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Grady talks
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**Girls in
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Legacies follow Lakeland's Roberts McCarley and Lake Alfred's Leavengood

By LISA FELLOWS-COFFEY
Editor

Lakeland City Commissioner Sara Roberts McCarley was installed as the new Ridge League of Cities President and Lake Alfred's City Manager Ryan Leavengood was given the 2025 RLC Nettie Draughan Municipal Official of the Year Award last Tuesday at the Ridge League of Cities September dinner meeting at the RP Funding Center in Lakeland.

Sanibel City Council Vice Mayor and Florida League of Cities President Holly Smith was the keynote speaker. Smith is a member of the Sanibel Planning Commission for eight years. She serves as Sanibel's representative to the Lee County Tourist Development Council, Coalition of Mayors and the Governor's Appointee on the Federal South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force. She is the first to serve as FLC President from the Southwest Florida region.

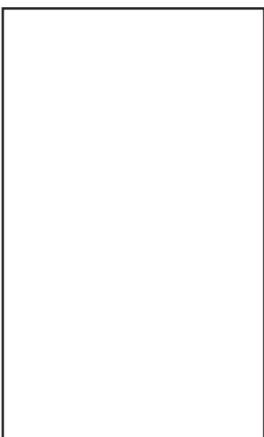
Smith also serves on or chairs multiple FLC committees, including the Advocacy Committee, the Legislative Policy Committee, Federal Action Strike Team, and is Sanibel's Voting Delegate to the National League

of Cities. Smith has been recognized as a Florida League of Cities Home Rule Hero every year since 2018 for her advocacy on behalf of local governments. In 2023, she received the Florida League's prestigious E. Harris Drew Municipal Official Lifetime Achievement Award, according to the Ridge League of Cities website.

"I'm extremely excited to be here and share this time with you," said Smith. "Bobby (Green) indicated there would be 240 people attending," said Smith. "And again, that is extremely impressive and the collective voice that you all have carries through the entire state of Florida and I know you use that voice well. All of your voices. Shout out to your executive director (Green). You have an amazing asset here. Not only can he herd you cats from 24 municipalities, and his bio is absolutely amazing, but more important to me as I'm getting to know him is his passion and authenticity. He has truly had the desire to help you understand complex issues. Hold on to this one...I want to congratulate the incoming slate of officers. They have to work really hard to get these positions of leadership. They don't do it alone, but if you've seen something special in each of them



LEGACIES > 4



**Avelo Airlines
extends its
Central Florida
flight schedule
through Spring
2026**

*Affordable one-way spring fares start at \$52**



PHOTO CREDIT | AVELO AIRLINES

PROVIDED TO THE SUN

Avelo Airlines recently announced that it is extending its Central Florida flight schedule through Spring 2026, just in time to start planning spring break travel. Travel-inspiring one-way fares start at \$52*. Travelers can make reservations at AveloAir.com.

Avelo Airlines Head of Commercial Trevor Yealy said, "It's time to start planning spring travel, and we are excited to extend Avelo's Central Florida flight schedule through April 2026. With Avelo's everyday low fares and industry-leading reliability, it's the perfect time for travelers to get a head start on booking their spring vacations or weekend getaways to their favorite destinations. Avelo offers somewhere for everyone – from award-winning beaches to outdoor adventure destinations and cultural hotspots."

Avelo Airlines serves six Central Florida airports: Daytona Beach International Airport (DAB); Fort Myers' Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW); Lakeland International Airport (LAL); Orlando International Airport (MCO); Sarasota Bradenton International Airport (SRQ); and Tampa International Airport (TPA)

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Ink In My Veins
David Dunn-Rankin

The Lingering Battle: the fight for VA disability benefits

Most of us are familiar with the problems that face football players after many years of physical battle on the football field. In particular, the traumatic brain injury which shows up years after retiring from football. Football has changed the way helmets are designed and the way players tackle to reduce the potential for long-term brain injury from playing football.

Another group that also suffers long-term effects from their profession, but who receive much less publicity about their injuries, is our military veterans. For some of our veterans, the end of active duty just shifts the fight. They suffer from late-onset conditions that are debilitating and affect their quality of life.

Naturally, our veterans turn to the Department of Veterans Affairs for support. Unfortunately, they are met with a maze of red tape, skepticism, and delays. A thriving industry of

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Community led the way in POWer in Pink 5k



By LISA FELLOWS-COFFEY
Editor

All participants of the POWer in Pink 5K hosted by the Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida were winners Saturday at Lake Hollingsworth.

Two survivors led the charge. Race Founder Jennifer Haddock spoke to the crowd of more than 200+ participants.

"As we know, breast cancer can have a huge impact on our lives and on so many individuals," said Haddock. "As I only know too well. I was diagnosed at 37. My youngest son was only 14 months old and I was still breastfeeding. So that was

a very difficult and challenging time for me. But my community came together and my friends and they supported me and the Breast Cancer Foundation of Florida. And through that I was able to get the treatment that I needed and I was able to continue to pay my bills."

"Through that I was able to keep fighting the good fight and this community coming together was why I started this race in 2019," said Haddock. "It was my way of giving back to my community who helped me so much. That race started in Winter Haven with less than 100 people. I think we are over 200 racers today and 29 sponsors because of what we're doing in this community.

The Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida and through Ashley (Lloyd) has been able to stand on its own through its non-profit for the first year."

Lloyd is also a breast cancer survivor and the Executive Director of the Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida.

"I wanted to tell everybody that they did a great job today," Lloyd said. "Everybody deserves to give themselves a big round of applause. Whether you walked in, volunteered in...I want to thank everyone for being here today. The Pink 5K is actually the first event that I ever volunteered at when I finished my

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LEGACIES FROM PAGE 1

to elevate them here tonight. This is a huge deal. You all have learned this from your peers as well."

Smith introduced Lakeland's Sara Roberts McCarley as the Ridge League of Cities' incoming President.

"She truly leads with a servant's heart," said Smith. "It's clear that she's been through some very tough experiences to get here today. That's going to show through in her leadership, and I look forward to working with you in whatever capacity that you need me for in the coming year or the coming years to the local and regional partners and sponsors in this room. Thank you for the work you do every day to help make our communities stronger. The partnerships are the backbone of the Florida League of Cities and are really vitally important to the success of all that we do in every one of our communities and the citizens we represent."

Roberts McCarley has been a Lakeland commissioner for more than six years.

She is a Davenport native.

"Both my parents served at different times on the Davenport City Commission," said Roberts McCarley. "Tonight's special, however, because my father, Peter Rust, served as the mayor of Davenport from 1996 to 2012 and was inducted as the Ridge League President in September 2011. Fourteen years later I'm humbled and honored to share this evening and spirit with him. I just want to thank my family for being here again and my friends who came because this really is a wonderful organization and one that my Dad was very, very passionate about his service, not only to Davenport, but to the Ridge in general and to the Florida League. He made a lot of good friends over the years during his service. But I appreciate my mom's still serving as a volunteer throughout Polk County and we're just so proud of her and very happy that we were raised by people who decided to serve others early on and often."

Leavengood thanked the Lake Alfred administration and staff after he received the award from 2024 winner Auburndale Mayor

Dorothea Taylor Borgert.

"It's hard to believe that 13 years has gone by," said Leavengood. "Sometimes it feels like forever and sometimes I feel like I've blinked. But looking at the room, I can see many shared stories and experiences and some scars there as well as we've progressed these past decade plus. As a young assistant manager in Auburndale at the age of 25, I can remember seeing all of Bobby's recognitions and achievements in his office. And the one that always stood out to me was the Nettie Draughon Award. That was over 16 years ago. Hard to believe that my mentor Bobby and I received the same award and to receive an award named after someone who gave over 50 years of service has very special meaning to me."

"I'd like to thank the Ridge League of Cities board for this recognition as well as my city commission for nominating me," continued Leavengood. "It's been a blessing and an honor to be the city manager of Lake Alfred for the last 13 years. Thinking about what I was going to say tonight gave me time to pause on the many challenges and the many accomplishments that led up to this point. And I remember them all fondly. To my commission, thank you for all your support. Over the years I've had the pleasure of working towards a collective vision and have never met a more community-minded group of individuals. I've been able to lay a few bricks, but the secret of Lake Alfred's success has been in no small part due to the stable foundation that they have provided."

Following an update on the Ridge League of Cities budget, Mulberry Commissioner and Ridge League treasurer Neil Devine reported 18 of 24 cities were represented at the meeting. He stated 236 were in attendance.

Lake Alfred led the city attendance with 26 members and received the traveling trophy. Haines City and Dundee each brought 18 representatives.



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treatment. And the reason I made it through my battle."

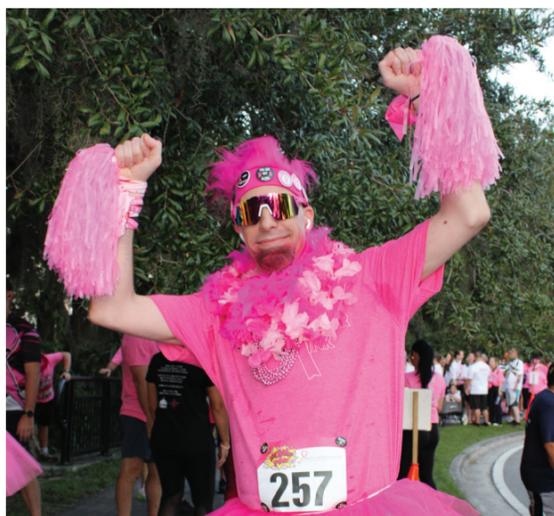
"The Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida took care of myself, my husband, and my two kids for two months that we went through surgery and recovery," said Lloyd. "My mortgage, my car payment, and my utilities were paid so that we didn't have to focus on that, which I think that part of the Breast Cancer Foundation of Central Florida deserves its own big round of applause...We continue to grow and help the community because of everybody standing here. Thank you again."

Ryan and Dr. Christine Gamache of Lakeland earned the "Most Pinkified" participants.

Grayson Agnini of Lakeland won the overall title in a time of 19:38. Katrina Machado of Lakeland was the first woman to finish in 23:55.

The female masters winner was Diane Rhoden of Lakeland in 25:43. John Metzgar of Winter Haven was the first male master finisher in 23:58.

Carmen Marra of Winter Haven was the top female grand master, finishing the 5K in 28:56. Scott Bowne of Lakeland was the top male grandmaster at 27:30.



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