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SERVING CHARLOTTE, LEE & COLLIER COUNTIES | JANUARY 2026

2025 YEAR IN REVIEW



p34
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AGENT

p23
NAPLES MAYOR
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TO THE Leaders of SWFL...

...and when I say Leaders; I'm talking the full gamut. Everything from politicians to pastors, to leaders of clubs and organizations, people who supervise, department heads, directors, and even those who may be over a team or stewards in unions. I want to take this time to salute each and every one of you individually and collectively for all the work that you've done in SWFL.

This has been a tumultuous year. One of Recocking. One of Shaking. Any time you build something you have to tear down a few things and level it... And build a deep foundation. The deeper the foundation; the higher the structure - the stronger the structure - the more fortified the structure. So I just want to take this time to salute you leaders... ALL OF YOU!... for standing in the gap and being faithful and doing the best you can.

IF you are reading this; please remember to keep ALL OUR LEADERS in your prayers, because they really are trying to do the best they can and balance a family. Focus on the issues and NOT on the person, because none of us are walking on water.

It is very important to not make things personal and stick to the business at hand. Look at what is righteous. Look at what is steadfast. Look at what is immovable based on case law and the law of the Bible...

Again – Thank you leaders for all the work that you've done. I Love you and may God continue to Bless each and every one of you as WE move SWFL from Englewood to Marco Island to the next level of peace, tranquility, and the nice small quaint aquatic way of life that we call SWFL.

McKinley G. Williams,
Publisher
The SWFL Chronicle



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SERVING CHARLOTTE, LEE & COLLIER COUNTIES | FEBRUARY 2025



Celebrate
BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Lydia-Joi Holloway's Little Free Neighborhood Library Opens with Overwhelming Community Support

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BYRON DONALDS

Not another
politician.
A man of
principle,
integrity,
and action.

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ABOVE FROM LEFT: LEE COUNTY COMMISSIONER BRIAN HAMMAN, CASSIUS BOREL, AND STATE REP. TIFFANY ESPOSITO



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Bridging the Gap Center for the Arts Launches Southwest Florida’s Premier Creative Hub for BIPOC Artists

Bridging the Gap Center for the Arts (BTG ARTS) is proud to announce its launch and vision to become Southwest Florida’s premier creative arts center dedicated to empowering BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) artists. Our center offers a space where creative arts—through performance, education, place-making, storytelling, and community connectivity—serve as catalysts for social and systemic change.

We are proud to introduce our signature offering, the Joe and Benita North Creative Community Program, an eight-week creative journey providing theatre and visual arts education being held at Riverside Community Center in Fort Myers. These beginner courses offer a fun and supportive introduction to both acting and painting. In the acting portion, students will explore stage movement, voice and diction, improvisation, and character development through games and scene work, building confidence, memorization skills, and stage presence—all leading up to a performance for family and friends. Meanwhile, the painting course guides students through the basics of mixing colors, brush techniques, and developing a personal creative style, with each week building on the last. The course concludes with an art exhibit to celebrate and showcase everyone’s work.

Step into the spotlight with our Adult Acting Class, guided by the visionary Founder, Sonya McCarter. Young performers can find their voice in the Youth Acting Class, led by the dynamic Nikia Cavanaugh of the acclaimed Ya-Ya Club. Meanwhile, creativity takes center stage in our Visual Arts Classes, led by the talented Cheyanne Lewis, a fresh and inspired graduate of FGCU.

Registration is now open, with classes beginning on September 6, 2025. Visit www.btgart.org to register.

WHAT WE AIM TO DO At BTG Art, we are deeply committed to bridging the systemic, cultural, and opportunity gaps that have persisted for ages in the arts. Our mission emphasizes building connections—across generations, communities, and between artistic excellence and social relevance.

FROM THE FOUNDER:

“The arts have the power to entertain, challenge, enlighten, and invigorate both the mind and body. Yet the disparity in access to these enriching experiences continues to grow.”

For the past seven years, I have dedicated myself to bridging the gap in arts education and opportunities for artists of color in Southwest Florida. I firmly believe that our communities are brimming with talented professionals and aspiring artists of color who simply need a dedicated creative space to develop their skills and showcase their work. By partnering with Bridging the Gap Center for the Arts, you can play a crucial role in engaging our community through various forms of expression—including Theater, Dance, Visual Arts, Film, and Playwriting. We are thrilled to embark on this new journey and invite you to join us in providing a platform for marginalized voices to share their creativity, celebrate their culture, and explore the universal connections that unite us all.” Join us in shaping a more inclusive creative future. **Visit www.btgart.com to register for classes, donate, or learn how to support artists of color in Southwest Florida.**

ABOUT BRIDGING THE GAP CENTER FOR THE ARTS:


Bridging the Gap Center for the Arts is a new nonprofit creative arts center in Southwest Florida dedicated to providing imaginative, innovative, and equitable opportunities for BIPOC artists. Through performance, storytelling, education, and community engagement, BTG Art empowers marginalized voices to drive social change and foster cultural dialogue, place-making, and artistic excellence.



Top left: Sonya McCarter, visionary Founder; top right: Joe and Benita North; bottom right: Nikia Cavanaugh, Ya-Ya Club; Cheyanne Lewis, inspired graduate of FGCU.

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IT'S OK TO BE A *Cougar*

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LATIFA LOWERY

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A SWAMP OF CONTROVERSY IN COLLIER COUNTY

Meet the Siblings Running Against Each Other for the Florida State Senate Seat

Nationwide — Siblings Randolph Bracy and LaVon Bracy Davis are competing against each other in a Florida special primary election for a state senate seat once held by Geraldine Thompson. Both have political experience and come from a family deeply rooted in public service and civil rights activism.

The seat became vacant after Thompson died earlier this year. She was not just a political figure but also a close family friend. Their mother, LaVon Wright Bracy, a well-known civil rights activist, was the maid of honor at Thompson’s wedding.

Randolph Bracy is a former state senator, while LaVon Bracy Davis most recently served as a state representative. Their father, Randolph Bracy Jr., once led the local NAACP, co-founded a Baptist church in Orlando, and taught at Bethune-Cookman University.

According to the Associated Press, this is not the first time politics has come between the siblings. In last year’s Democratic primary for the same seat, Bracy Davis endorsed Geraldine Thompson over her brother. Now, they’re competing head-to-head.

The winner of the Democratic primary will go up against Republican Willie Montague in the general election. The district is heavily Democratic, with Black voters making up more than half of its registered Democrats, making the outcome of the primary especially important.



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Naples Johnnie Reid, who works at the State Attorney’s office in Naples, just broke a national record at The Senior Games in Iowa. She ran 100 meters in 13.6 seconds in the 60-64 age group.

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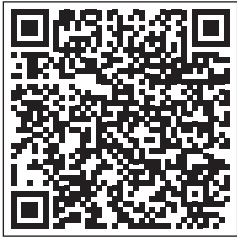


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Dear Seasoned/Senior *Lovers*

"Kathy Smith embodies what it means to be a public servant in the truest sense."

story page 26



Collier County Commissioners' 10 Commandment Vote Makes History

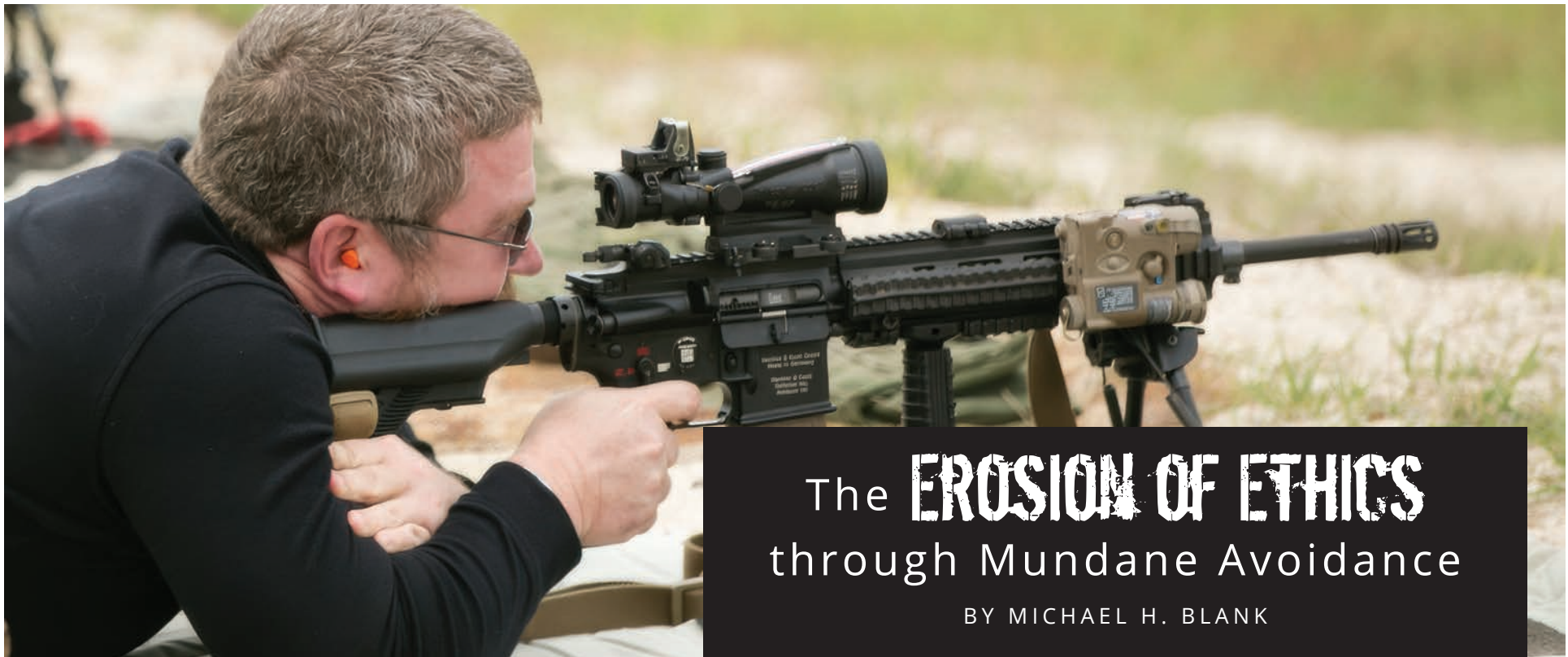
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"The arts have the power to entertain, challenge, enlighten, and invigorate both the mind and body. Yet the disparity in access to these enriching experiences continues to grow." Sonya McCarter

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The **EROSION OF ETHICS** through Mundane Avoidance

BY MICHAEL H. BLANK

I've been working through several possible topics for this column. I have one on the practices of credit card companies that seem to be catching the attention of both sides of the aisle in Washington.

I have others on the current state of affairs in Washington, but I've decided to take a stab at the root cause of a lot of the problems we face in society today. Sadly, it isn't the politicians in Washington, nor the CEO's running companies with dubious ethical practices, nor even those running credit companies with policies designed to compound financial issues until they cause the crisis they claim to be trying to avoid. No, dear reader, it is, unfortunately, you and I.

Be it by blind action, carelessly done, or by inaction when acting carries risk to us, or perhaps the worst of all passive acquiescence when we know what is going on around us is wrong, but it is easier not to make an issue out of it. Is it merely physics that keeps us at rest, or fear, or apathy, or financial reward targeted to keep us as confederates of these issues we generally claim to abhor as a society.

I will avoid the internet quotes on this phenomenon, partially because as with many things' internet, the quotes appear to be incorrectly attributed, but also because they fall short. They all stem from a time when it was easier to be ignorant. Now, we have all the information we need at our fingertips, or if not there, just a terminal away, available freely or nearly, at your local library. Today, we have not even the benefit of a layer of forest like the residence of Landsberg, Germany to hide the sins being committed around us. It is piped into us via news apps, X, cable, radio, and so many other formats we'd run out of paper before the list concluded. This is why it isn't sufficient to say we are guilty only of inaction, because with all of it being fed to us, we've obtained a collective state of **ACTIVE AVOIDANCE**. In some cases, this may manifest itself as collective action of the least burden and efficacy.

What do I mean by that? Things like protests that make you feel good about attending, ease your conscience, and enable you to go right back into the passive assistance in the issues as a whole. Perhaps you are feeling that I am a being a bit cynical here, but I think the latest craze, the "No Kings" protest is an ideal example. It is funded by a Walmart Heiress primarily, it seems, for having their cheap source of goods (and profit margins) threatened by the current administration. Sure, the theme resonates, might even have a peppering of truth to it. While they might not be ethical, they sure aren't stupid. They know you won't show up to the "Protect Walmart Profits Margins" march, no matter how well poetically that might read. I'm not condemning anyone who went, but in the end, what

was the real point, rather than to keep us at each other's throats and to continue to be pawns on someone else's chessboard? Did it effect policy? If it did, did it help anyone of your fellow members of this great Republic? Did it lead to more jobs? Or just higher profit margins for an heiress?

This is the **MUNDANE AVOIDANCE THAT LEADS TO THE ACQUIESCENCE TO EVIL** that I am talking about. How many of us have decided to "let it go" when we see something bad happening? How many of us have given up after even a significant effort to address a wrongful situation? How many of us may have been the recipients of someone else reaching out to address a wrong, that we, knowing the amount of work and that potential for a negative impact in our lives, shelved this attempt effectively shutting it down? Maybe you work at a call center, or in a compliance department, or human resources and you are reading this right now actively trying not to remember. I don't really blame you. I have tried to be one of the ones taking effective and prolonged action and I can tell you from my results, I find it a hard thing to advocate for as even our own legal system almost argues for allowing such things to continue in the noble names of **"COMPROMISE" AND "REASONABLENESS"**.

This is truly the insipid nature of the evil we face in the modern world. It was one thing when it was a dark army in a field or a social movement with clear and unsettling goals, but now it is more like a slightly tinted syrup that flows around all of us. The change in the light is almost imperceptible day to day, likewise with the viscosity, until one day we are shocked awake by something only to realize we can no longer distinguish day from night looking at the sky and that we are so firmly cemented in place, movement seems impossible.

I wish I could tell you that there is some frequency you can play on your radio that will shatter that hardened epoxy and set you free and clear, but no such solution exists to my knowledge. We are forced to first **LOOK AT OURSELVES** and the reality of the situation we are in and at our own actions. We got into this situation slowly, so we must extricate ourselves in a similar manner. Next time someone reaches out with letters showing fraud, follow up. Listen to the exasperated client and see if his accusations hold some truth. Read the full length of the submissions about product defects, not just the top line. Do what you can, where you can. **MAKE A CONSCIOUS EFFORT NOT TO BE BLIND**, not to chose comfort over righteous confrontation, but not to allow it to turn into confrontation for its own sake. If we all do just a little bit for each other, perhaps we can start to see the blue sky again. Maybe we can even start to see the tide turn and remember how good we can have it if we just treat each other with the respect we seek for ourselves. Here is to seeing each other at the breach in the wall someday.

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Celebrating a Trailblazer:

Marie Hicks Honored for 40 Years of Dedicated Service to Charlotte County

By McKinley G. Williams, The SWFL Chronicle

With warmth in her smile, grace in her demeanor, and a legacy carved in excellence, Marie Hicks is closing the chapter on an extraordinary 40-year career of public service to the citizens of Charlotte County. As she retires, the entire community joins together to honor her decades of unwavering dedication, her groundbreaking achievements, and the unmistakable joy she brought to every corner of the Clerk's Office.

From the moment she walked through the doors of the Charlotte County Clerk of the Circuit Court's Office on September 3, 1985, under the leadership of then-Clerk Barbara T. Scott, Marie Hicks began a journey that would touch countless lives and transform not only the processes within the courthouse—but the people working inside it.

"Marie had a humble start and became a rising star, because she cared about helping people."

McKinley G. Williams

Beginning her career as a floater in the Traffic Department, Marie did what others often avoided. She took on the work that was overlooked or underappreciated—disposing of traffic citations by hand, managing backlogs, and lending a helping hand wherever it was needed. Her meticulous nature, strong work ethic, and cheerful attitude quickly caught the attention of supervisors and colleagues alike.

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The SWFL Chronicle Staff Receives SEC Approval to Cover Conference Football Events

NAPLES: STATE OF THE CITY..... 6

CONSTITUTION DAY GALA 24

TO THE LEADERS OF SWFL 22

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we step into the New Year 2026, we pause to thank God for allowing us to see another year. When we look back, many of us can testify that the journey was not easy. We have faced trials, uncertainties, disappointments, and moments when we weren't sure we would make it. Yet, by the grace of God, we are still standing.

Like the Apostle Paul, we acknowledge that we have not yet arrived, but we are committed to "this one thing": forgetting what lies behind and reaching toward what lies ahead. Everything that tried to distract us, delay us, or defeat us in previous seasons, we boldly declare, "Good riddance!"

Paul reminds the church at Philippi that growth in Christ requires focus. Though surrounded by pressure and confusion, they were encouraged to resist distractions and press toward the prize of God's high calling. That same charge is for us today. As believers, we must let go of past failures, disappointments, old habits, and even former successes that can keep us stuck. What is behind us no longer defines us.

In 2026, God is calling us to reach forward to stretch our faith, deepen our commitment, and fix our eyes on Him. Stretching may feel uncomfortable, but it is in the stretching that growth occurs. God is requiring more of us in this season, and as He stretches us, He strengthens us.

Finally, Paul tells us to press. Pressing means continuing forward even when it is difficult. It means trusting God when the journey feels hard and leaning on His Spirit for renewed strength. Our pressing is not just for our benefit it glorifies God and becomes a testimony to those watching us run this race.

As we enter 2026, we declare new strength, new vision, new purpose, and new levels in Christ. We are more than conquerors. We are overcomers. We are pressing forward in faith, leaving the past behind, and claiming victory for everything God has ahead.

Good riddance to the old and glory to God for the new.

Now may the Lord strengthen us with power through His Spirit, order our steps, and lead us forward in victory. We declare it by faith, in Jesus' name. Amen. May God continue to bless you in every area of your life.

With Love,
Pastor Demetrius Thomas
St. Mary Baptist Church of Punta Gorda



Pastor Demetrius Thomas
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**COMMISSIONER
DEUTSCH
NEEDS TO GO!**
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**MR.
CORNELL,
AGENT**
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**MARTY
WISHER
& SWAN
STUDIOS**
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TIME, TALENT & Treasure

MAYOR TERESA LEE HEITMANN
CITY OF NAPLES

239-213-1000
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Lately I have been reflecting on what truly makes Naples such a special place to call home. Beyond our natural beauty and quality of life, it is the people who give of themselves every day.

I think of community leaders, some whose names make headlines or appear on the façades of buildings, and others who work quietly under the radar. I think of people who lead nonprofits, civic efforts, women's groups, business organizations, and environmental causes. I also think of many whose generosity may never be publicly recognized, but whose impact is felt every day across our city.

What connects these individuals is something often called the rule of Time Talent and Treasure. This idea comes from faith traditions that teach stewardship, the belief that we are each entrusted with gifts and called to use them wisely and generously. Over time, this simple philosophy has become part of civic life, too. It reminds us that giving is not only about money. It is about showing up, sharing skills, and caring for others.

In Naples, this way of thinking runs deep.

We see this spirit in programs that give children safe and welcoming places to learn and grow. When adults give their time, their skills, and their support, young people are guided, encouraged, and given the confidence to believe in themselves. These efforts provide stability, opportunity, and hope, helping children build a stronger foundation for the future.

We see it in efforts that protect our land and water as well. Volunteers and leaders work year after year to preserve the natural beauty that defines our region, ensuring future generations can enjoy the same environment we treasure today.

We see it in groups that support families during hard times, offering help, guidance, and a sense of belonging. We see it in business leaders who choose to give back to the community that has supported their success, strengthening our local economy while investing in people. We also see it in volunteers who quietly give hours each week, often behind the scenes, with no expectation of recognition, simply because they care.

These acts of service shape Naples in ways that cannot always be measured. They strengthen families, support children, protect our environment, and build trust and care among neighbors.

Naples is often called a paradise. Some call it the green jewel. While our beaches and sunshine are certainly special, what truly makes Naples remarkable is its people. Our community is blessed because so many choose to live out the values of Time Talent and Treasure in everyday ways.

My hope is that we are all inspired by these generous and compassionate leaders. Each of us has something to give. Whether through volunteering, mentoring, supporting a cause, or simply caring for a neighbor or offering a kind word, we all play a part.

As we live and work together in this beautiful place we call home, let us remember that Naples is strong because of the generosity of its people. For that, I am deeply grateful and wish everyone a joyful and prosperous New Year.

Teresa Heitmann, Naples Mayor

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REP. SHEILA CHERFILUS-
MCCORMICK

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SHERIFF CARMINE MARCENO REMINDS YOU ABOUT...


Income Tax SCAM

As we enter the heart of tax season, Sheriff Carmine Marceno wishes to remind you that fraudulent tax-related activities begin to surface. While the vast majority of tax preparers are trustworthy and well-intentioned, there are those who use the tax-filing process to commit fraudulent and criminal acts.

Choose your tax-preparer carefully! Remember...you are entrusting these people with your most sensitive data.

You are ultimately responsible for the accuracy of your return and need to be certain that your tax preparer isn't fraudulently using your personal information!

IF YOU THINK YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM OF A TAX SCAM, CALL LCSO HEADQUARTERS AT (239) 477-1000.





REFLECTIONS

OF AN EPISCOPAL PRIEST

The Very Rev. A Charles Cannon, III | Saint Hilary's Episcopal Church

THE EPISCOPAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTMAS

As an Episcopal priest in Fort Myers, FL, my view of Christmas is shaped by the three seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany.

THE EPISCOPAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTMAS

In the Episcopal tradition, Christmas is celebrated as the Feast of the Incarnation—the moment when God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. This season is not just about the birth of a child, but about the profound mystery of God choosing to dwell among humanity. Episcopalians emphasize that the Incarnation reveals God's deepest love for creation and God's desire to be intimately involved in all aspects of the human story.

KEY THEMES

- Advent is a four-week journey of preparation and anticipation leading up to Christmas. Each of the four weeks traditionally focuses on a distinct spiritual theme:
- The first purple candle symbolizes hope, which is rooted in the promises of God, especially the hope for the first coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.
- The second purple candle symbolizes peace, which combines the peace that Christ brings into the world and the call for all faithful believers to become peacemakers in the world. There is also a tone of reconciliation, harmony, and natural balance.
- The third candle represents joy and is rose colored with a shift to joy and rejoicing in God's continuing faithfulness to god's

relationship with humans.

- The fourth candle is purple and symbolizes love. The final week of Advent highlights love – essentially God's love – revealed in the "enfleshment" or Incarnation of God in Jesus our Christ.
- Christmas celebrates the Incarnation and the Presence of God among us. Christmas celebrates the birth of "Emmanuel," meaning "God with us." In our celebration, we reflect on how the birth of Jesus brings God's presence into the ordinary and the everyday world, sanctifying all aspects of human life.
- Epiphany celebrates "Light in Darkness": Our worship in this season highlights the bright star of Bethlehem coming with radiant light into a world often marked by darkness, pain, and struggle. The birth of Christ is witnessed by shepherds, townspeople, and sages from the Far East who witness to the new dawn of hope, peace, and reconciliation.

All of our celebrations are open opportunities to engage in community, glorious music, prayer, and holy worship. Episcopal worship at Christmas is rich with tradition—carols, sharing in the Holy Eucharist, and the retelling of the Nativity story. The community of families, friends, neighbors, and guests gathers to rejoice, give thanks, and renew their commitment to living out Christ's love in the world.

This three-season series of events is an invitation to transformation. The Incarnation is not just a historical event but an ongoing invitation and revelation of God in our lives. God's people are called to recognize Christ in others, to serve those in need, and to let the love of God shape their lives.

The Collect for Christmas Day, 1979 Book of Common Prayer,
Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born [this day] of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen

A blessed Christmas to all from the Very Reverend A. Charles Cannon, III, and the people of Saint Hilary's Episcopal Church. In Fort Myers, FL



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10:30 AM Traditional Service with Choir

SCANDAL or RESIGNATION?

IN CHARLOTTE COUNTY

BY VERNON BROWN
THE DUNBAR SHADE TREE PHD.

DEAR CITIZENS OF PUNTA GORDA,

I am writing this letter to express my deep concern and strong disappointment regarding the recent resignation and abrupt departure of Mr. David Levin, the longtime City Attorney for Punta Gorda, during a City Council meeting. Mr. Levin's sudden walkout in the midst of a public, highly consequential discussion was not only unprofessional but also an alarming display of poor business acumen and disregard for the principles of sound municipal governance. He is an unfaithful bastard in my opinion; and reminds me of a kid who takes his ball so other kids can't play if he is NOT picked on the team.

Mr. Levin's resignation may have been precipitated by personal or professional frustrations, particularly given that his contract, in place since 2005, was not renewed and set to expire in July. Nonetheless, the way in which he chose to handle his departure—abandoning his post mid-meeting, without forewarning or appropriate procedural transition—reflects a lack of maturity, professionalism, and respect for the city government, its officials, and, most importantly, the citizens of Punta Gorda who paid his salary. The city should sue him just to send a message.

Municipal leadership depends on structure, stability, and a sense of responsibility from those who hold key roles within its administration. When someone in a pivotal position such as the City Attorney's office chooses to resign publicly and without notice, it disrupts the entire framework of governance. This kind of impulsive action is unbecoming of a legal professional and undermines the decorum expected in public service. Moreover, such behavior during a live meeting with residents present sends a damaging message about the professionalism of the city's leadership to its constituents and the broader public.

Let us remember that public officials are held to a higher standard, especially when entrusted with legal counsel and stewardship. As the City Attorney, Mr. Levin had a duty not only to the council

but to the people of Punta Gorda to ensure a smooth, efficient, and dignified transition of legal authority. Whether or not he agreed with the council's decision to pursue new representation, he owed it to the office he held, and the community he served for nearly two decades, to honor his role until the conclusion of his contract or until an appropriate exit plan was in place.

Instead, Mr. Levin chose to exit with a curt remark—"I'm going to make this easier for y'all"—and left the meeting entirely. That is not leadership. That is not integrity. And that certainly is not a reflection of the values that Punta Gorda seeks to uphold in its public servants.

This sudden departure left the City Council scrambling to find an interim replacement on the spot. While we applaud the council's ability to act swiftly by engaging Mr. Steven Leskovich, the fact remains: this should never have been necessary. Government transitions—especially those involving legal counsel—require thoughtful planning, open communication, and sufficient notice to ensure that critical operations are not jeopardized.

The role of a City Attorney is far from ceremonial. This position oversees essential legal matters, offers guidance on policy decisions, ensures the legality of ordinances, contracts, and resolutions, and advises on potential liabilities and legal risks. It is an office that directly impacts every aspect of city governance. A sudden vacancy, particularly in the middle of a heated discussion about that very office's future, creates vulnerability, confusion, and potentially exposes the city to legal or procedural missteps.

Furthermore, the rationale provided by Mr. Levin for his resignation was deeply troubling. During the meeting, Councilmember Jeannine Polk criticized Levin for his timing in withholding concerns about an agreement with ICE until after it had already been approved. These are the kinds of legal and ethical questions that require the City Attorney to engage constructively and collaboratively—not defensively or



DAVID LEVIN



STEVEN LESKOVICH



JEANNINE POLK



GREG JULIAN

vindictively. Rather than addressing these concerns professionally, Levin opted to terminate his relationship with the city in the moment, in front of his peers and the public.

This was not a dignified exit. It was an act of defiance and frustration. And while everyone is entitled to feel disappointment or disagreement, professionals in high-stakes roles must rise above emotion and do what is in the best interest of the institution they serve.

The resignation’s timing also had budgetary and logistical implications. Vice-Mayor Greg Julian posed a critical question about whether funding would be available to hire an interim City Attorney while Levin’s contract was still in effect—a question that rightly points to the need for financial clarity and continuity. By resigning on the spot, Levin left the council to sort through these issues without the benefit of legal continuity, adding unnecessary stress and ambiguity to an already delicate transition.

Moreover, in terms of broader business practices and organizational integrity, Mr. Levin’s actions run counter to the expectations we place on leaders and public figures. Any reputable legal professional or executive would understand that sudden resignations, especially in a public and adversarial setting, can have severe repercussions—not only for reputation but for operations, morale, and strategic planning.

This is not how one closes out nearly 20 years of public service. Such a lengthy tenure should be honored with grace

and reflection, not ended with dramatics and haste. It is also disheartening for the city’s employees, many of whom likely respected Mr. Levin and expected a transition that mirrored the professionalism they strive to uphold in their own roles.

While Mr. Steven Leskovich has admirably stepped in to fill the gap and appears qualified, the fact that this decision had to be made within the same meeting—essentially off the cuff—further underlines the recklessness of Levin’s exit. Governance should never be left to react in real time to such destabilizing events. It should be given time, forethought, and structure—none of which were afforded to the City Council in this situation.

In the end, public service is about stewardship. It is about placing the community above self-interest. It is about leaving your post better than you found it. Mr. Levin failed in these responsibilities during the final moments of his tenure, and that failure should be acknowledged for what it was: unprofessional, disruptive, and wholly inappropriate for someone of his

experience and stature. I urge the City Council to reflect on this event not just as an isolated incident, but as a reminder of the standards we must hold for those in public service. A transition, even under strained circumstances, must be done with care, communication, and commitment to the public good. Mr. Levin’s actions fell short of these expectations, and his resignation, as it was conducted, sets a troubling precedent for how public servants may feel empowered to depart when circumstances no longer suit them.

The people of Punta Gorda deserve better. They deserve professionalism, accountability, and respect from all who serve in city leadership. Abrupt exits, especially those made in public defiance, do not represent those values. They represent abandonment—and in the realm of public duty, there are few things more damaging.

Good Riddens David! Thanks for letting us know how you really felt about your job as Attorney for the City of Punta Gorda.



Attorney Joe North



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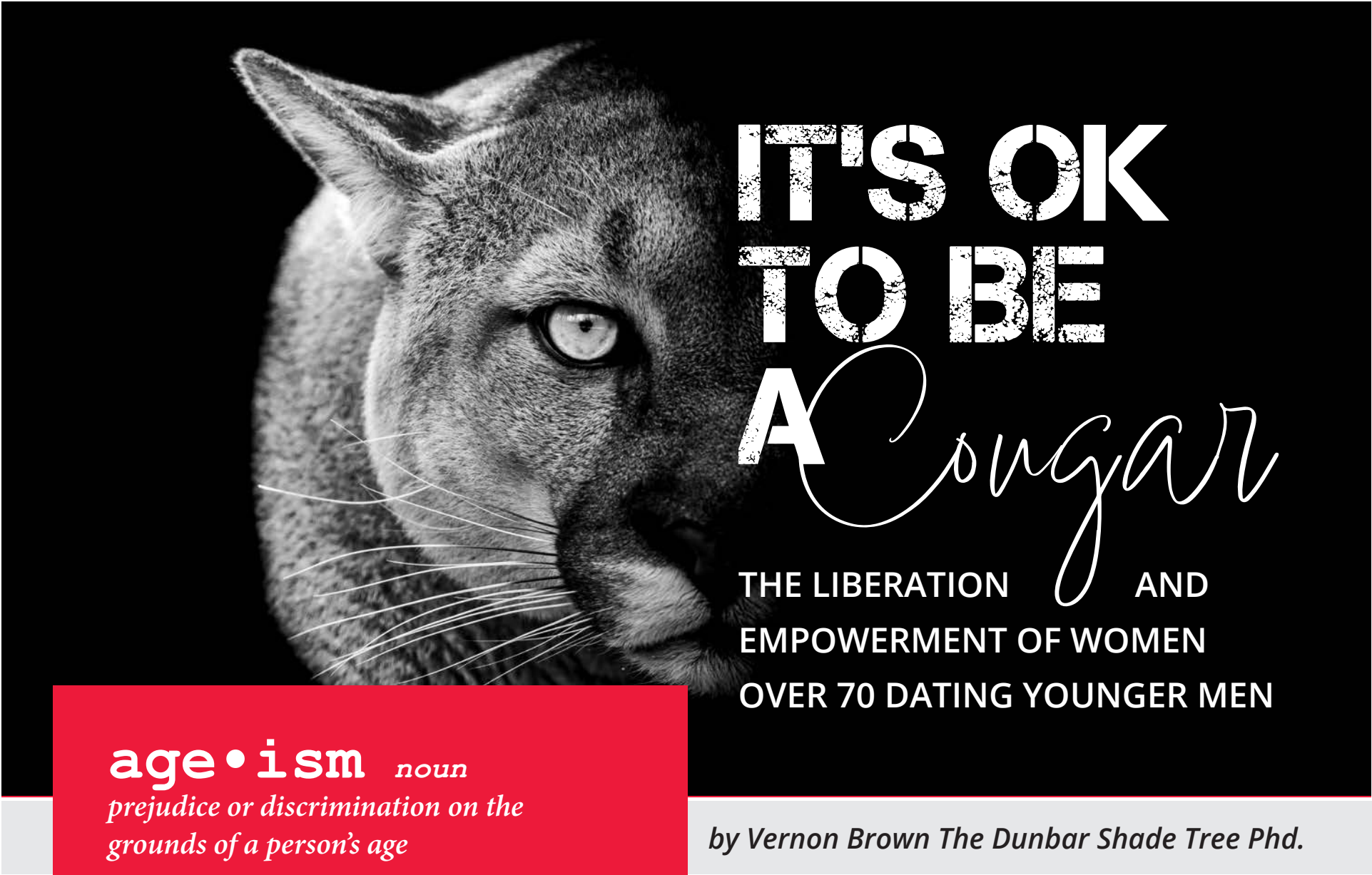
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IT'S OK TO BE A Cougar

THE LIBERATION AND
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN
OVER 70 DATING YOUNGER MEN

age•ism *noun*
*prejudice or discrimination on the
grounds of a person's age*

by Vernon Brown The Dunbar Shade Tree Phd.

In recent years, society has witnessed a remarkable shift in dating norms, particularly among women over 70 who are choosing to engage in relationships with younger men. This phenomenon challenges age-old stereotypes and celebrates the empowerment and liberation of older women. Why being a cougar – defined as a mature woman who dates younger men – is not only beneficial but also a positive society trend. You can see the reasons behind the growing number of women over 70 entering such relationships and the numerous advantages it brings for both individuals and society as a whole.

BREAKING THE MOLD: DEFYING AGE AND GENDER NORMS

The Isley Brothers had a hit song in 1969 “It’s Your Thang, do what you want to do. I can’t tell you who to sock it to.” Traditionally, society has imposed rigid standards regarding relationships, often dictating that women should seek partners who are older or at least the same age. In other words, society wants to tell women “who to sock it to.” However, the rise of the cougar phenomenon disrupts these norms, challenging age beliefs and outdated gender roles. By dating younger men, women over 70 assert their new norm and reject the notion that their romantic pursuits should be confined by arbitrary age boundaries.

Moreover, these relationships serve as a powerful statement against ageism, highlighting the beauty and desirability of older women. By embracing their sexuality and pursuing relationships with younger partners, these women shatter stereotypes and inspire others to embrace their age with pride rather than shame.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-CONFIDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

Entering into relationships with younger men can be an empowering experience for women over 70. It often requires a strong sense of self-confidence and independence, qualities that are honed over years of life experience. By choosing partners who may be significantly younger, these women demonstrate a willingness to assert their desires and prioritize their own happiness above society’s expectations.

Furthermore, dating younger men can invigorate older women, fostering a sense of vitality and rejuvenation. The excitement of a new romance can reignite passion and enthusiasm, leading to a more fulfilling and enriching life in later years. Rather than resigning themselves to the sidelines of romance, these women actively engage in the pursuit of love and companionship, embracing the opportunities that come their way.

MUTUAL FULFILLMENT AND COMPANIONSHIP

Contrary to stereotypes, relationships between older women and younger men are not solely based on physical attraction. Instead, they often stem from genuine emotional connections and shared interests. Both parties bring unique perspectives and life experiences to the relationship, enriching each other’s lives in meaningful ways.

For younger men, dating older women can offer valuable insights and wisdom, as well as a deeper understanding of themselves and their goals. Conversely, older women benefit from the enthusiasm and vitality that younger partners bring, creating a dynamic and fulfilling partnership based on mutual respect and admiration.

Moreover, these relationships provide companionship and support, which are especially important in later life. By building strong emotional bonds with younger partners, women over 70 can enjoy fulfilling relationships that enhance their overall well-being and quality of life. Which explains why “Stella got her groove back.”

CHALLENGING AGE-GAP STIGMA: DISPELLING MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Despite the numerous benefits of cougar relationships, they are often met with skepticism and judgment from society. Age-gap stigma persists, fueled by outdated stereotypes and misconceptions. However, it's essential to challenge these preconceived notions and recognize that love knows no age limit.

Firstly, concerns about the longevity of such relationships are unfounded. Research has shown that age differences have minimal impact on relationship satisfaction and stability when other factors such as compatibility and communication are strong. By focusing on the quality of the connection rather than age disparities, cougar couples can build lasting and meaningful partnerships.

Secondly, the assumption that younger men pursue older women solely for financial gain or a fleeting thrill is misguided. While financial security may be a factor in some cases, it is rarely the primary motivation for entering into these relationships. Instead, mutual respect, emotional connection, and shared values are the foundation of successful cougar partnerships.

EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN LOVE

As society becomes more inclusive and accepting of diverse relationship dynamics, it's crucial to celebrate the myriad ways in which people express love and companionship. Cougar relationships represent a beautiful example of age-positive romance, challenging stereotypes and expanding the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in dating.

By embracing the cougar lifestyle, women over 70 reclaim their position and assert their right to pursue happiness and fulfillment on their own terms. They refuse to be defined by their age and instead embrace their sexuality, vitality, and zest for life. In doing so, they inspire others to break free from society's constraints and live authentically, regardless of age or conventional expectations.

The growing number of women over 70 who choose to date younger men represents a powerful shift in societal attitudes toward age, gender, and relationships. By defying age stereotypes and embracing their desires, these women reclaim their position and assert their right to love and companionship at any age. Cougar relationships offer mutual fulfillment, companionship, and empowerment for both partners, challenging age-gap stigma and promoting inclusivity in love.

As we celebrate the liberation and empowerment of women over 70 who date younger men, let us recognize the beauty and strength of these relationships. They embody the resilience, wisdom, and vitality of older women, serving as a testament to the transformative power of love, regardless of age or societal norms. In a world that often seeks to confine individuals within narrow definitions of acceptability, cougar relationships remind us that love knows no bounds and that true liberation comes from living authentically and fearlessly.

So Remember The Isley Brothers 1969 hit song “ It’s Your Thang. Do what you want to do...” and know that “It’s Ok to Be a Cougar.”



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MEMO TO THE COMMUNITY:

A Year of Fulfilled Commitments

On November 19, 2024, I had the honor of being sworn in as Lee County's first elected Superintendent of Schools in fifty years. That day was more than a personal milestone. It marked a turning point for our

community. For the first time in decades, the people of Lee County had a direct voice in choosing who would lead their school district. You placed your trust in me, and I have worked every day to honor that trust through action, accountability, and results.

After more than thirty years serving as a teacher, principal, and district leader, I have always believed that Lee County has a sound school system. This year, we began the work of becoming a great one. We focused on strengthening our foundation, modernizing outdated systems, and putting students, families, and teachers back at the center of every decision we make. Our shared vision of a world-class school system is taking shape across six key priorities that guided our work from day one.

1. SAFE AND SECURE SCHOOLS

Nothing matters more than safety. This year, we built on previous security investments, including the OPENGATE weapons detection system, by expanding training, upgrading critical equipment, and securing an additional \$2.9 million in state safety funding.

We also addressed long-standing transportation challenges through the Safe Start Initiative, which restructured routes, improved operations, and strengthened driver recruitment and training. These steps led to safer, more reliable arrivals for thousands of students across Lee County.

2. STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND LEARNING TIME

We set out to restore focus in the classroom and give students more time to learn. The new "bell-to-bell" policy limiting personal device use during the school day is helping reduce distractions, while the addition of 30 minutes to the high school schedule has created 42 extra hours of instruction each year. These changes, along with improved transportation efficiency that brought on-time arrival rates to 95% in the morning last week are helping ensure that every student starts the day ready to learn.

3. CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION EXPANSION

Preparing students for tomorrow's workforce remains a top priority. This year, we expanded career and technical pathways with new programs in Applied Robotics, Solar Technology, and Environmental Water and Reclamation, all aligned with local job markets.

Agriculture, marine, and veterinary assisting programs now reach 10 high schools, and we launched Xello, a K-12 platform that helps students plan their futures through career

exploration and goal-setting.

These programs reflect our belief that success has many paths and every student deserves the opportunity to find theirs.

4. TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Strong schools start with strong teachers. Through Project Believe, we reduced teacher vacancies from 575 in April to just 37 by the first day of school, a tremendous milestone. As of today, there are 19 teacher vacancies.

We also launched the Teacher Incentive Initiative, offering up to \$9,000 in bonuses to educators serving at-risk schools. This has helped place experienced, high-performing teachers where they are needed most, giving students greater stability and support in the classroom.

5. FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EFFICIENT OPERATIONS

We took a hard look at every dollar spent. Every administrative department implemented a five percent budget reduction, and we reorganized several district functions to reduce duplication and streamline operations. These efforts produced more than twenty million dollars in operational savings. Those funds have been redirected into the highest teacher pay raises in the state of Florida, in addition to other classroom priorities.

Fiscal responsibility is more than good accounting. It is a promise to taxpayers that their investment is used wisely and transparently.

6. PARENT PARTNERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

Parents are our greatest partners in student success. This year, we launched a Parent Task Force to strengthen collaboration with district leadership and held a series of community town halls across Lee County. Families now have more opportunities than ever to share feedback and engage directly with school and district leaders.

We also simplified the student assignment process and created easy-to-follow video guides to make online enrollment more accessible for parents. These changes reflect our commitment to service, communication, and partnership.

LOOKING AHEAD

This has been a year of rebuilding trust and real progress. Together, we have made our schools safer, our classrooms stronger, and our district more accountable to the people we serve.

We are also planning for the future, investing in new schools, modernizing aging facilities, and creating the foundation for long-term success. Our goal remains the same: to make Lee County a model for excellence in public education.

Thank you for your continued support, encouragement, and partnership. Together, we are proving that when we set high expectations and work with purpose, great things happen for our students.

Sincerely,
Dr. Denise Carlin, Superintendent of Schools

I was one way and now I am completely different, and something has happened in between.

She has rise with the courage of 1000 soldiers. Courage isn't the absence of fear but facing your fear. The roar of a lion. She is rising. She is done looking back questioning herself and dwelling on mistakes. Like the dawn of a new day, brighter, stronger, powerful, battled, struggled and fought. She climbs the mountain she is faced with. She is a warrior with a spirit of fire. A strong heart. This walk isn't for the weary. This day has been a long time coming. Sure. She may be afraid, and doesn't have all the answers... but she knows she doesn't have to.

Where do you put your trust? She's been knocked down,dragged through failure and broken over and over. Those challenges don't define her... never defined her. Her time is now. She's taking back her life and her voice will be heard. Sounding with both passion and conviction. She is standing in front of the storm that sought to bring her to her knees. No more wavering. No more compromise. She will be unmovable. Resilient. And now I become the storm. You will get through this. You always do.

Don't get caught up in the moment and forget who you are. Even if she doubts herself she keeps going keeps fighting keeps rising. It hasn't always been easy, quite the opposite in fact, she is dangerous to the enemy because she knows what it is like to fall and get back up 1000 times. She is not afraid of breaking. She is strong that is the way that she has survived.

The cycle is broken.

Only this time she will not settle for normal. She wants more than average and ordinary. This time she fights for more. The part that has been lost along the way. It's about how you persevere. In every way. Slaying her own strongholds. Her armor has grown with each setback she has faced. She will make it to the other side. She is becoming the person she was meant to be.

Her story is raw, real and passionate. Do not underestimate



the power of consistency and the power of determination. If you really want something... allow your desire to push you to the goal. Exceed your expectations. She will confuse them with her silence and amaze them with her actions. Walk with the wise and become wise. There is always, always, always something to be grateful for.

The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering. Tears dry up. Smiles fade. But memories last forever. That risk that you are afraid to take will change your life. She is proof you can have your heart broken and be able to navigate through the dark place. How beautiful. Let people love you for who you are and not for what they want you to be. Not everyone who desires access to your life, your heart, and your spirit are worthy of it. Protect it and protect your time... your most valuable asset. Give it to those who will appreciate it. If you don't go after what you want you will never have it. Move forward so you are not in the same place. You have overcome the things you once thought you couldn't. There is nothing wrong with her she has patterns to unlearn.



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A Thank You Letter

to Mr. Cornell – Agent from the Dunbar Community

Dear Mr. Agent,

On behalf of the entire Dunbar Community, we extend our deepest gratitude and heartfelt appreciation for all that you have done—and continue to do—to preserve, uplift, and celebrate the proud heritage of our neighborhood. Your tireless dedication to keeping the traditions and history of Dunbar alive through the Annual Easter Parade, the Dunbar All-Class Reunion, and your countless efforts as a community organizer have left an indelible mark on every one of us.

The Dunbar community has always stood as a beacon of unity, resilience, and pride. Our neighborhood's story is one of perseverance, culture, and connection—a story that could easily fade with time if not for individuals like you who take it upon themselves to ensure that our legacy continues. Through your leadership and commitment, you have helped preserve not just events, but the very spirit of Dunbar—the laughter of our children, the memories of our elders, and the sense of belonging that ties us all together.

The Dunbar Easter Parade has become far more than an annual celebration; it is a living tribute to our shared history and community pride. Year after year, you have organized, coordinated, and inspired volunteers, families, and local organizations to come together in joy and fellowship. You have turned what could have been a simple procession into a powerful symbol of unity—a moment when generations come together to celebrate who we are, where we come from, and the values that continue to guide us.

Likewise, the Dunbar All-Class Reunion has become a cornerstone of our community identity. Through your vision and guidance, former students, teachers, and friends from near and far have been able to reconnect and reminisce about the formative experiences that shaped their lives. What began as a gathering of classmates has evolved—under your direction—into a tradition that strengthens bonds across decades. You have created a space where history lives, memories are honored, and new friendships are born. These reunions have rekindled a sense of belonging and pride that is felt deeply by everyone who has ever called Dunbar home.

Your work as a community organizer has gone beyond

event planning. You have become a steward of our history, a guardian of our traditions, and a mentor to those who follow in your footsteps. Your ability to bring people together—regardless of age, background, or circumstance—has been nothing short of inspiring. You remind us that community is not just about geography; it is about shared purpose, love, and the collective will to build something meaningful together.

In a time when so many neighborhoods struggle to hold on to their roots, Dunbar continues to thrive because of leaders like you. You have shown us the importance of honoring our past while building for the future. You have taught us that preserving tradition is not about clinging to what was, but about keeping our stories alive for generations to come. Every parade, every reunion, every handshake and smile shared under your leadership reflects your passion and commitment to this community.

We recognize the countless hours, the personal sacrifices, and the quiet determination that go into making these events possible year after year. Your work often happens behind the scenes, but its impact is visible everywhere—in the joy on the faces of our children, in the gratitude of our elders, and in the renewed sense of unity that fills our streets. Because of you, the Dunbar name continues to stand for excellence, community, and pride.

As we look to the future, we want you to know that your efforts have not gone unnoticed. The Dunbar Community is stronger, prouder, and more connected because of you. You have not only preserved our traditions—you have strengthened our identity and inspired us all to give back, to stay involved, and to continue celebrating the rich legacy that makes Dunbar so special.

Thank you, Mr. Cornell Agent, for being a steadfast leader, a passionate organizer, and a true pillar of our community. Your work ensures that the heartbeat of Dunbar will continue to echo through the years, reminding future generations of the power of heritage, togetherness, and love for one's community.

***With sincere appreciation and warmest regards,
The Dunbar Community***



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FMRWC OFFICER INDUCTION *(from left)*

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5220 Summerlin Commons Blvd., Suite 300 | Fort Myers, Florida 33907