambulance in Jackson, Miss., because of “long hours, little pay and the location overall.”

Officer Jordan is the first in his family to work in the field of law enforcement and, when asked why, he said: “I wanted to do it ever since I was 8 years old. I liked the excitement from watching the police respond to calls.” He has been an officer for 11 years, with four of them being here in Okeechobee. He stated, “This is my hometown; I want to better the community in which I was raised.”

Officer Jordan is also the first K-9 officer for the Okeechobee City Police Department.

Officer Jordan stated that his job as a law enforcement officer has “taught me respect for fellow people and humanity by exposing me to where life could lead and affording me the opportunity to be able to teach others how to avoid that path.” The biggest influence in his career was a former co-worker and friend from Pearl Police Department in Mississippi, Detective Mike Walter. Officer Jordan said that “his (Walter’s) demeanor toward the challenges of everyday life and his love for what he did” were influences on him, and the same factors are why he still is an officer today.

When he is not at work, Officer Jordan, who is married with two children, likes to “fish with my family and work on the farm.”

Other than the present era, he stated he would like to have lived in “1800s post-Civil War, out west in Colorado serving in law enforcement.” Officer Jordan would also like to have met former U.S. President Ronald Reagan, because of his “wanting to unite people, whether here or in other countries,” noting that he challenged Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall that separated Germany from August 1961 until November 1989.

If he was afforded one superhuman power, Officer Jordan said he would want it to be “the ability to read minds.”

Prior to the most recent tragedy, the School Board approved and the Operations Department oversaw the installation of exterior cameras at all Okeechobee County schools. These are live-feed cameras that can be monitored at each site and also record activity so that it can be reviewed by law enforcement later, if necessary.

During the 2017-18 school year, eight of the 10 schools in Okeechobee County have conducted lockdown drills. And every classroom and office has been supplied with a copy of the emergency handbook, which details what to do in the event of an active shooter or other emergency situation.
A question of safety

“Welcome to Okeechobee.” Unfortunately, this phrase is sometimes used in a cynical fashion, pointing out supposed failings of what is called a backward town. In general, I do not agree or appreciate this statement. Recently, however, I had this phrase applied to me regarding an incident which happened just outside my door, something that made me believe we need to revise our statutes so that the cynical version of this phrase does not become justified.

The incident happened in the evening on Monday, Feb. 12. While some neighborhood kids fished in the pond in the back yard, my wife let out our aging Shih Tzu. The children heard a commotion and turned to watch in horror as our neighbor’s pit bull mix crossed under the fence. The kids ran to our house, knocked on the door and greeted my wife with, “Helpless pet. The kids ran to our house, knocked on the door and greeted my wife, our neighbor’s pit bull and the neighbor’s other dog playing with our pet’s lifeless body, tossing it in the air and playing tug-of-war with it like a toy.

I called the sheriff’s office while this was still taking place, who referred me to animal control. Both of these agencies came and did what they could. I appreciate their efforts.

However, from my perspective, the end results of their reports and efforts were negligible. Nothing whatsoever happened as a result of this incident.

Should dogs that are prone to violence be allowed in neighborhoods with other small pets, or especially young children? Young children become the victims of these animals as well as the parts of our families we call pets. We have a friend in town whose daughter was recently (just before Christmas) disfigured and almost blinded by a neighbor’s pit bull. Members of my community, I have to ask, “Why do we let this be?”

The problem – the failure – is perhaps in a system that needs updating. I heard a recent stat that more than 90 percent of violent (animal) attacks on children in our community come from pit bulls. In consequence of these sorts of behaviors, owning pit bulls often carries heavy charges by insurance companies and local governments. Parts of Florida institute dangerous dog laws, which make it an offense when a dog without provocation kills another dog or attacks a child. In Okeechobee, there are no real bylaws for “dog on dog” incidents, and even in dog-on-child incidents can be evaded. It seems to me that it is, simply put, a question of safety. Are we going to ensure that our community is a safe place to live, or are we going to just let these sorts of violent activities to persist?

Reflections from the Pulpit

Ash Wednesday

By Pastor Douglas Ryan,
Treasure Island Baptist Church

Well, Feb. 14 was Ash Wednesday. Wikipedia defines Ash Wednesday in these terms: “Ash Wednesday is a Christian day for peace and the first day of Lent, which is six weeks of repentance before Easter.” Although this is accurate, I can’t help but notice something about the definition put forth by Wikipedia. Let’s break it down. Observe the first eight words, “Ash Wednesday is a Christian day for peace.”

For the Christian, the peace of God is available to us daily, and every day can be a day of peace with Christ. In John, Chapter 14, Jesus says that when we accept Him as our Lord for forgiveness of sins, His Father sends His spirit to dwell within us. John 14:26-27: But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Mark 9:50: Sait is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other.

I believe we can be at peace throughout the majority of our lives with Christ as our guide.

Notice the next six words, “and the first day of Lent.” Lent encompasses all of the things stated in the description, but let’s look at fasting. Fasting is denying oneself food, for a time. However, we have used the term to deny oneself only certain foods, or other pleasures.

For the Christian, we are to deny ourselves daily. Luke 9:23 says, Then he said to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Amen!!

But I encourage you to carry the truth and the glory of Christ’s gift of salvation and peace around with you daily, year-round! Never forget that you can find peace in Christ every day. This comes by being with Him every day, which in our Western society requires denial of ourselves daily. Repentance is what brings us not only salvation, but union with God as we recognize our need for Him every day of our lives. Start now and never cease. Then and only then will God’s will and path for you become clear.

Aqua...
Second company helps support refuge

The Hargetts are originally from northern Indiana, where Jeremy, 44, worked beginning in his teens at private zoos and refuges in that region. He doesn’t have a degree – “I got six credits away from a bachelor’s in biology,” he says – but is self-trained in working with animals, especially reptiles, and started out as an animal broker. “I’ve been doing this for decades. I’m licensed with state and federal regulators. I’m licensed with so many animals, my license used to say ‘all,’ and then they switched the law and started specifying. So it’s much easier to tell you what I’m not licensed for. I can’t have a cheetah, believe it or not, but I can have tigers, lions, bears, gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans, wolves and coyotes.”

Mr. Hargett has another business called Cold Blooded Industries, CBI for short, that is a reptile breeder and wholesaler and, although it’s a separate company – Wild@Heart is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit – he’s been using its profits to support the refuge. He sells the reptiles, including venomous snakes, to pet outlets as well as to venom laboratories and other companies. His expertise with animals is such that he gets calls from veterinarians for advice and even conducts classes for nurses and doctors about treating snake and animal bites. One source of revenue for the refuge is that he takes some of the animals to locations on occasion for paid showings or demonstrations; one of their big cats soon will be taken to a film location for production of a new Disney movie.

As for the animals at Wild@Heart, from the more than 60 that lived there previously, the Hargetts have reduced the number by half or more.

“What we’ve done is we’ve gotten rid of about 11 tigers. We found sanctuaries and places that had old stock that was dying or dead, and other places to live for them; we didn’t actually ‘get rid’ of them. There are so many here, and Okeechobee’s such a small place,” he said. Louisiana State University recently took one from Wild@Heart to use as its new mascot, replacing the LSU Tiger Mike VI who died in 2016 from cancer. LSU’s new one, known as Harvey to the Hargetts, is a rescue tiger under 2 years old and became LSU Tiger Mike VII last August.

Bills for feeding, care a heavy lift

“We’ve really tried to thin the stock down. In order for us to survive, we need to be able to get donations, we need to be able to make money, through admission donations and things like that. It costs a lot to feed these guys. Medical bills are not a joke, here,” Mr. Hargett said, noting that most of the animals are geriatric. Still, though, a male tiger will eat 30 pounds of meat a day and a female, 18, about the same as a lion or lioness. He makes two trips a week to a Walmart in Port St. Lucie that donates its unsaleable meat, where he might glean 500 usable pounds out of a ton, and buys the rest at a discount from an Okeechobee supplier.

Right now, he said, “we have at least 30 animals.” They include 11 tigers, three lions, two kinkajous (also called honey bears, from South America), one panther, one leopard, three baboons, two ring-tailed lemurs, one brown-tailed lemur, two black bears, one bobcat that’s a permanent resident and another that he loaned to a Clewiston facility for breeding, four crocodiles and about 20 alligators or caimans.

Although all the caging on the 5-acre fenced refuge property is up to regulatory snuff, Mr. Hargett’s not satisfied. “I’d like to expand it. The park right now is only 5 acres, but I have another 5 acres that I think we can go further out with. I want to change the caging drastically. I’ve rebuilt a lot of it, but the new style of cages are round ... And I’d like to make them open-top, taller cages, maybe more like three-quarters of an acre each, just to give (the animals) a little bit more room.” He also wants to diversify the stock by bringing in a wolf pack and hyenas.

But he and his wife are going to need more help. He has no employees at Wild@Heart; the couple take care of the refuge alone, with help from one of their 10 children, 17-year-old Dallas. They did do some fundraising but have received only $4,700 in donations thus far. So he’s supported it through CBI’s profits.

“Wild at Heart is not a nonprofit, and we’ve just been trying really hard to get it to live on its own as opposed to being supported. It’s a real job to do. Everywhere we’ve gone here in Okeechobee, we’ve had people really interested in coming out and volunteering and stuff,” he said, but once they find out it’s the former Animal Adventures, they’re reluctant because of Ms. Pearce and her park’s bad reputation. She has even harassed visitors, said Mrs. Hargett, and they had to get their lawyer to enjoin her. Mr. Hargett said Wild@Heart does have two regular volunteers who come at least twice a week.

‘We have to get it open’

His goal is to open the park as soon as possible, “to start doing field trips and stuff.” The way is clear to do that because he has current FWC and USDA licenses, plus refuge and 501(c)(3) status, so he doesn’t need any special permission from Glades County or anyone else. The Hargetts also believe in transparency, even hiring a programmer to put all their records online and give access to veterinarians and regulators.

But Mr. Hargett has to get comfortable showing the refuge in the condition it’s in now, more or less, because it will take revenue to make more improvements.

“I’m at the point where I’m always saying, ‘Oh, wait, this isn’t right. I need to ...’ but it’s going to cost me another $5,000 or $10,000. If we were to do that forever, we’d never open up. And if we never open up, we’re done. We have to survive. We have to get it open, you know, to be able to thrive in some way. And it’s hard to thrive if you’re not open. People don’t want to help out somewhere they can’t even see.”

The Hargetts have a Facebook page; search for “Wild at Heart wildlife center.” The park is located at 5001 S.W. Rucks Dairy Road, in Glades County (off State Road 70, west of the Kissimmee River), and Mr. Hargett can be reached at 239-850-0839 for information about either the refuge or CBI.
Community Events

**Church hosts bingo**

The public is invited to play bingo at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, 901 S.W. Sixth Street, on Monday, Feb. 19. Doors open at 5 p.m. Bonanza sales start at 6:50 p.m. Bingo begins promptly at 7 p.m. Food will be available for purchase.

**Five-card bingo at Legion**

American Legion Post #64, 501 S.E. Second Street, will hold five-card bingo on Monday, Feb. 19, from 1 to 3 p.m. Lunch will be served at 12:30 p.m. For more information, call 863-763-5309.

**Republicans meet**

The Okeechobee Chapter of the Republican Party of Florida monthly meeting will be Monday night, Feb. 19, at 6:30 p.m. at Cowboys BBQ, 202 NE 7th Avenue. Come at 6 p.m. if you wish to place a food order. Florida 17th Congressional District Candidate Bill Akers is the scheduled guest speaker.

**Historical Society to meet**

The Okeechobee Historical Society will meet on Monday, Feb. 19, at noon in the main museum building, 1850 U.S. Highway 98. The meeting will include a covered dish luncheon. If you are interested in joining the society, please bring a dish to share and $10 for the annual dues.

**Garden club to meet**

The Garden and Orchid Club will meet Monday, Feb. 19, at 6 p.m. at the Okeechobee Extension office, 458 U.S. 98. For information, call 561-763-2788.

**Yard Sale set**

Real Life Children’s Ranch, 7777 U.S. 441 S.E., will host a yard sale on Monday, Feb. 19, and Wednesday, Feb. 21, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Come on out for great bargains.

**VFW will serve Wednesday dinner**

The VFW Auxiliary will serve a chicken dinner on Wednesday, Feb. 21, at Post 9528, 29012 S.R. 78 W. All proceeds will benefit Florida military veterans in distress. For information, call 863-467-2882.

**Legion hosts Sax Man**

On Feb. 22, American Legion Post #64, 501 S.E. Second St., will present Thirsty Thursday with the Blues by “Sax Man,” from 5 to 7 p.m. Lunch and dinner will be served from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. For more information, call 863-763-5309.

**West Virginia Day set**

West Virginia Day will be held on Saturday, Feb. 24, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the First Baptist Church of Okeechobee, 401 S.W. Fourth St., in the Fellowship hall. Bring a covered dish. For information call Ray or Phyllis Stone at 863-467-8636 or 863-634-1427.

**Lunch and Learn set**

Join Raulerson Hospital, 1796 U.S. 441, for a Lunch & Learn called “Keep cruising without joint pain,” featuring orthopedic surgeons Dr. Epstein and Dr. Slutsky on Monday, Feb. 26, at 11:30 a.m. at IRSC. Lecture begins at noon. RSVP to 863-763-9228 or at RaulersonHospital.com (classes & events.)

**Collaborative council meets**

The Community Collaborative Council of the Okeechobee County Shared Services Network will conduct their monthly meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 27, at 10 a.m. in the board room (305) of the Okeechobee County Administration Building, 700 S.W. Fourth Ave., Okeechobee. The purpose of the meeting is to allow the community to identify issues, collaborate, and share information regarding services for children and their families. The meeting is open to the public and everyone is welcome to attend. For more information, please call Erin Moore at 863-462-5000, ext. 257.

**Chili cook off set**

A chili cook off will be held on Saturday, March 3, at the VFW Post #4423, 300 N.W. 4th St. Entry fee is $5 to compete. Judging will start at 1 p.m. There will be a 50/50 drawing and live entertainment. For information, call 863-801-2290.

**Hospital hosts lecture**

Raulerson Hospital invites you to join four medical students from FSU for a community lecture about Getting Your Affairs in Order (Advance Care Planning) on Thursday, March 8, at 10 a.m. The lecture will be held at IRSC’s Williamson Conference Center, located at 2229 N.W. 9th Ave. in Okeechobee. Refreshments will be provided. Please RSVP at 863-763-9228.

**Fair seeks contestants**

The Okeechobee County Fair Association is seeking adult and youth contest participants for the upcoming fair March 13-18, 2018. The contests consist of quilting, sewing, leatherwork, painting, drawing, photography, horticulture, woodworking and more. There will also be food competitions such as home baking and canned goods, as well as a vegetable competition featuring garden vegetable, fruit and vegetable and largest vegetable categories. This year the fair will again have the educational posters and educational display competitions. New for this year will be a Painted Rocks Division. Individual youths may enter the educational poster contest and 4-H Clubs or FFA Chapters may enter the educational display contest. The top three club/group chapters will win awards of $150, $100 and $75 for their programs. You may download the entry forms and rules at the Okeechobee County Fair Web site, www.okeechobeecountygfair.com. Or pick up copies of the 2018 Premium Book at the Okeechobee County Extension Office at 458 U.S. 98 North. The deadline for entries is March 2, 2018. If you have questions, please contact Dianne Spann at 863-634-3327.

**BBQ dinner set**

Rebekah Bishop Prescott memorial scholarship BBQ dinner will be held on Friday, March 16, at 11 a.m. at the OHS AG farm. Pick up or dine in. $10 per dinner. Tickets available at Elf’s Western Wear, 907 N.W. Park St. For information, call 863-634-8135, 863-634-1657 or 863-634-7478.

**Ag Center open to public**

Unless an event is taking place, the Okeechobee County Agri-Civic Center grounds are open to area residents for exercise activities such as walking, running and bike riding daily. The gate on S.R. 70 is open from 7 a.m. until dusk for residents to access the roads and parking lots at the facility.

**Downlisting: Don’t leave manatees out in the cold**

**Guest commentary**

By Anne Harvey Holbrook, JD, MS
Save the Manatee Club

Last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service downgraded the West Indian manatee’s status from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The Save the Manatee Club is concerned that downlisting will further slow efforts to secure key habitat protections needed for the species’ longevity in Florida. In order to sustain the progress made toward recovering the manatee, increased reporting of manatee boat strikes and a stronger emphasis on preserving and restoring warm water habitat are essential.

**Domestic violence hotline available 7 days a week**

If you or someone you know is in danger of domestic violence please reach out to Martha’s House. The office is located at 4134 U.S. 441 N. and the office number is 863-763-2893.

The 24 hour hotline is 863-763-0202. For more on Martha’s House visit the website at http://www.marthashouse.org/ or visit their Facebook page.

Break the silence, end the violence.
EES Students of the Week

Everglades Elementary School students achieving excellence in the classroom for the week of Feb. 12 include: kindergarten, Alice Wright, Joselyn Hernandez, Ashan Adil; first grade, Noemy Garcia, Kimberleigh Shorey; second, Emaie Taylor, Dominic Rosa, Nia Oglesby, Adrian Villegas-Lombera; third, Oshiel Luna, Joe De Leon, Lucas Hicks, Kati Floyd; fourth, Calvin DeLeon-Vincente, Cecilia Meza, Cordeazia Kilgore, Tyger Armstrong; fifth, Leonardo Flores, Merideth Schoenwalder, Amber Laster and Madison Acree. Congratulations to these outstanding students.

CES Students of the Week

Central Elementary School’s Students of the Week for the week of Feb. 12 are: Rhiley McQueen, Edena Dames, Arianna Larson, Kailyn Dionne, Doris-Mar Hernandez, Kaidence Bigford, Axel Hoopes, Hannah Kate Johns, Julian Marshal, Alden Thomas, Jose Lara, Dalia Cruz, Terryonna Taylor, Yaritza Gamez, Mariano Rosas-Florencio, Christian Pineda, Aaliyah Comley, Landen Kensaul, Caleb Cruz, Alana McDonald, Francisco Ibarra-Bernal and Preston Guinn.

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Real Cards. Real Dealers. Live Blackjack.

Come Play.
**SFWMD approves plan to spend $1.9 billion on water projects**

Special to the Okeechobee News

WEST PALM BEACH – Last week, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board approved a plan to invest $1.9 billion in capital improvements. These improvements will aid in the district’s mission of providing flood control, restoring water quality, ensuring water supply and restoring natural systems for the 8.1 million residents of South Florida over the next five years.

“This board is committed to prudent use of taxpayer dollars while improving our water management system,” said SFWMD Governing Board Chairman Dan O’Keefe. “Whether it is for the protection of families and businesses or restoring and safeguarding the environment, an investment of local and state dollars in our infrastructure is crucial to achieving the district’s mission.”

The Governing Board approval ensures an update to the SFWMD’s five-year capital improvement plan that governs work on projects and infrastructure. The Governing Board budgeted $321 million for necessary capital improvements for this year alone.

Approximately $1.6 billion of the capital improvement plan money would be used for restoration projects, such as the massive C-43 West Basin.

The five-year plan includes $64 million per year to build the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Storage Reservoir, a project called for by the Florida Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott. This project will help reduce damaging discharges to the northern estuaries and deliver clean water to the Everglades while achieving water quality standards set by state and federal laws.

The Governing Board also budgeted an additional $300 million for operations and maintenance projects to keep pump stations and water storage structures working properly to provide flood protection.

“This from massive projects like the C-43 Reservoir and EAA Reservoir to the expansion of Stormwater Treatment Area 1 West, these next five years will see the district undertake and complete major capital projects,” Mr. O’Keefe continued. “This is a very exciting time in South Florida as we see taxpayers’ investments come to fruition.”

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**Donors encouraged to make appointments**

Special to the Okeechobee News

In light of the overwhelming response by blood donors in the wake of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School tragedy, OneBlood, the local blood center, is urging people who want to donate blood to make an appointment to donate in the days ahead.

Right now, the blood center team is working diligently to test and process the thousands of units of blood that were donated yesterday.

Having a ready blood supply is vital for our community. OneBlood thanks all the donors who turned out to help following the tragedy and encourages people to become regular blood donors to help ensure a safe and available blood supply 365 days a year.

Appointments can be made online at oneblood.org or by calling OneBlood at 1-888-9-DONATE.

Generally healthy people age 16 or older who weigh at least 110 pounds can donate blood. To learn more about the importance of blood donation and how donors can target the power of their blood type, visit oneblood.org.

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Mr. Osceola said that the Osceola Warrior Legacy grew out of the martial arts school, which was established on the Big Cypress reservation about 10 years ago as an after-school program for young people.

He said he took over the program about five or six years ago, and added that the school is focused on teaching the students to have confidence in themselves and to instill a sense of self. “It’s not a traditional martial arts school,” he said. “We’re not hunting for trophies.”

The school currently has students ages 5 to adult. He said they hope one day to have martial arts schools at all of the Seminole reservations.

To honor Seminole history, Osceola’s Warrior Legacy was formed, using students from the martial arts school. Mr. Osceola said much of what they know about the tactics used in the Seminole Wars comes from letters written by Army soldiers. They used this information to put together demonstrations.

Osceola’s Seminole Legacy will present two shows at the festival on Sunday, at 2:10 p.m. and 5:45 p.m.

Celebrating 80 years, the Brighton Field Day Festival & Rodeo continue today (Sunday, Feb. 18) at the Fred Smith Rodeo Arena. The festival will include professional bull riding, Native American dancing, alligator wrestling, a live snake show, American Indian arts and crafts, and native foods. Attendees may also visit the Seminole Culture Camp, where a living Seminole Indian village will be on display.

Gates open at 9 a.m., and activities begin at 10.

The Fred Smith Rodeo Arena is located at 500 Harney Pond Road, off State Road 721 in Glades County. From Okeechobee, take State Road 70 west to SR 721, turn south on SR 721, then turn right on Harney Pond Road and travel 1 mile to Fred Smith Arena; or, take State Road 78 west to SR 721 and turn north on SR 721 and turn north on SR 721, then left on Harney Pond Road.

Charlie Osceola (right) and Alyssa Osceola (left) show that women also fought in the Seminole Wars as they take on soldier Andrew Wallin. The girls are descendants of Polly Parker, a Seminole woman who was captured in 1858 but escaped by jumping off a steamship and making her way back to the Everglades.

The Rita Youngblood Band is among the performers at the festival. They will play on Sunday at 10 a.m. in the “fan zone” near the festival’s main entrance.

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Sheriff Stephen addresses law enforcement graduates

Special to the Okeechobee News
On Wednesday, Feb. 14, Law Enforcement Academy Class No. 149 graduated with Sheriff Noel E. Stephen and Okeechobee County

Raising awareness about smokeless tobacco

Special to the Okeechobee
QuitDoc Foundation and the Florida Department of Health's Tobacco Free Florida Program are raising awareness about the dangers of smokeless tobacco, such as chew and dip, during Through With Chew Week. This public awareness campaign was created to reduce the use of smokeless tobacco among young people and help combat this deadly addiction. This year’s Through With Chew Week takes place Feb. 18-24.

To raise awareness about the dangers of smokeless tobacco use, members of the Tobacco Free Partnership of Okeechobee and SWAT (Students Working Against Tobacco) Club spoke to the Okeechobee County Board of County Commissioner on February 6th. The Commissioners were educated on the dangers of smokeless tobacco, the rates of adult and youth usage in our county and ways that we are working to change the social norms of smokeless tobacco within Okeechobee County. The commissioners proclaimed February 18-24, 2018 “Through With Chew Week” and awarded the staff with a proclamation from the County.

Although smokeless tobacco use is low, the rate has fluctuated and disproportionately affects certain areas:
- In 2012, the rate of adult smokeless tobacco use was 3.2 percent. In 2016, the rate was at 3.0 percent. This decrease is minimal compared to the rate at which cigarette use has dropped (17.7 percent to 15.5 percent).
- Rural communities in particular have experienced challenges in battling smokeless tobacco use. Individuals living in these areas are more likely to use tobacco – particularly smokeless tobacco.

“We are proud that youth smokeless use is at an all-time low, the number of adult Floridians using smokeless tobacco is still an issue,” said Dr. Kellie O’Dare, Tobacco Free Florida Bureau Chief. “We want to remind smokeless tobacco users that our cessation services are for everyone – not just smokers.”

At least 28 cancer-causing chemicals have been identified in smokeless tobacco. Smokeless tobacco users have an 80 percent higher risk of oral cancer and a 60 percent higher risk of esophageal cancer and pancreatic cancer compared to non-users.

There is no scientific or medical evidence that proves smokeless tobacco use is an effective method to help people quit smoking. Floridians who want to quit any form of tobacco have access to the state’s free and proven-effective resources. For more information, please visit www.tobaccofreeflorida.com/quityourway.

About the Florida Department of Health

The department, nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board, works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

Follow us on Twitter at @HealthyFla and on Facebook. For more information about the Florida Department of Health please visit www. FloridaHealth.gov.

Okeechobee Arrest Report

The following individuals were arrested on felony or driving under the influence (DUI) charges by the Okeechobee County Sheriff’s Office (OCSO), the Okeechobee City Police Department (OCPD), the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP), the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) or the Department of Corrections (DOC).

- Todd Mitchell Hawes, 37, U.S. 441 South, Okeechobee, was arrested Feb. 15 by the Okeechobee Narcotics Task Force on a felony charge of possession of a controlled substance (methamphetamine) without a valid prescription. His bond was set at $5,000.
- Scott William Alcock, 47, Citrus Avenue, Fort Pierce, was arrested Feb. 15 by Deputy Jonathon Gove on a DOC felony warrant charging him with violation of probation - petit theft two or more convictions. He is being held without bond.
- Ahmed Mohamed, 24, was arrested Feb. 15 by Deputy Jonathon Gove on a Pinellas County felony warrant. His bond was set at $4,026.

This column lists arrests and not convictions, unless otherwise stated. Anyone listed here who is later found innocent or has had the charges against them dropped is welcome to inform this newspaper. The information will be confirmed and printed.

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