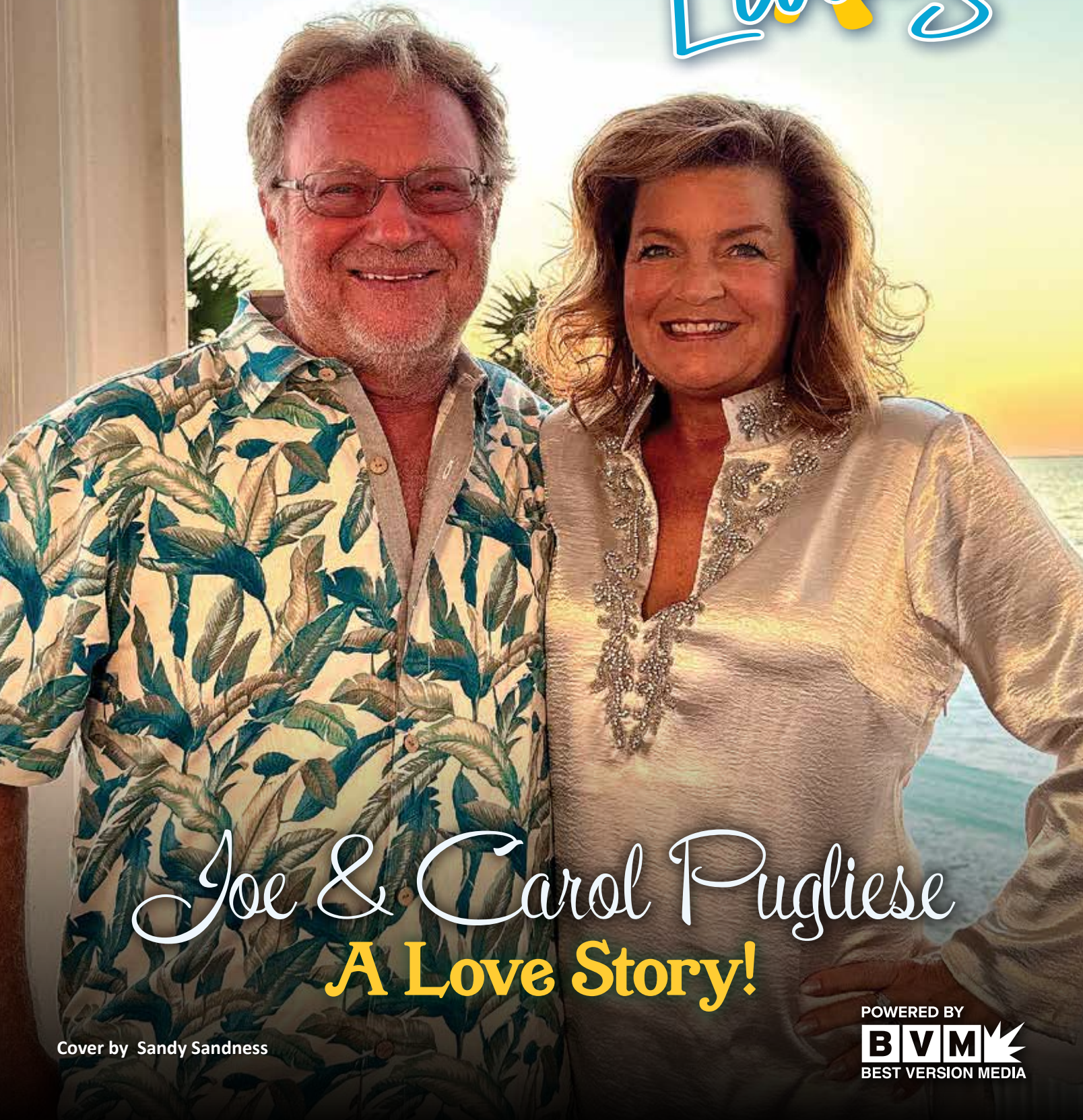


An exclusive magazine serving the residents of Fort Myers Beach

February 2025

FORT MYERS BEACH



Joe & Carol Pugliese A Love Story!

Cover by Sandy Sandness

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FORT MYERS BEACH

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FEEDBACK / IDEAS / SUBMISSIONS

Have feedback, ideas or submissions? We are always happy to hear from you! Deadlines for submissions are the 20th of each month, 6 weeks in advance of publication. Email your thoughts, ideas and photographs to gmooney@bestversionmedia.com. Submissions must be original and exclusive to Fort Myers Beach LIVING, at a maximum of 500 words. Fort Myers Beach LIVING reserves the right to edit submissions for clarity, space limitations and spelling.

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- Emergency: 911
- Lee County Sheriff's Office: 239-477-1000
- FMB Fire Department: 239-590-4200
- FMB Town Hall: 239-765-0202
- FMB Public Library: 239-765-8162
- Lee County Parks & Recreation: 239-533-7275
- Beach Elementary School: 239-463-6356
- FMB Water Department: 239-463-9914
- Trash Collection: 239-334-1224
- Florida Power & Light (FPL): 1-800-226-5885
- CenturyLink: 239-335-3111
- Comcast Cable Company: 239-432-9277
- FMB Chamber of Commerce: 239-454-7500

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SUDOKU

- By Gary Mooney -

SUDOKU RULES:

Each row must contain the digits 1-9.

Each column must contain the digits 1-9.

Each box must contain the digits 1-9.

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Answers on page 10



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Hello Friends & Neighbors!

Happy Valentine's Day!

Every February 14, we all celebrate a simple four-letter word: "Love!" I grew up in Missouri as a "Beatles Kid," as many in my generation did, and we took these words seriously: "All you need is love!"

All of us ended up on Fort Myers Beach for basically the same reason: once upon a time, we all drove over one of our two bridges and immediately fell in love with FMB! That first glance of the Gulf and our sugar-white sand beaches captured our hearts and souls in a vice grip that remains to this day.

"Where there is love, there is life"

– Mahatma Gandhi

Hurricane Ian however ravaged our community in September 2022 and those reverberations continue, not only today but for the immediate future. As such, FMB is still in the early phases of its long rebuild. Our Town Council is making monumental decisions as to how this rebuild will look and not everyone will agree with their direction. Whether you do or not, please don't make it personal or take it personally. FMB has always been a community based on love and we are all neighbors in the end, so please love and respect one-another.

"And remember, my sentimental friend, that a heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others."

– The Wizard of Oz

When you keep love in your heart, everything else becomes better. The sky is bluer, the water blue-greener, and the stresses of life less intense. We all uttered this phrase hundreds of times: "I Love FMB!" As the landscape of our island evolves, whether you agree with it or not, keep love in your heart. Treasure your old neighbors, find the best in your new neighbors and respect each other because, without love, what do we really have?

"And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make."

– The Beatles

Speaking of Love, continue to love and support our advertisers because we cannot deliver *Fort Myers Beach LIVING* to you free of charge without them. When you do visit, let them know you saw their ad in our magazine so we can continue to provide you with this original entertainment each month!

I Love You All & Have An Awesome Beach Day!



Sandy Sandness

Publisher

Fort Myers Beach LIVING

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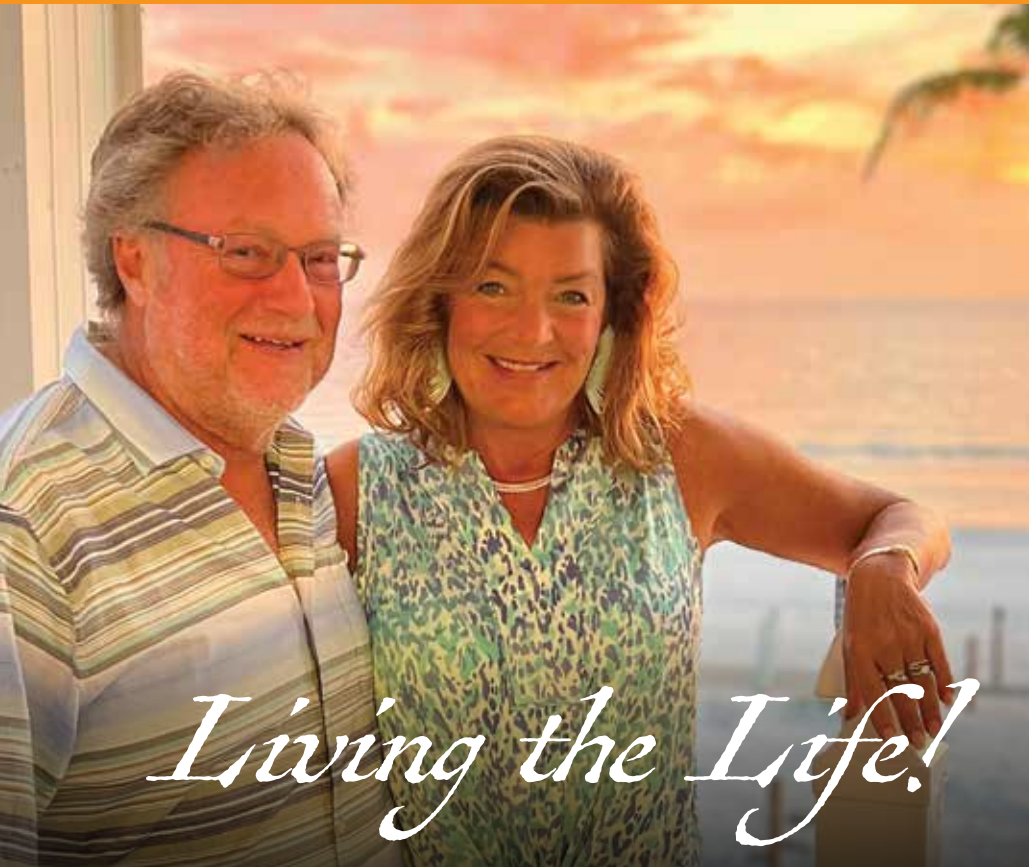
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Joe & Carol Pugliese Find Island Life Wonderful

- By Gary Mooney -

Joe and Carol Pugliese are natives of the Keystone State, with Carol from Erie, Pennsylvania. "Erie has a lovely state park and is actually a beautiful town – in the summer! As everyone knows, it has rugged winters and that is why we are on FMB!" Joe hails from Farrell, Pennsylvania, "a mill town near Youngstown, Ohio. My grandfather, mother, father and I worked in the steel mill." These days, Carol and Joe live on FMB for the seven winter months but return to Erie for the summer, residing in the home in which Carol was born and raised, that she affectionately calls "The Lake House."

Joe has two children from a prior marriage – Katie and Sam. "They are both married," he says, "with Katie in Washington DC with Sam in Vallejo, California, so they are about as far apart geographically as possible. We do not have any grandchildren yet but are hopeful."

A Fairy Tale Love Story

Carol calls their meeting and courtship "a fairy tale love story! I was an indepen-

dent girl who never married and had a 30-year career as a waitress at this great family restaurant near the state park in Erie. This guy comes in with his son, and even though they are not at my table, I notice he is playing 'Words With Friends' and I am a 'Words With Friends' enthusiast, so I said to him, 'play me!' Joe and I began to play, then chatted during the games, and after several months of just being friends, we fell in love and it has been wonderful ever since."

Joe proposed to Carol at a surprise 50th birthday party with close friends, and they married in their FMB home's yard in April 2018. "That time of my life is special for two reasons," recalls Carol. "Not only did I marry Joe, but I am a proud breast cancer survivor. I finished my radiation treatments a month before the wedding and remain healthy today!"

"The Gingerbread House"

Joe discovered FMB while on a South-west Florida golfing trip with several buddies. "I rented a car to see what

the area looked like, so I drove up and down the coast. I stopped on FMB, took a walk down the beach and spotted a house mid-island, across from the Publix Supermarket and what was then Newton Beach Park, that I immediately loved. I approached the owners, saying 'you have the prettiest house on the beach' and asked if it was for sale but it was not. We opted to rent a house for six-week vacations for the next two years, then that house came up for sale and we bought it. When I was younger, I set two goals: that I would own my own business that I started with a box of credit cards and that took 30 years, and that I would own a beach house and that took 40 years but I accomplished both!" "Everyone knows our house," adds Carol. "People either refer to it as the 'Clock House' because of the old front porch clock or the 'Gingerbread House' because of its grey and white Victorian look."

Carol and Joe are retirees. "My typical day starts at 5 a.m.," he relates, "drinking a cup of coffee while sitting on the porch looking at the stars and listening to the waves, as we must be the closest house to the beach on the entire island." "Photography is my passion," crows Carol! "Wildlife, birds, dolphin, landscapes – you name it. Joe on the other hand still 'works' – it's called golf!" "I golf four days a week," he says, "even though it is an hour commute each way to my favorite course."

Carol & Joe's Wedding Day at their FMB home.





Carol has an incredible talent for photographing local wildlife!

Waves, Wind & Fire

Like almost everyone on FMB, hurricanes now challenge Carol and Joe. “We were up north during Ian and we suffered two long days not knowing if we had a house,” recalls Joe. “My nephew saw a film from a helicopter ride over FMB and recognized our home and that is how we knew it survived.” “Scientists later determined that mid-island was Ground Zero for FMB’s storm surge,” Carol adds. “They placed it at 21 feet and mid-island is us!”

When they could finally return to FMB after Ian, Joe and the Best Man from their wedding loaded a van with everything they needed to start the restoration. “Tools, wood, fencing and anything else we could think of,” he states. “Soon a third friend joined us and we hooked up a generator for electricity and attached a pump to a neighbor’s well for the house plumbing. Fortunately, our home has a 16-1/2-foot elevation but unfortunately Ian produced a 21-foot surge that sent waves through our living room. It was only after we began the work that we discovered that we lost four of the porch’s six support beams and if we lost one more, the porch would mostly likely pull the rest of the house down with it.”

“After working our tails off, we moved back in less than a month,” Carol continues. “We had new windows, furniture and appliances. We welcomed our first company since Ian, and I was showing my sister and a friend how beautiful everything was, then I said, ‘let’s go to the pool.’ Suddenly we heard a huge BOOM! The metal bucket used by the construction crew removing the foundation of the old Newton Beach Park house hit the power line that shot through the cable line up the telephone pole to our cable line and our home started on fire! A construction worker pounded on our door, saying the exterior of the house was on fire and he put it out with a fire extinguisher. We thought everything was all right but a minute later, my sister sees smoke billowing from behind the TV mounted to the wall. We pulled out the TV console and I yanked out the smoking wires and called the FMB Fire Department.”

Déjà vu All Over Again

Joe and Carol were in Pennsylvania when Helene struck in September 2024. “While our elevated house was fine, a friend sent us a photograph showing that the surge filled in our swimming



After Ian, Frankie Caron painted this beautiful mural of the side of their house to keep the beach “vibe” going.

pool with sand and did considerable damage to our fencing, so we hired a company to remove the sand and get everything up and running,” says Joe. “Then less than a week later, Milton comes through and fills the pool with sand and damages the fencing and we start all over again.”

“Like Sandy Sandness said recently in ‘FMB LIVING Magazine,’ it was Helene that really got to me,” Carol offers. “It was hundreds of miles from FMB and not supposed to harm us at all, then the storm surge rolls through and it is déjà vu all over again. We are hanging in there but this year’s upcoming hurricane season will tell us a lot. How many years can we

continued on page 14

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“Marker #1 is down by the Collier County line and it goes all the way up to Marker #99 at the Charlotte County line, with a lot of spots and sights in-between.”

launch from the very same spot as the Calusa did hundreds of years ago and can paddle to places like Mound Key, just like they did, and that is amazing! Then after you return, visit the Mound House and make a day of it.”

While the Blueway technically surrounds FMB, “we only put GCB trail markers on the backwater to keep kayakers safe from the beach side’s heavy boat traffic,” Mike states. “I myself love to paddle around Estero and Hell Peckney Bays but I encourage you to do so with the assistance of a GCB map or the app as once you get out in the mangroves, you can get all turned-around, as that happened to me! When you paddle south of FMB, there are several great spots to see and visit, like Big Hickory Pass, Little Hickory Pass and Lovers Key State Park. The wildlife is terrific, as the beach is a great place to witness dolphin and manatees; if you think it is wonderful to see one from the shore, wait until you experience one swimming right past you out on the water!”

The Great Calusa Blueway

Paddling Waterway Celebrates 20th Anniversary

- by Gary Mooney, photo by Mike Hammond & Lee County Parks & Recreation -

“The Great Calusa Blueway (GCB) is a 190-mile paddling trail that runs the length of Lee County,” says Mike Hammond, the Calusa Blueway Coordinator for Lee County Parks & Recreation. “Marker #1 is down by the Collier County line and it goes all the way up to Marker #99 at the Charlotte County line, with a lot of spots and sights in-between. To make your paddling experience more enjoyable, Lee County provides GCB maps, apps and a website, along with related programming, to make it easy for people to get out on the water. Lee County began forming the GCB in 2000, made it official in 2001, and the last marker went up in 2005 so we are now celebrating its 20-year anniversary!”

were the first waterway people in Florida and had a village at the Mound House site, and that is what makes the Mound House such a special and unique place to access the GCB – you

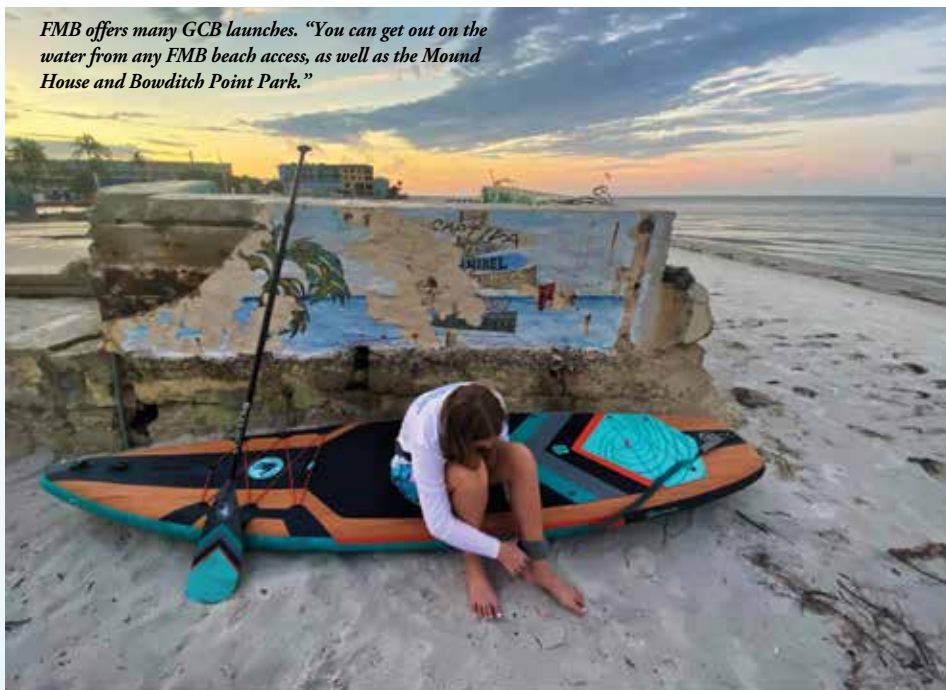
Mike explains that, in addition to the Mound House, FMB offers many GCB launches. “You can get out on the water from any FMB beach access, as well as Bowditch Point Park, though I caution anyone who uses Bowditch to be aware



of the main channel's boat traffic. One of my best options is to launch from Bunche Beach that is on the mainland right across from FMB. You can paddle out to the island, enjoying the weather, water and wildlife, without fighting your way over the bridges jammed with heavy traffic! Unfortunately, our recent spate of hurricanes damaged some kayak launches around Matanzas Pass that are still under repair but there are plenty of other spots around FMB to get out on the GCB."

Always Something New on the GCB!

The best way to maximize your time on the GCB, Mike advises, is to pick up a map, access the app or visit Google Search. "We stock GCB maps at all the area kayak and bait shops, or stop by any Lee County Parks & Recreation department or center to get one. If you cannot personally do that, then call me at 239-707-7981 and I will mail one to you. If you have questions, are new to the GCB, or are looking for



FMB offers many GCB launches. "You can get out on the water from any FMB beach access, as well as the Mound House and Bowditch Point Park."

some ways to maximize your experience or tour a portion of the trail that is new to you, please call me as I am

here to help you! For example, if you really want to see manatee, based on that day's wind direction, water tem-

continued on page 11





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February

EVERY DAY

FREE LeeTran Beach Tram

@FMB Public Library to Bowditch Point Park
The FREE LeeTran Beach Tram runs every 35 minutes 7 days a week from the FMB Public Library to Bowditch Point Park and back, with the first tram each day leaving from the FMB Library at 9:30am and the last departing Bowditch Point at 10:35 p.m. See www.leegov.com.

**Monday Through Friday
Bay Oaks Recreational Center**

@Bay Oaks Recreational Center
As of press time, The Bay Oaks Recreational Center remains closed following Hurricanes Helene & Milton. To learn its current status, see www.fortmyersbeachfl.org.

CLUB REC!

@FMB Public Library
Bay Oaks hosts this incredible "After School Program" for Beach Elementary School students EVERY Monday through Friday throughout the academic year from 2 to 6 p.m., with games, snacks & homework time. \$125 for FMB residents & \$175 for non-residents for the entire school year!

**Sunday, February 2
AND EVERY SUNDAY**

Bayside Park Concert Series

@Bayside Park
Relax while listening to fantastic tunes from local musicians at these FREE weekly outdoor concerts from 4 to 7 p.m.! February 2: "Soapy Tuna"; February 9: "Guilty Pleasure"; February 16; "TBA"; February 23: "The Echo." See www.fortmyersbeach.org.

**Monday, February 3
FMB Town Council Meeting**

@Town Hall, Bay Oaks Recreational Center
The FMB Town Council continues its work to rebuild FMB at 9am; see www.fortmyersbeachfl.gov.

**Mondays, February 3 & 17
Caribbean Cruise-In Car Show**

@Parrot Key Caribbean Grill
The largest FMB Car Show returns on the 1st & 3rd Monday of each month through April. Enjoy music, food and prizes while marveling at these fantastic cars! The free car show is from 3 to 6 p.m.; see www.myparrotkey.com.

**Wednesday, February 5
Mound House Museum,
Grounds & Store**

@The Historic Mound House
Built in 1921, the Mound House is the oldest standing structure on FMB. It is a multi-level museum that displays Calusa artifacts, interactive exhibits and the one-of-a-kind 1,600-year-old underground shell mound attraction. Wednesdays through Saturdays 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with Grounds daily from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Adults \$15, Students \$8, Kids 6 to 12 \$5, & 5 & under free; Grounds free. See www.moundhouse.org.

**Thursday, February 6
FMB Chamber "Coffee Connection"**

@TBD
Start your day with your FMB Chamber friends for networking with complimentary coffee and tasty breakfast items. The FREE "Coffee Connection" is from 8 to 9:30 a.m.; for the location, see www.fortmyersbeach.org.

**Thursday, February 6
FMB Town Council Management
& Planning Session**

@Town Hall, Bay Oaks Recreational Center
The FMB Town Council continues its work to rebuild FMB at 9 a.m.; see www.fortmyersbeachfl.gov.

**Thursday, February 6
AND EVERY THURSDAY
THROUGH APRIL**

Santini Marina Plaza Market

@Santini Marina Plaza
This FMB South End Market offers fresh produce, artisan foods, arts, crafts, clothing and more EVERY Thursday through May from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; see www.41markets.com.

**Friday & Saturday, February 7 & 8
AND EVERY FRIDAY & SATURDAY
Moss Marina Farmer's Market**

@Moss Marina
Savor scrumptious food items, along with lovely arts & crafts, EVERY Friday and Saturday at 450 Old San Carlos Boulevard through May from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; see www.mossmarina.com.

**Saturdays., February 8 & 15
"American Boating Course"**

@San Carlos Bay Squadron Classroom
This 2-day, 8-hour basic boating class includes Florida navigation rules and how to deal with water emergencies. \$65-per-person & \$20 each additional person from 8:15 a.m. to Noon; see www.scbps.com.

**Saturday, February 8
2nd Annual "Mrs. Roper's Back
to The Beach Caftan Crawl!"**

@Bayside Park
A curly red wig, a caftan, and some chunky accessories are all one needs to conjure up the surprisingly beloved Helen Roper! Join us for the 2nd Annual "Caftan Crawl," a groovy celebration to benefit FMB Strong. Whether you are a longtime fan of Mrs. Roper or just love an excuse to dress up in bold colors and funky patterns, this event is for you! Visit eight FMB bars, making each of them your own "Regal Beagle!" For just \$20, your ticket includes a Custom Finisher's Medal, Stadium Cup, Swag Bag & More! Purchase tickets at <https://donorbox.org/roper-tickets>.



**Monday, February 10
CROW Campus Tours**

@Center for the Rehabilitation Of Wildlife
An in-depth look at what the animal patients experience, from intake to release, including the hospital and treatment process. The 90-minute tour is Monday through Friday at 11 a.m.; \$25-per-person with advance registration and payment necessary at 239-472-3644, x-229 or reservations@crowclinic.org.

**Tuesday, February 11
FMB Art Association
Spring Art Show "Awakening"**

@First Presbyterian Church Bonita Springs
"Awakening" runs through Thursday, March 11 at the First Presbyterian Church Bonita Springs at 9751 Bonita Beach Road SE daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. FREE; see www.fortmyersbeachart.com.

**Tuesday, February 11
FMB Local Planning Agency Meeting**

@Town Hall, Bay Oaks Recreational Center
The FMB LPA, appointed by Town Council, continues its work to rebuild FMB at 9 a.m.; see www.fortmyersbeachfl.gov.

**Wednesday, February 12
Mound House Eco-Kayak Tours**

@The Historic Mound House
Explore the winding mangrove creeks and hidden backwaters of the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve on this 2-hour tour. The MH provides all equipment; ages 12 & up, weather permitting and participants must wear shoes and bring water. The Eco-Kayak Tours are every Wednesday through Saturday from 9 to 11 a.m. \$50-per-person in-

SUDOKU

Answers from page 3

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cluding MH admission, with reservations necessary at www.moundhouse.org.

Wednesday, February 12
FMB Community Foundation
Monthly Meeting

@The Island Pancake House
 Join the best club on the entire island! Food & drink for purchase from the restaurant and all are welcome at 6:30 p.m.; see www.fmb-wc.org.

Thursday, February 13
FMB Chamber
Membership Luncheon

@La Ola Surfside Restaurant @ Bell Tower
 Join your FMB Chamber friends to savor a scrumptious luncheon from La Ola Surfside Restaurant at Bell Tower from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. The Guest Speaker is Toni Finley of Finley Inc. Marketing Services & Consulting. \$30 members and \$40 perspective members; see www.fortmyersbeach.org.

Thursday, February 13
FMBWC Social: Broadway Palms /
“The Buddy Holly Story”

@Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre
 Join the FMB Woman’s Club as we enjoy “The Buddy Holly Story!” \$95 per person includes the show, dinner and gratuity. Meet at the Broadway Palm lobby for cocktails at 5 p.m., with dinner at 5:30 and the curtain rising at 7:30. Email monicasmucker.esq@gmail.com for information and reservations.

Friday, February 14
HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY!



Friday, February 14
Welcome & Discovery Center

@Lovers Key State Park
 The Welcome & Discovery Center educates and informs visitors about Lovers Key habitats through interactive displays Wednesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The W&DC is FREE with the park entry fee; see www.friendsoflovesskey.org.

Saturday, February 15
FMB Community Foundation
“Fashion Show”

@“The Islander,”
 Santini Marina Plaza
 The FMB Community Foundation’s “Fashion Show” returns for the first time since Hurricane Ian at the Santini Marina Plaza breezeway adjacent to “The Islander” at 1 p.m. Marvel at and purchase fashions from “The Islander” and “Tunaskin Aquatic Apparel.” A

fundraising highlight are the marvelous gift baskets assembled by the FMB Community Foundation members.

For tickets and more information, see www.fmbcommunityfoundation.com.

Tuesday, February 18
FMB Town Council Meeting

@Town Hall, Bay Oaks Recreational Center
 The FMB Town Council continues its work to rebuild FMB at 9 a.m.; see www.fortmyersbeachfl.gov. Town Council meets one day later than usual due to the Presidents’ Day Holiday.

Wednesday, February 19
Shell Mound Tours

@The Historic Mound House
 Discover the archaeology and history of the Mound House and learn clues uncovered about this 1,600-year-old shell mound on this 30-minute tour every Wednesday through Saturday at 10 a.m., Noon & 2 p.m. This hands-on tour explores the environment and cultural history of the site and features replica artifact demonstrations. \$5-per person plus MH admission; see www.moundhouse.org.

Wednesday, February 19
FMB Community Foundation
Monthly Meeting

@The Island Pancake House
 The FMB Community Foundation is the island’s leading philanthropic organization, so join in on the fun from 5 to 7 p.m.; see www.fmb-wc.org.

Thursday, February 20
FMB Chamber
“Business After Hours”

@Kava Culture
 Join your FMB Chamber friends for a fun time while enjoying savory appetizers and a cash bar from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Members FREE & \$15 for perspective members; contact the FMB Chamber for the “Business After Hours” location at www.fortmyersbeach.org.

Wednesday, February 26
FMB Community Foundation
Social Get-Together

@To Be Determined
 The FMB Community Foundation is the island’s leading philanthropic organization, so join in on the fun from 5 to 7 p.m.; for the location, see www.fmb-wc.org.



perature and currents, I can steer you in the right direction.”

Mike emphasizes that you do not need to be an experienced kayaker to savor the GCB. “If you are a new paddler and might be nervous, the best way to do so is to contact a local outfitter to safely guide you. This I promise you – once you get out on the GCB the first time, you will do so again and again, so get yourself out on the GCB and enjoy! There are so many attractions and ways to have fun because, at 190 miles, you cannot possibly experience it all in a day or two.”

For Mike, his favorite spot on the GCB is Bunche Beach. “This is one of the best birding beaches not only in Florida but anywhere in the country. I meet people there from all over the nation and world who are photographing our shorebirds, like egrets and plovers, that we take for granted! Bunche is an outstanding spot to see dolphin and manatees, it is full of mangroves, and a really cool spot where you can safely access the GCB – in fact, it is so accessible that I use Bunche as the paddleboard training location for the Special Olympics athletes. Bunche is my go-to spot, with easy accessibility for everyone and so much to see.”

Southwest Floridians should consider themselves lucky to have the GCB, concludes Mike. “Other Florida counties are now starting to explore the creation of their own water trails because of our success with the GCB. We are so fortunate to have this marvelous natural wonder right in our own backyard, with 190 miles of waterways and convenient launches everywhere. Paddlers from all around Florida and beyond tell us how much they enjoy the GCB because of its length and scope. You cannot possibly experience it all in just a visit or two, as there is always something new to see on the GCB!” ■

Valentine's Strawberry Kiss Cookies

by Sandy Sandness

INGREDIENTS

- 1 strawberry cake mix
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon strawberry extract
- 4 ounces cream cheese, softened
- pink sanding sugar
- 48 chocolate truffle kisses

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
2. Unwrap the Hershey Kisses and place them in a bowl in the freezer.
3. Combine the cake mix, softened butter, egg, extract, and cream cheese in a large bowl until a soft dough forms. Do NOT follow the cake mix package directions because the cookies will not turn out.
4. Refrigerate the dough for at least 60 minutes. It will be very sticky and hard to form into balls if you do not chill it.
5. Use a small cookie scoop and make 48 balls. Roll each dough ball in pink sanding sugar.
6. Bake 12 at a time for 8 minutes. Let cool on the pan for a few minutes, then remove the cookies gently and place them on parchment paper or a cooling rack.
7. Do not over-bake the cookies. Cake mix cookies look soft and puffy when they come out of the oven. Be patient; they will set up as they cool.
8. Press a frozen kiss into the top of each warm cookie. Let cool completely before placing in a sealed container.

The dough for these pink kiss cookies comes together in minutes with just a few simple ingredients. Just allow enough time for the cookie dough to chill before baking.

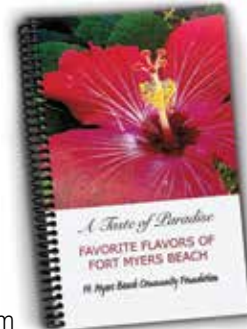
Happy Valentine's Day!



A Taste of Paradise

If you love to cook, the Fort Myers Beach Community Foundation's cookbook, *A Taste of Paradise: Favorite Flavors of Fort Myers Beach*, is full of delicious recipes from the kitchens of our locals! It is available for purchase at

www.fmbcommunityfoundation.com



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Chamber Chatter!

Fall In Love with FMB Again!

Now that Fort Myers Beach is officially “In Season,” we are seeing more people out and about and we are feeling that increase in our island’s population! Our snowbirds and guests are exploring the island and learning what is new and different since their last visit, and we sure do appreciate their financial support. While the weather over the last few summers threw us a few curveballs, the early start of winter in the north has become our friend and the freezing cold and early onset of snow has brought our northern friends down much quicker than normal! Old FMB businesses are reopening and new ones are joining us each month. This has allowed our guests to get reacquainted and “fall in love with FMB again!” In fact, as we continue our rebuild, the Chamber has kicked off a marketing effort entitled just that – “Fall In Love with FMB Again!”

While we anticipate an excellent season, FMB is still not back to where we were prior to Hurricane Ian in September of 2022. We need our condominiums to continue to reopen, we need more shops and restaurants, and we need a resurgence of our local arts and culture scene. As these continue to recover, each brings with it a much-needed shot-in-the-arm in their own unique way. Progress on the condominiums remains slow so we must be patient in that regard. Our hotel industry lost hundreds of rooms to Hurricane Ian. Margaritaville’s grand opening a little over a year ago certainly helped backfill that void and with the Lani Kai Island Resort and the Best Western Plus Beach Resort finally opening back up, we now have roughly 1,400 available hotel rooms on the island. That number, however, will remain stagnant until future new hotels and/or resorts are developed. We long for the day when we are back to being fully up and operational so that we can welcome everyone back with open arms, as our seasonals, visitors and guests are crucial to our island life.

In this spirit of “Island Renewal,” it is exciting to see that the FMB Community Foundation will once again be hosting its fabulous “Fashion Show” at the recently rebuilt Santini Marina Plaza on Saturday, February 15! FMB will once again host our island’s signature event, the FMB Lion’s Club “Shrimp Festival” in March, and there are rumblings that the popular “St. Patrick’s Day Parade” may return this year too!

Remember that the FMB Chamber Office is open on the 3rd floor

of 100 Lovers Lane, Mondays through Fridays, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. In addition to our Lovers Lane location, the Chamber operates our Times Square visitor information satellite office from “The Roxie,” located next to the Trolley Stop, that is open daily from 10 a.m. to sunset.

Happy Valentine’s Day and please be kind to one-another. On behalf of our 400-plus FMB Chamber of Commerce members, remember . . . “Island Life; It’s **Our** Business!” ■

Jacki Lyszak, President

Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce!

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go through this if these storms continue, so what happens this summer will go a long way in dictating if we stay long-term. An added factor is if Town Council ceases to follow the Comp Plan during the island's rebuild; if they do not, that may be another reason to think about leaving."

"I am familiar with Ocean City, Maryland and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina," Joe says. "Forty years ago, they were beautiful beach towns and today there is nothing but highrises, condominiums and hotels and when you drive down the main streets, you have no idea that you are right next to the ocean, and I see the same thing happening to FMB. But that can only occur if our Town Council allows that to happen." So, what will FMB look like in five years? "Highrises up and down the island," predicts Joe. "I am afraid the FMB we all fell in love with will go away," concurs Carol.

Better Than Before!

What Joe loves the most about FMB is "watching the sunsets and sitting on our porch, looking at the stars and listening to the waves at night and seeing the birds in the morning. Those simple things are priceless, wonderful and pure FMB! It constantly amazes me that we live in a place where other people work all year just to take a one-week vacation, so I feel fortunate we can do this." "The island's beauty and nature are unmatched and its people awesome," Carol states. "I love the wildlife and the island's nature, along with its diverse community."

Carol and Joe feel that FMB is at a crossroads. "I am optimistic that our residents will realize what we had and will work hard to rebuild that, without sacrificing what makes us special," rationalizes Carol. "It is important that we redevelop the Town the right way, so let's take our time to make sure we do it right." "If



Carol and Joe are always dressed for the occasion!

we show some patience and follow the Comp Plan," agrees Joe, "we can not only get back what the hurricanes took from us but we can be even better than that; there is no reason why we cannot rebuild this island better than before!" ■

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