

CECILA DUKES-JOHNSON: BREAKING BARRIERS IN A MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY!



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Is Black History Month
Still Relevant?

Scars of Hope, LLC

Cecila Dukes-Johnson:
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Some Love!

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and Local Events



HAPPY

Valentine's Day

GET INVOLVED

County Commission Meetings
February 3 and February 17
9 a.m.

McPherson Governmental
Campus Auditorium
601 S.E. 25th Ave.
Ocala, FL 34471

Ocala City Council Meetings
February 3 and February 17
4 p.m.

110 S.E. Watula Ave.,
Ocala, FL 34471

Marion County School Board
February 10 and February 24
5:30 p.m.

School Board Meeting Room
1614 E. Fort King Street
Ocala, FL 34471

Our mission is to record the rich history of the people, places and events in the community and share information that impacts the lives of residents in Marion County.



TOWN Talk

MAGAZINE

Sharing the good news happening
in our community.

Founders

Monica Bryant & Cynthia Wilson-Graham

Editor

Monica Bryant

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Cynthia Wilson-Graham

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Monica M. Jacobs

Let's Talk

We want to hear from you:

Email your submissions, events,
comments or questions to

Towntalkmagazine@yahoo.com.

Please include contact information
(name and phone number) on the
submission. Deadline is the first
Monday of each month for the
following month's publication.

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or Towntalkmagazine.org.

EDITOR'S DESK



Every year around this time the question that often comes up is whether or not Black History Month, the time set aside to recognize key roles, contributions and the sacrifices of African Americans throughout U.S. history, is relevant or still seen as a means for change? I believe it is!

Recently while scrolling on Facebook, I came across a post where a junior high school secretary lost her job after using a racial slur in a text message she accidentally sent to the school's coach who only wanted her to remind the players there would be no practice on Monday because it was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, a federal holiday.

When the coach responded with Huh? Say what? Where did that come from? She realized her mistake and texted: "I'm very sorry coach. I didn't mean to send that text to you. Please forgive me."

She meant what she said. She was only sorry she got caught. If the coach had not questioned the text, she never would have apologized and, even worst, would continue thinking that her behavior was acceptable and never thought twice about doing it again. We need more people like that coach!

Her comment was a stark reminder that because of people like her and others, we not only need to recognize Black History Month but definitely continue celebrating it not just in February but all throughout the year!

Did you know the month of February was specifically chosen because the second week of the month coincides with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln, who was influential in the emancipation of slaves and Frederick Douglass, a former slave and prominent leader in the abolitionist movement, which fought to end slavery.

In a time when it seems that our history is essentially at-risk of trying to be erased, if we don't celebrate our achievements, our history and how far we've come and how far we still have to go, who will?

In an article from www.chaseoaks.org, Jennifer Rogers gave four reasons why we should celebrate Black History Month:

1. **It celebrates diversity.** Promoting diversity brings awareness to the idea that we are all diverse and we all have something to contribute.
2. **It unites us:** Celebrating diversity and recognizing beauty brings us together and helps us to learn about people from different cultures and backgrounds and to understand how we are all connected. Finding this connection unites us.
3. **It takes us beyond the history books:** Typically, in our history textbooks, we focus on the "major players" and oftentimes we leave out lesser-known figures that have accomplished incredible things. Rather than letting the history books tell us who is important, we can celebrate special months like Black History Month to give us an opportunity to learn more about other historical figures (and local ones) that have impacted our lives and world.
4. **It helps us understand the importance of our stories:** Black History Month is about sharing and celebrating the stories of countless men and women who made a difference in our world. Some achievements are noted more than others. All of their stories reveal how they changed the world and how we can too!

Support the local Black History Month events happening in our community.

For all your small business and community needs, check out the 4th Annual Town Talk Small Business and Community Resource Directory available now online and in print throughout Marion County.

Let's Talk!

Monica Bryant

Monica T. Bryant, Editor

For more information or locations to obtain
a copy, while supplies last, call Cynthia Graham
at (352) 286-1772 or via email at
hph5032c@icloud.com.



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COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

~SCARS OF HOPE LLC~

While most people try to hide their scars, especially the ones caused by trauma or self-injury, primarily because of embarrassment, feelings of shame or fear of being judged or social stigma, Shari Battles is working to change that mindset.

Battles said her childhood included challenges that shaped her resilience early on, and like a lot of people, she carried emotional wounds that weren't always visible, but deeply impactful.

"My healing journey began through faith, self-reflection, mentorship and a willingness to confront painful truths. Purpose, accountability and spiritual grounding played major roles in my healing," she said.

In 2022, Battles founded Scars Of Hope LLC to provide transformational coaching, speaking and empowerment services and to meet the growing need for healing-centered personal development and identity restoration. Her vision is to see every scar become a symbol of strength, every wound transformed into wisdom and every survivor become a thriver.

The for-profit organization was born out of Battles' personal journey because she realized that many people are silently carrying emotional scars from trauma, rejection, loss, abuse and broken identity.



"I started this organization to help people understand that scars don't disqualify you, they can become proof of survival, strength and purpose," Battles said. "My goal is to help individuals move from pain to power and from survival to significance."

Several years ago Battles became a life coach although she never planned to. She just wanted to make a difference, but over time, it became clear that this work was not just a profession, but a calling and helping others heal, grow and walk in purpose is deeply aligned with who she is.

"People are often surprised to learn that my strength was forged through vulnerability," she said. "The confidence they see today came from choosing healing, discipline and purpose - even when it was uncomfortable."

Battles collaborates with facilitators, partners and volunteers depending on the program or event, and individuals interested in volunteering or collaborating can request information via email at hopeinscars@gmail.com. She receives referrals through community partnerships, word of mouth, social media, churches, schools organizations and previous clients, but individuals can also self-refer.

Like many growing organizations, Battles said the organization's challenges include expansion capacity, funding for large-scale programs and meeting increasing demand while maintaining excellence and integrity. Her long-term goal is to become a nationally and globally recognized transformational brand - impacting lives through coaching, curriculum, media and large-scale empowerment initiatives.

Battles will be the lead facilitator at the Em-Power Girls Mentoring Program G.L.O.W (Girls Learning to Overcome and Win) Squad Battles Boot Camp on Saturday, February 28, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. at the Mary Sue Rich Community Center at Reed Place, 1821 N.W. 21st Ave. The Empowerment Seminar, for girls ages 8-17 years old, includes lunch. Registration is \$15. To register, go to <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/battles-boot-camp-glow-squad-registration-197933295151>.

"Scars of Hope represents the belief that scars tell a story, not of defeat, but of survival," she said. "Every scar is evidence that healing is possible and that hope can rise even after pain."

Shari Battles, Founder & CEO, Transformational Life Coach



We Provide:

- Transformational life coaching
- Empowerment workshops and seminars
- Youth and women's empowerment programs
- Leadership development sessions
- Group coaching and mentoring experiences
- Customized curriculum and identity-building frameworks

Services are fee-based, but initial consultations, which include a needs assessment, goal clarification and discussion of the best coaching or program options for the individual or organization, are **free**.

Services available for youth, teens and adults. Programs serve girls, women, boys and men depending on the offering. Some workshops are gender-specific while others are inclusive.

All services are centered around the core philosophy: Identify. Face. Overcome.

Services offered locally and virtually in Central Florida.

Monday through Friday,
8 a.m. to 7 p.m. by appointment and select evenings/weekends for workshops and events.

Connect with Scars of Hope on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Threads, or go to their website at BattlesofHope.com.

For more information,
call (352) 275-8751
or email hopeinscars@gmail.com.

The **Community Spotlight** highlights a person, place or event in our community. Tell us what's happening around town so we can share your **Good News** with others. Email submissions to Towntalkmagazine@yahoo.com.

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- Dental Health
- Disease Reporting
- Family Planning
- Hepatitis Services
- HIV/AIDS Services and PrEP
- Immunizations
- Sexually Transmitted Infections Testing and Treatment
- Tuberculosis Services

Community Health

- Positive Youth Development Program (BRAZEN)
- Chronic Disease Management and Prevention
- Health Education
- Healthy Start
- Mobile Health Unit
- Overdose Data to Action
- Refugee Health
- School Health

Community Services

- Birth and Death Certificates
- Disaster Preparedness
- Volunteer with the Medical Reserve Corps

Environmental Public Health

- Environmental Public Health

WIC

- WIC Program (Women, Infants, and Children)



Main Office: 1801 SE 32nd Ave., Ocala, FL 34471 • 352-629-0137

Dental Clinic: 1501 W Silver Springs Blvd., Ocala, FL 34475 • 352-622-2664

WIC: Ocala, Belleview, and Reddick • 352-622-1161

For more information, visit **Marion.FloridaHealth.gov** or email **Info.Marion@FLHealth.gov**.

LET'S SHOW OUR TEACHERS SOME LOVE!

By Monica M. Jacobs, Teacher and Author of "My New Church" children's book



Monica Jacobs

February is here, and it's almost time for Valentine's Day. Most classrooms have parties for the children, but the children often want to give their teacher something too. In this article, we will consider four ways to love on our teachers that are both cost effective and thoughtful.

#1 Let your child's teacher know that you are supportive by offering to cut out things for learning centers or staple papers together.

Admittedly, this gesture is geared toward elementary school teachers. However, teachers are bogged down with lessons plans that contain explicit instructions, remediation and enrichment. They must plan for whole group instruction, small group instruction, learning centers, intervention groups and independent/group work. It's a lot, and it takes a great deal of time. In addition, they must keep grades up to date and provide timely feedback. Offering to help create learning center work for the students would take a great load off the teacher. That would be one less thing for them to have to think about accomplishing.

#2 Make a homemade Valentine's Day card.

This gift is obvious, right? Maybe not. Please do not misunderstand me. I love my students and every way they show me that they appreciate me. However, most cards that teachers receive have a simple message: "Happy Valentine's Day," or "I love you." These are all endearing messages and blessings to the teacher. However, if you want to make a greater impact and bless his/her heart even more, tell the teachers why you love and appreciate them. For example, "I love you and thank you for teaching me how to _____. I am smarter because of it." Or "I want to be a(n) _____ when I grow up. You are helping me become that when you teach _____. I love you for that. Thank you!" Any thoughtful message will suffice. These are just some basic examples.

#3 Purchase a carnation or a candy bar.

Who doesn't like flowers and candy? It doesn't have to be a bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolates. It can be one candy bar or a single flower. If you have a garden, it may be even more special if the flower came from it. Both gifts could be under \$5.

#4 Make a gift.

One of my favorite gifts was a handcrafted vase with faux flowers from the Everything a Dollar store. She wrote a very personal message about why I was her favorite teacher and why she liked my class and stuck it on the side of the faux flower. Another sentimental gift I appreciated was a boy in middle school who gave me a gift bag that contained Starbucks coffee and a Cookies and Creme Hershey's bar. The card had a simple message that said, "Dear Ms. Jacobs, thank you for teaching me Reading and Language Arts during my first year in middle school. You will not be forgotten. I hope you enjoy your coffee and chocolate."



Valentine's gifts are for everyone. What is your child's favorite gift from a teacher?

To reach Jacobs, contact her via e-mail at Jacobsmonica628@gmail.com.



NAACP

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★ Howard Academy Community Center

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

ACTIVITIES

Join us for the month of February for some engaging activities at Howard Academy! Check out the schedule below. There will be several opportunities to visit the Black History Museum during the month. All activities will be held at Howard Academy Community Center.

Scholarship Night

05 FEB

6:00 PM

Calling all high school juniors and seniors! Come check out the many scholarships available in our community. We will have representation from the Divine 9 organizations, MLK Commission, Men Working for a Better Community, The Charmettes, Juneteenth Committee and many more!

Howard Academy Community
306 N.W. 7th Avenue
Ocala, FL 34475



Weekly Museum Tours

We are so lucky to house the Black History Museum here at Howard Academy. We get to experience black history 365 days a year. The museum holds so much history not just of Marion County but the much more. During the month of February, we will open the museum every Wednesday from 12:00 noon to 2:00 pm. Come out and see, learn and enjoy!

Dates
2/4
2/11
2/18

12:00pm - 2:00pm
and
4:30pm to 5:30pm

Howard Academy Community
306 N.W. 7th Avenue
Ocala, FL 34475

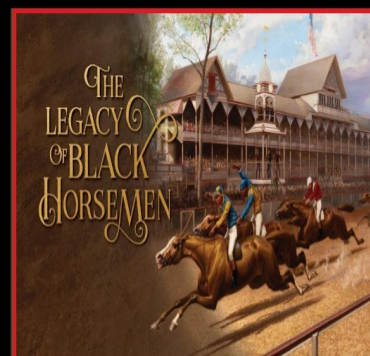
Recognition Night

25 FEB

5:30 pm

This night we will recognize the contributions of community members who have given their time to Howard Academy/Black History Museum. We will have a small program in the cafeteria followed by refreshments and time to mingle and take pictures. The museum will be open this night for touring. We will also formally introduce "Friends of the Museum" to the community.

Howard Academy Community
306 N.W. 7th Avenue
Ocala, FL 34475



The Legacy of Black Horsemen

28 FEB

1:30pm to 5:00pm

Join us to learn about the Legacy of Black Horsemen. The stories of Black jockeys, trainers, owners, groomers and exercisers in the 1800s whose contributions helped lay the foundation for the Thoroughbred industry. Light refreshments will be served and the museum will be open.

Howard Academy Community
306 N.W. 7th Avenue
Ocala, FL 34475

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Ocala, FL 34482
February 19, 2026
5:30pm - 7:00pm

For More Information Contact
Principal Stacie Newmones 352-671-4935
PTO President Linda Ward 954-093-4249
Family Engagement Liaison Amy Watkins 352-671-4935

BLACK HISTORY

TRIBUTE TO CULTURE
CELEBRATING HERITAGE

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- Chorus
- Spoken Word Poet
- Alumni Recognition
- Resources for Students
- Interactive Activities
- Free Food
- and more...

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- SHIP, Hometown Heroes, and More
- Credit Challenges & Common Myths
- Why You Need a Realtor on Your Team
- The Role of a Realtor Advocate



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Pillar Mortgage Company



Tiffany Bess
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Howard Academy Community Center

306 NW 7th Ave,
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🕒 21st February | 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM

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CECILA DUKES-JOHNSON: BREAKING BARRIERS

The only regret Cecila Dukes-Johnson has is that she didn't start her business sooner.

Growing up, her dream job was to be an anesthesiologist since she didn't think the career she worked in for nearly 24 years was an option because she knew very little about it.

Dukes-Johnson started working as a part-time teller at BBVA/PNC, but quickly moved into management. She spent 23 years and 10 months with the company, the last 19 years as a Branch Manager in the Ocala market being primarily responsible for managing and growing Consumer Households, Small Businesses and Retail Investment portfolios. She also led and coached a team of 6 to 8 employees, taught financial literacy and homebuyer classes in the community and made sure every client received top-tier customer service.



Cecila Dukes-Johnson

Things changed when she became a homeowner at 22 years old and started having issues with her septic and drain field. After spending thousands of dollars on septic issues, she said a light bulb went off in her head and she started running numbers. Although it's predominantly a male-owned industry, she told herself, I can do this too!



And she did! In 2021, while still working in Corporate America, Dukes-Johnson started Tomboy Septic Pumping Services LLC, DBA Central Florida Grounds Services LLC. She said it was her existing strategy that happened sooner than she anticipated.

As the youngest and only girl of her mother's five children, she said, her older brothers taught her how to do everything they did. Baseball, football, plumbing and electrical work and how to protect herself. Since she was a true Tomboy, she named her business Tomboy Septic Pumping Services to remind herself that she could do anything just like her brothers taught her.

"After dedicating 25 years of my life to Corporate America, I was over the unfair bias treatment of people that looked like me. I was tired of giving 110% of myself only to get a 2% to 3% annual raise," she said. "So, I decided to step out on faith and become an entrepreneur."

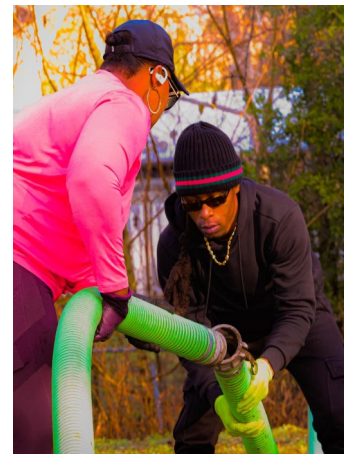
The home-based business, located in Reddick, FL., is open Monday - Saturday, 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. and serves Marion, Levy and Alachua counties. They provide comprehensive septic services, including new septic system installation, drain fields, repairs and routine pump-outs. Eric Collier, a native of Marion County and her business partner and mentor, is the drain field and septic specialist. He has more than 20 years experience in the business.

Dukes-Johnson said Henry Frazier, a good friend, took her under his wings and showed her how to run the business. She said he didn't see her as competition, but as a younger sister who would be successful at anything she focused on in life.

A typical job takes about 45 minutes to an hour from start to finish and the price is determined by the county, the number of bedrooms and bathrooms and the size of the septic tank. Her worst day in the business was when one of the septic tops fell down inside the septic tank and she had to crawl inside it with her employees to get the septic top out.

"That was gross and scary at the same time," she said. "I actually had nightmares for three days about the situation."

Dukes-Johnson said although it was tough and expensive to penetrate the industry, her biggest challenge has been marketing the business outside of social media and paying for expensive repairs. She definitely plans to expand the business soon because she's getting service calls from multiple counties since everyone is booked out for several days. She currently has one male employee; however, when she expands the business, she would love to see other females in this industry too.



She also owns R.I.C.H Foundations LLC (Reinvesting in Community Households), a credit counseling business that offers one-on-one credit counseling, debt consolidation strategies, budgeting tools and resources to help people in the community reach their financial goals. For more information, call **(352) 234-6483** or email richfoundationsllcfl@gmail.com.

Dukes-Johnson didn't have trouble gaining trust as a woman in the business because she said most of her clients knew her from her previous career.

"If they can trust me with all of their finances and personal information, they can most definitely trust me with their poop. Most people watch me in total awe because they can't believe that a woman of my caliber is willing to pump septic tanks for a living," she said. I am a God fearing leader with a servant's heart who is passionate about financial literacy, helping others thrive and making a positive impact in my community."

You can connect with Dukes-Johnson on Facebook and Instagram. For more information on Central Florida Grounds Services LLC or to schedule service, call or text her at **(352) 525-5398**.

EM-POWER GIRLS MENTORING PROGRAM

Laresa Scott's heart was overwhelmed by some of the issues she experienced before retiring from Marion County Public Schools after 20 years of service. While working as a clerk typist at Howard Academy Community Center, Scott met a lot of young girls whose parents were searching for ways to help their daughters. She stayed connected to some of them after she retired in 2021, and they still needed academic assistance for their girls and a way for them to gain confidence and positive support.

"As the years changed, there wasn't much change with some of the young ladies," she said. Compelled to do something to assist with what was already in place, Em-Power was born and here we are."



The Em-Power Girls Mentoring Program, started by Scott in 2022, offers Peer Support, Career Exploration, Indoor/Outdoor Retreats, Life Skills and Service Learning projects. The program, open to girls ages 8 to 17, meets monthly on the third Saturday, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. unless there's a special event. Parents receive a text before each meeting which includes the topic and meeting place because it changes. Participants pay a one-time fee of \$25, which includes a meal at each meeting, a T-shirt, snack and supplies.



Laresa Scott

While assessing the needs of the program last year, Scott said they discovered there was a weak area that needed to be strengthened so the girls could be empowered and have fun at the same time. To fill that need, on Saturday, February 28, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Em-Power presents G.L.O.W (Girls Learning to Overcome and Win) Squad Battles Boot Camp at the Mary Sue Rich Community Center at Reed Place, 1821 N.W. 21st Ave. Shari Battles will be the lead facilitator and Levi Washington is the guest facilitator for the Girls Empowerment Seminar, which includes lunch. Registration is \$15. For more information, call Scott at (352) 509-7758 or (352) 509-7734 or to register, go to <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/battles-boot-camp-glow-squad-registration-1979332955151>.

"Our aim is to assist the girls in being more confident, offer leadership development and helping them with those difficult points in their journey," she said. "The goal is empowerment and building self-confidence through a seminar and activities."

Scott said they also offer Anger Management and Cognitive Behavioral therapy for the girls to manage stress and anxiety if they need it. She said the only requirement, besides age, is they want the girls to be committed to the program, which is something they need the parents to help with and also be an active part of what their daughter is doing.



In addition to parent involvement, Em-Power needs mentors who can help bring clarity, communication and be committed to the age group of girls they are assigned to mentor. The girls are divided into the following groups: Crystals (age 8); Gems (age 9 and 10); Diamonds (age 11 and 12); and Princesses (age 17).

Since its inception, 45 girls have participated in the program. Referrals to the program can be made over the phone, by e-mail or on the website at <https://ndirectionrc.wixsite.com/families>.

Em-Power, a program sponsored by New Direction Reentry Center of Marion Inc., (NDRC), was started by Scott, CEO/Founder, in 2018 to help meet some of the needs in the community. The long-term goal of NDRC, which is funded by private donations, is to empower citizens who may need the services they offer as they build long-term sustainability.

While funding and committed volunteers are their greatest need and challenge, Scott said career professionals are needed to speak at meetings, office supplies, arts and crafts and sponsors who would like to donate meals for the meetings. A donated van to transport the girls to events and meetings since many don't have transportation is at the top of their wish list.

"We really aren't that much different than the other programs," Scott said. "The need is great and one organization can't do it all. We're just a piece of the puzzle."

For more information or to support Em-Power or NDRC, call Scott at (352) 509-7758 or (352) 509-7734.



5100 W. Highway 40, Suite 1100
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- Life Skills Coach
- New Venture Creation
- Public Assistance Access Point
- Notary Services
- Anger Management
- Rational Emotional Behavior Therapy
- Cognitive Behavior Therapy
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy

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FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION WORKGROUP

PARTY

IN

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Celebrating

BLACK

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DINNER & SPECIAL PRESENTATION.

**Save the date
FEB 12TH**

DINNER 5:00PM
PRESENTATION 6:00PM



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Marion County

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Right In Your Neighborhood.

The Florida Department of Health in Marion County's Mobile Health Unit brings essential health services directly to communities across Marion County!

Come See Us!

Interfaith Soup Kitchen
435 NW 2nd Street
February 25
9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
Contact 352-644-2627 or
MarionMHU@FLHealth.gov
for more information.

Services Offered:

- Family Planning
- Immunizations
- Health Screenings
- Education
- STI and HIV Testing

FREE AFTER SCHOOL TUTORING

Certified Teachers for Grades 1st – 5th

- HIGH INTEREST LEARNING ACTIVITIES
- PREP FOR STATE TESTING
- ASSISTANCE WITH HOMEWORK
- DAILY SNACKS

THREE OCALA TUTORING SITES:

Howard Academy Community Center	Hickory Knoll Apartments Students	Berkeley Point Apartments Students
Mondays & Wednesdays 4:30 pm – 5:30 pm 306 NW 7th Ave, 34475	Mondays & Wednesdays 4:30 pm – 5:30 pm 507 NE 22nd Ave, 34470	Tuesdays & Thursdays 4:30 pm – 5:30 pm 2833 NE 7th Street, 34470



CONTACT:
DR. BARBARA J. BROOKS
352-875-4237
WWW.RAMALSERVICES.ORG



RABIES

is active in
Marion County.



Prevent exposure:

- Immunize pets and secure livestock
- Avoid wild or stray animals
- Never feed wild or stray animals



For more information, visit
FloridaHealth.gov/Rabies
or call DOH-Marion, **352-629-0137**

Florida
HEALTH



Internet Safety Presentation

for Parents, Guardians, and Trusted Adults



February 10, 2026, at 6-8 p.m.
Florida Department of Health in Marion County
1801 SE 32nd Ave., Ocala, FL 34471

This presentation, offered in partnership with the FBI, will provide parents, guardians, mentors, and trusted adults with important information about current online risks and social media challenges facing youth.



Attendees will learn practical strategies for recognizing unsafe online behavior, supporting safe digital habits, and helping young people make informed choices while using the internet and social media. Please call 352-644-2687 with any questions.



Florida
HEALTH



know the safe-sleep



Scan the QR code
to learn more.



your baby should sleep

ALONE

Adult beds are dangerous for babies.



your baby should sleep on their

BACK

Reduce sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) risks.



your baby should sleep in a

CRIB

Your baby is safest sleeping with no pillows, soft toys, stuffed animals, or bumpers.



SAFE
KIDS
MARION COUNTY

MONEY SMART TIPS

By Scott Hackmyer

LET'S WORK ON GETTING HEALTHY THIS YEAR!



Since you are probably like most Americans and have already blown your New Year's Resolutions, let me give you a new one with a fresh start for February. Work on getting healthy. I'm not trying to take all the fun out of your life but you can save a lot of money with a healthier lifestyle. The healthier you are the less days you have to miss from work and you reduce expensive doctor and medication bills. I was walking into Publix and saw a man smoking and coughing while sitting on the curb. My first thought was "how is that working for you?"

Money is tight and I noticed that a pack of cigarettes is close to \$10 now. If you have tried to quit before and weren't successful, or if this is your first trying, I encourage you to Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW to ask how Quit coaches can help connect you with quit smoking medicines and/or Quit Smoking support groups in your own neighborhood. They may also be able to provide you with free medicines such as nicotine patches, lozenges or gum which they can mail to your home. Using any form of tobacco is expensive and bad for your health but other things you can do too to get healthier include cooking differently at home. Reduce the frying you do when cooking. I know some of your favorite recipes, many of which have been in your family for generations, call for frying but baking or grilling is so much healthier. Significantly cut back on foods like mayonnaise and other high fat foods and try to eat lots of fresh vegetables, fruits and drink a lot of water. If you like soup in the winter try to catch Amy's "Light in Sodium" soup on a Buy One Get One free sale at Publix. I think it's delicious and an entire can only has about 20% of your recommended maximum sodium as compared to other brands that often have as much as 65% of your allowable sodium intake. Less salt is better for all your eating. I used to run weight loss groups at the middle schools I worked at. There are some behavior tricks that also can help you lose weight and eat healthier. Use a smaller plate or bowl. This tricks your mind into thinking you are eating more food when your small plate is full or overflowing compared to food on a large plate that leaves you wanting more. Never eat out of a bag when it comes to snacks like cookies or chips. Put a small amount on a plate, but the bag away then enjoy. If you want more you have to get up and repeat that process but it reduces the tendency to eat a large portion, if not all of the bag, without even thinking about it or enjoying it.

I know the government is sending different messages out now but get your vaccinations and get your children vaccinated. I'm not a doctor, and this is just my opinion, but after working in the school system for 33 years I've observed how quickly children spread every germ they come in contact with, and then they bring it home to you. Final advice, reduce your alcohol intake, stay away from caffeinated sodas and power drinks and get some exercise, even if it's just walking. Staying healthy is not only good for your quality and length of life, but it's also a big boost to your budget.

There are some good sales coming up this month, particularly around President's Day weekend. Look for sale prices on mattresses, large appliances such as dishwashers, refrigerators, furniture and more. If you want a great deal on blue jeans check out the regular price at Rural King on their own RK brand of jeans. They sell for \$11.99 a pair. I bought a pair a year ago, wore them all last winter and they still look and feel great, so I just bought two more pairs. Although they had a large inventory last month, they do sell out sometimes so if you're shopping for jeans get to the store quickly.

It's income tax season. Instead of paying a company to prepare your taxes remember that United Way offers its Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program for free for individuals who need help filing. Their IRS certified volunteers can prepare basic income tax returns and filing at no cost for low to moderate-income individuals and those with disabilities. Look at the United Way of Marion County's website for more information or to make an appointment.



Business Spotlight



Business Name: Divyne Gifts, LLC

No. of Employees: 2

Business Owner: Teresa Dennis (aka Rita)

Business Address: 3100 S.W. College Rd., Suite 36
Paddock Market, Ocala, FL 34474

Business Phone: (813) 595-0222

What Year Did You Start Your Business? 2017

Hours of Operation: Monday - Saturday: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
and Sunday noon to 6 p.m.

Products and/or Services: Gifts in a basket, box or tray. I design unique, divine and luxury gifts that create memorable moments for birthday's, holidays or just because gifts that are suitable for anyone and any occasion at multiple price points.

E-mail Address: Dg.Divynegifts@outlook.com or
ladyt272004@yahoo.com

Website Address: currently under construction

Are You on Social Media? Yes If yes, on what platforms?

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/divynegiftsllcflorida.rita>

Instagram: Divynegiftsllc

Tik Tok: Divyne gifts llc

What or Who Inspired You to Start Your Business?

My business started years ago with me giving fun, unexpected gifts to friends and coworkers, something that made them laugh and feel special. A few years later my daughter needed a gift for a classmate, so I helped her create a basket and from there, people began requesting more. What started as gift baskets became a family business with my brother being one of my biggest supporters. He helped build, sell and he believed in the vision. After he passed, much of the support faded, but I kept going. Today, it's mainly me and my daughter. I continue this business in his honor. He's my reason for not giving up. Plus, I have to prove to myself that I can do it!

What Makes Your Business Unique or What's Your Specialty?

It's the presentation for me. Anyone can put items in a basket. What makes Divyne Gifts unique is the thought, love and passion I put into designing. I focus on how the gift will make someone feel appreciated, celebrated and loved, which is what people remember.

What Advice Would You Give Someone Starting a Business?

Do what you love. Show up, keep building and just keep in mind progress over perfection. Have fun and be consistent. Take your time and learn as you go. Every business owner makes mistakes. You don't know everything. Just give yourself grace even on the slow days. In the end, it will be the ones who keep going, and don't compare your business - your beginning - to someone else's journey.

The Small Business Profile is FREE and open to small businesses located in Marion County with less than 25 employees or solo entrepreneurs.

To have your business featured in an upcoming edition, please request a form by emailing Towntalkmagazine@yahoo.com. Completed forms can be returned via email or mailed to P.O. Box 6212, Ocala, FL 34478.

A CENTURY OF
College Park Elementary
Black History Celebration
February 12, 2026 @ 5:30 PM
Cafeteria

Arts & Crafts
Entertainment
Food Trucks

FREE ADMISSION
Stage Production: I was born in 1925
Starring: Mrs. Audrietta Coleman-Izlar
as
MS. ELEANOR JOHNSON

2026 THEME • 100 • 100 YEARS OF BLACK HISTORY COMMEMORATION
#1 BEST SELLING CHILDREN'S DRAMA ON AMAZON

COLLEGE PARK ELEMENTARY
A COMMUNITY PARTNER SCHOOLS

Author Book Launch
FREE ENTRY

PHYLLIS M. MCNEAL

REGISTER NOW

Step Into Your Power
Sassy, Classy & Smart:
The Path To Total Self
Confidence

DATE OF EVENT: FEBRUARY 14, 2026
TIME: 1:00-3:00 PM
LOCATION: INDIGO EAST COMMUNITY CENTER
8385 SW 84TH STREET
OCALA, FL 34476
CONTACT: GWENDA OVERSTREET O.GWENDA@YAHOO.COM

SUMMERFIELD NATIVE TO SERVE AS TRUSTEE

Calvin Hagins, philanthropist and federal executive, has been elected to serve as a Trustee by the Board of Trustees of the Delta Sigma Pi Leadership Foundation, effective January 2026 to January 2028.



Calvin Hagins

"This is a major commitment of my time and energy to a Brotherhood and a cause that develops and prepares students for success in a complex and dynamic business marketplace," Hagins said after being elected. "I look forward to contributing and gaining support from the business community."

As a Leadership Foundation Trustee, Hagins will generate and provide financial leadership and support for the fraternity's educational and charitable programs. Delta Sigma Pi is the nation's largest co-ed professional business fraternity which supports business careers through various events.

Hagins has almost 40 years of experience in Federal supervision within the financial services industry. He is one of the country's foremost experts in Federal supervisory matters having provided technical content for trade publications, given Congressional testimony and spoken extensively at industry conferences and on nationally syndicated radio shows.

In his current role as Principal Deputy at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Hagins serves as the subject matter expert on the Bureau's supervision program and leads the largest division within the Bureau consisting of almost 400 compliance professionals.

He is a proud Finance degreed graduate of the University of South Florida and Brother of Theta Phi chapter of Delta Sigma Pi.



Register to attend at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/author-book-launch-phyllis-m-mcneal-sassy-classy-smart-tickets-1980768128794>, scan the QR code on the flyer or email Gwenda Overstreet at o.gwenda@yahoo.com for more information.

COMMUNITY EVENTS - SAVE-THE-DATES

Calling All Vendors!

Be part of Marion County Day on Saturday, March 28, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the McPherson Campus, 601 S.E. 25th Ave., Ocala.

Join 10,000+ attendees at this exciting community celebration as we kick off the countdown to America's 250th birthday.

Event highlights include:

- Local vendors & food trucks
- Marion County Public Schools Battle of the Drumlines
- Family-friendly fun and much more

Interested in being a vendor? Sign up today at www.MarionFL.org/mcday



CALLING ALL POETS AND WRITERS!

YOUR VOICE MATTERS!

Share your poetry and take the stage at Ocala's first Art Park Literary & Poetry Festival.

Submissions are open to adults and Marion County students (middle and high schools).

Deadline is March 2.

Apply for free at ocalafl.gov/poetryfest



Open Call for Poets ~ Apply Now!

The City of Ocala and Marion County Public Library System invites you to submit a poem inspired by the theme "My Place, My Story" for the inaugural Art Park Literary and Poetry Festival.

The festival takes place Saturday, April 11, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Tusawilla Art Park, 213 N.E. 5th St.

Submission Guidelines:

- Free to apply.
- One poem per poet, 40 lines maximum.
- Work must be in English, an original and be unpublished.
- Must be family-friendly, nonviolent and nonpolitical.

Eligibility Guidelines:

- Must be 18 or older.
- Live or work in North Central Florida.
- Be eligible to work in the United States.
- Student competitors must be enrolled in a Marion County middle or high school and have parental or legal guardian consent.

The deadline to apply is March 2. Apply now at www.ocalafl.gov/poetryfest.

For more information, contact the City of Ocala Cultural Arts Division at **(352) 629-8447** or artinfo@ocalafl.gov.

Selected poems will be featured in the inaugural festival book. Poets retain full ownership of their work, with permission for the City of Ocala to share for festival-related purposes.





Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Healthy Relationship Decisions

Lunch and Learn

**February 23, 2026, from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Mary Sue Rich Community Center at Reed Place
1821 NW 21st Ave., Ocala, FL 34475**

Join us for a community lunch and learn focused on teen dating violence awareness and promoting healthy relationship decisions. Please call 352-644-2687 with any questions.

This luncheon will equip trusted adults with tools to support youth in healthy relationship development. Guest speakers will share insights on

- recognizing warning signs
- understanding the dynamics of abuse
- discussing safety plans
- supporting youth in building safe, healthy relationships

Guest Speakers:

Monica Bryant

Advocate for domestic violence prevention and chair of the Family Violence Prevention Workgroup.

Donna Guinn

Victim Advocate Supervisor with the Ocala Police Department.