

Ave Maria Sun



COURTESY PHOTO
All ages experience why Ave Maria ranks nationally with its countless amenities.

Ave Maria Ranks as one of the Top Master-Planned Communities in the Nation

BY SANDRA YEYATI
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

John Burns Research and Consulting (JBREC) has named Ave Maria, Florida, one of the Top Selling Master-Planned Communities in the United States, according to its annual report. Coming in at number 16 in this prestigious ranking is a testament to Ave Maria's stellar sales in 2023, with a net total of 652 new home purchases.

"What's impressive is that we're competing with hundreds of other master-planned communities, some of which are very large, with 20 builders or more," said Michelle Mambuca, the marketing and public relations manager at Barron Collier Companies (BCC), Ave Maria's developer. "This ranking means that people see the value in buying a home here. They see it as a good investment with the kind of lifestyle they want to live, making Ave Maria one of the most popular destinations in the U.S. to buy a home."

John Burns is a respected leader in the real estate industry, providing independent research and consulting services relating to the US housing industry. "Their research is key," Mambuca attested. "We turn to JBREC for trusted, unbiased, third-party recommendations for market positioning, pricing and proposed development concepts or product types."

Ave Maria's sales figures tell a story of steady and speedy growth, a hallmark of a well-planned and maintained community. A total of 4,600 new homes have been sold since

SEE TOP-RANKED, A20 ►

BIZ KIDZ

Nurturing Young Minds into Tomorrow's Entrepreneurs



BY MELANIE PEFINIS
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

SHARK TANK HAS NOTHING ON Biz Kidz. Sure, the popular ABC TV show gives innovators a time in the spotlight. But very few of these young entrepreneurs can't drive yet or even see over the steering wheel. That's where Biz Kidz truly shines. This program educates and encourages young entrepreneurs to put their dreams into action. Children learn about business, supply and demand, marketing, finances, and other lessons usually when they no longer require a babysitter.

SEE BIZ KIDZ, A10 ►

"I have so much fun doing the markets, expos and trips that Biz Kidz offers. I have learned so much."

— Ella Lyman, 11-year-old



AMELIA CONTE PHOTOGRAPHY

From selling lemonade to soap, Ave Maria's young entrepreneurs are taking the community by storm. Joyful Lemonade, a standout at the Fall Festival, raked in \$700, while the Soap Sisters, with their slogan 'Making joy one soap at a time,' added a touch of sweetness.

Maple Ridge
Lifestyle Director Creates New Fun for Residents
A21 ►



Business Insider
Businesses and Services Shaping Community Life
A24 ►



Diamond Siblings
AMU's McCormick Brothers Redefined Baseball
A29 ►



BIG KINDS OF SMALL TOWN FUN

Oil Well Craft Beer's Ugly Christmas Sweater and Karaoke Party



Let's revisit the spirited celebration that was Oil Well Craft Beer's 6th Annual Ugly Christmas Sweater and Karaoke Party on Dec. 23!

The karaoke stage witnessed joyous renditions of favorite tunes, as attendees proudly showcased their outrageously ugly Christmas sweaters. Bedazzled, brightly colored, and boldly tacky, the sweaters set the tone for a night of lighthearted celebration.

Craft beers flowed, creating a convivial atmosphere that resonated with the holiday cheer. As the clock struck 9 p.m., the event transitioned into an exclusive 21 and up experience, ensuring an evening of adult-friendly festivities. Cheers to the memories of craft beers, karaoke notes and the wonderfully tacky sweaters!



COURTESY PHOTOS

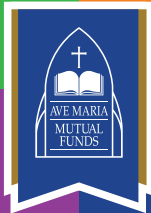
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BY MELANIE PEFINIS
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

This immediate care medical center, affiliated with the NCH Healthcare System, will feature a team of board-certified physicians and medical professionals providing on-site services seven days a week.

Midtown Plaza is set to become Ave Maria's go-to destination, whether you're in the mood for a rejuvenating facial, a savory slice of pepperoni or a delectable banana split. After indulging, drop into NCH for a medical check-up and ensure your back is in perfect gardening shape for all that mulch you just bought at Ace.

Part of this lifestyle includes the indulgent spa treatments offered at Ave Nails. Manager Mr. Dang expressed, "Coming to Midtown Plaza is the best thing that happened to us." While snowbirds and Ave Maria University students fill up his schedule during the season, Mr. Dang acknowledges that permanent residents keep him and his staff busy throughout the rest of the year.

Ave Nails offers services ranging from



BRENT KIRCHNER, AVE MARIA UTILITY COMPANY

Midtown Plaza is expected to open in Summer 2024.

mani-pedis to facials, eyebrow treatments, paraffin wax sessions, and foot massages – the perfect way to treat yourself after finishing your check-up at NCH's brand-new facility, and perhaps indulging in that tempting banana split.

Centrally located at the corners of Ave Maria Boulevard and Anthem Parkway, the commercial plaza will serve as a hub for the community. According to Cee Cee Marinelli of BCC, they aim to continue attracting businesses that complement the Ave Maria lifestyle. 🌻🌻



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6 Passenger 2023 KANDI FLAT BLACK 150 amp Lithium Maintenance Free Battery, Lifted, 14" alloy rims & tires, built in Charger, one year factory warranty. Factory Accessories kit (cell phone holder, 5 panel mirror, extra cup holders) installed. \$11,999 stock #6B1864



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BIG KINDS OF SMALL TOWN FUN

Step into the Festive Charm of Hometown Christmas

The Ave Maria Town Center transformed into a winter wonderland with cheerful holiday tunes echoing through the air, delightful treats to savor, and a myriad of joyful activities, this annual event provided a heartwarming celebration for residents attended. As we reflect on the joyful memories created, let the spirit of these past festivities continue to resonate, carrying the warmth and magic of the season throughout the year. ❄️



COURTESY PHOTOS



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FOOT PAIN?





SAME DAY APPOINTMENTS

AVE MARIA, HERE'S WHAT YOUR NEIGHBORS ARE SAYING

“Dr. Pelucacci and the entire staff were friendly, welcoming, and extremely professional. As a physician, I was impressed by the thoroughness of the exam and time spent including me in the decision making. What a great experience from check in to check out.”
– Dr. William B.

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– Dan W.

“Dr. Jake Powers and his staff made my visit an absolute pleasure. Dr. Powers did a wonderful job explaining problem/procedure/ expected outcomes. I highly recommend this group for all of your podiatry needs!”
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BIG KINDS OF SMALL TOWN FUN

Aced the Courts at Del Webb Naples' Winterfest Open: A Weekend of Pickleball Excitement



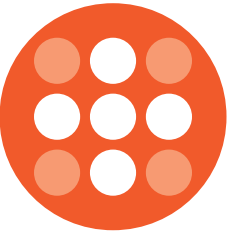
The Del Webb Naples community recently played host to an exhilarating weekend of pickleball festivities, bringing players and enthusiasts together for a thrilling tournament and networking event. Courts buzzed with competitive energy as participants showcased their skills, and everyone was welcome to join

in the excitement as spectators. The highlight of the event was the Pro-Exhibition, followed by the lively tunes of Southwest Florida's beloved rock band, Steinbeck Way. Attendees soaked in the vibrant atmosphere and camaraderie that permeated the tournament. 🎉



1. From left, Tim Smith, Barbo Deschenes, Andrea Blackwell and Lori Larkin.
2. From left, 3.0 level mixed doubles winners: silver medalists Sharon Kolodynski and Rod Kilgore, gold medalists Stephanie and Mark Kadlec, and bronze medalists Nicolett Shand Manzano and Addam Shand.
3. Stephanie and Mark Kadlec at the ready in their mixed-doubles match.
4. No room for error as Rod Kilgore hits the ball and Sharon Kowalski looks on.
5. Dan and Lynn Lukas.
6. Keeping your eyes on the ball is job number one.
7. Phyllis and Bill Olex.

SANDRA YEYATI / AVE MARIA SUN



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Avalon Park Unveils 11 Unique Floor Plans to Fulfill Your Dream Home Resolutions

BY MELANIE PEFINIS
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

The pursuit of your dream home as a New Year's resolution may be closer than you think, especially with Avalon Park, Pulte Homes's family community in Ave Maria, offering a choice of 11 distinct floor plans. While deciding among these single-family homes might pose a delightful challenge, the community's proximity to the Town Center and exceptional amenities ensures that house hunting is an ease.

Mike Egan, a Pulte sales consultant, expressed his enthusiasm for the diverse array of floor plans: "We love our models. We strive to provide a range of floor plans with a consumer-inspired approach, catering to our customers' unique preferences and lifestyle needs."

The variety of floor plans and prices at Avalon Park is truly diverse, with innovative one- and two-story designs incorporating smart home technology, allowing buyers to customize their homes based on their family's needs. This design strategy stems from Pulte's recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped our perception of living spaces. Egan noted, "We recognize that our customers really had their priorities clarified in the last three years. We've wanted to respond by offering homes they can personalize to fit their needs while at the same time anticipating the dynamic demands of the housing market."

Apart from the abundant amenities in Ave Maria, including opportunities for biking, walking, socializing and fitness, Avalon Park adds special incentives for growing families. New residents of Avalon Park receive an exclusive 5-year complimentary membership to the Ave Maria Water Park, underscoring Pulte's unwavering commitment to enhancing the customer experience.

The community charm and inclusive atmosphere, highly valued by Ave Maria residents, play a crucial role in Pulte's interest in establishing homes. According to Egan, "The foundation of any successful partnership is a mutual appreciation for the unique qualities we offer one another. Ave Maria is more than just a community; it is a special 'throwback' neighborhood that aligns with the desires of our homeowners."

Customer input drives innovation for Pulte's design team, evident in their popular Creekview and Stonewater floor plans inspiring the new Layton and Lay-



The Layton's opulent gathering room.

ton Grande floor plans. So, if finding the perfect new home is part of your resolutions for the year, it seems like 2024 might be your time. Egan expressed excitement for the upcoming year, stating, "We have so much to look forward to in 2024. As families increasingly choose Avalon Park as their preferred community for raising their children, the growth of this vibrant neighborhood is undeniable. Because of Pulte and Ave Maria's shared commitment to excellence and a genuine understanding of what makes Ave Maria special, we are confident that this partnership will continue to be successful in the years to come." 🌟



New residents of Avalon Park receive an exclusive 5-year complimentary membership to the Ave Maria Water Park.

"We love our models. We strive to provide a range of floor plans with a consumer-inspired approach, catering to our customers' unique preferences and lifestyle needs."

— Mike Egan,
Pulte sales consultant



Layton model exterior.



Covered lanai with outdoor space to enjoy in the Layton Grande.



The Layton's open-concept kitchen design.



The Layton Grande den is perfect for a home office or optional guest bedroom.



A custom pool with water views in the Layton model.





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BIZ KIDZ

From page 1

The brainchild of Biz Kidz, JD Ribali, evolved from a program that stagnated at his wife Kristin’s workplace. Her nonprofit had been helping a Boy Scout earn his Entrepreneur Badge. When the nonprofit could no longer support the endeavor, JD and Kristina broadened the idea and reimagined the program. Through the years it has grown more expansive and is continuing to reach new heights.

“We just got our 5013c nonprofit declaration a few weeks ago,” said Ribali. “This will allow us to apply for grants and other funding sources. For the past two years we have been operating only on generous community sponsorship and support from other small businesses in Southwest Florida.”

School-aged children can attend Biz Kidz camps which consist of corporation themed field trips, to local companies to witness daily operations, or a special guest visit where company managers evaluate the children’s ideas and offer real life suggestions and participate in the creation of kid’s products. “Members of the local business community will act as mentors to these children and encourage them to pursue production of their ideas,” said Ribali.

At the Biz Kidz Expo, row after row of crafted items conceptualized and made by the kids are put up for sale. Children have the chance to follow their ideas from first thought to fabrication to profit. And speaking of profit, the average child makes \$250 a day at these events.

That sure beats a paper route!

Also at the Expo, prizes are offered for the most successful business plans. This is in addition to the profits kids make when selling their wares. Just ask Lisa Lyman. Her daughter Ella holds the record as the highest single day earner so far at \$1000. “She’s the most down to earth young lady. And just so full of drive and motivation to see her business succeed,” said Lyman.

The business idea came to 11-year-old Ella one day while walking her beloved dog, Chicky. Holding the leash with one hand, she was unable to text her mom about her route

“My kids all worked for our family business, and they saw first-hand what goes into running a company and keeping your product viable.”

— JD Ribali

and ETA. She needed a third hand. What to do, what to do? “My dog leashes are adjustable crossbody dog leashes so you can walk your dog hands free,” said Ella. “I created my product early in 2023 and started doing Biz Kidz that April.”

A video on the Biz Kidz Facebook page shows the colorful yarn creations that free up hands for texting, talking or picking up those certain things that we all know are part of walking your dog.

“I have so much fun doing the markets, expos and trips that Biz Kidz offers. I have learned so

much. Ella noted. “I have gotten the opportunity to improve myself and my product, as well as my people skills.”

Even stellar sales like Ella’s aren’t the only motivator with Biz Kidz members. A grand prize of \$5,000 is also awarded at the Expo to encourage children to continue pursuing their dreams. The Biz Kidz frog logo seen



Bubble Bracelets by Madi & Fia features a variety of accessories, including turtle-themed bracelets. Buy two or more, spin the wheel, and win free prizes like stickers, notepads, pencils and more!



on their branding was designed by a former member who now draws for Nickelodeon’s SpongeBob SquarePants.

That logo will be front and center when a new weekly Zoom meeting soon launches, offering a place for kids to ask questions, share ideas and brainstorm. “My kids all

worked for our family business, and they saw first-hand what goes into running a company and keeping your product viable,” said Ribali. “They also learned that failure is part of business. Our Zoom meeting and other events let kids learn that you need to be adaptable to succeed.”

Ave Maria residents will have a chance to witness the excitement of this program and these youngsters when they visit the community at this winter’s signature events such as Taste of Ave and the Blues, Brews & BBQ Festival. If the response at last autumn’s Fall Festival is any indication, the kids will be warmly received. Their Joyful Lemonade product raked in \$700. There’s nothing sour about that!

In addition to dog leash inventor Ella, Ribali proudly mentions other notable ideas. At a recent event at Miromar Outlets, one high schooler sold out of his product. “You know those shoe charms that kids love to put on Crocs?” he asked. “This boy devised a lock for the charms, so they won’t fall off or get stolen.” His product now has a patent pending.

“Another one of my favorites would go to Goodwill and buy old broken toys,” Ribali continued. “He would isolate needed components and then visit the thrift store’s electronics section. He would take apart circuit boards from different devices and combine them with the toy parts to build his own robots!”

Clearly, we should keep our eyes out for Biz Kidz members on Shark Tank in the future. As Ella summed it up, “I want to put in a good word for Biz Kidz and how much I truly enjoy it. I always look forward to my next market!” After she walks Chicky, of course. 🌟



Meet Ella, the creative force behind For Dogs Sake, as she showcases her adjustable crossbody dog leashes—an innovative product that emerged from Ave Maria’s young entrepreneurs, proving that age is no limit to entrepreneurial spirit.

COURTESY PHOTOS

ALL AROUND AVE MARIA

Dates and details are subject to change. Call the Ave Maria New Home & Welcome Center at 239-352-3903 for more information. Follow Town Center businesses on social media for updates and special promotions.

■ OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Sunshine State Steak Cook-Off

Indulge in a sizzling culinary experience at the 14th annual Sunshine State Steak Cook-Off, hosted by the Knights of Columbus. Taking place on Saturday, Jan. 27 from 2 to 6:30 p.m. in the Ave Maria Town Center, the event features lively entertainment, beer vendors, a kids' bounce house and an Arts & Crafts Festival. Grill teams will showcase their skills, preparing approximately 2,000 steak dinners for attendees to enjoy from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. Be part of the excitement, with winner announcements scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Admission is free, and steak dinners can be purchased for \$30 in advance at SunshineStateSteakCookOff.com or \$35 on the day of the event.

Ave Maria Marathon 2024

On Saturday, Feb. 10, from 7 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., experience a day of fitness and fun! Athletes of all levels can participate in the Friends & Family Mile, 5K, 10K, half marathon or full marathon. The races commence and conclude in the Town Center, and don't miss the vendors' expo from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. For additional details and registration, visit alpha.win/

event/ave-maria-fl.

MERCHANT EVENTS

The Bean at Ave Maria

Check out The Bean's drive-thru coffee cart located in front of The Pub at Ave Maria every day from 6:30 to -8 a.m. and swiftly purchase muffins, bagels, hot and iced coffee and more!

Discover the latest weekly special drink announcements, expertly crafted by our talented baristas, at facebook.com/the-beanatave.

Every Tuesday, dive into family-friendly Bingo fun where winners can snag complimentary drinks, ice cream, and more!

Galentine's Day Brunch- Celebrate the special bond of friendship with their Galentine's Day Brunch on Wednesday, Feb. 14! Gather your gal pals for a morning of indulgence and togetherness as they serve up a delectable brunch spread. From savory delights to sweet treats, their menu is designed to make this Valentine's Day memorable. Whether you're single or coupled up, join The Bean for a heartwarming brunch that honors the joys of friendship. Make it a date with your besties and treat yourselves!

High Tea- Indulge in an exquisite High Tea experience at The Bean on March 9. Join them for a delightful afternoon filled with assorted sandwiches, delectable desserts, pastries and a selection of hand-picked teas. Whether you come alone or with friends, this is your chance to dress up and treat yourself to a charming teatime. The chef has curated a special

menu, and spots are filling up quickly based on verbal interest, so be sure to R.S.V.P. to secure your place or table. Tickets are \$30 each, and all ages are welcome. Additionally, they have a special drink menu available upon request.

Mercato at Ave

With 16 charming vendor spaces known as "casitas," Mercato at Ave brings you a diverse array of local products ranging from exquisite candles, soaps, and clothing to beauty supplies, jewelry repair, and more. The array extends to convenient services like drop-off dry cleaners and a fragrance station. Indulge in high-end sneakers, savor delicious ice cream and cupcakes, and discover much more—all under one lively roof!

At Mercato at Ave, the experience goes beyond shopping. Revel in the atmosphere with free Wi-Fi, savor handcrafted coffee beverages, or unwind at the wine and beer bar. Lounge areas invite you to relax, while live music creates a delightful ambiance. Don't miss the opportunity to capture memories at the specially designed mural, perfect for striking photo moments.

Explore more about their diverse range and upcoming activities on their Facebook page and Instagram, as well as their website mercatoatave.net.

Oil Well Craft Beer

Indulge in delicious sub sandwiches available daily from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Call (239) 354-4454 to place an order!

Every Monday through Saturday from 5 to 8 p.m. there is at least one food truck at the Park of Commerce serving

scrumptious food to go with libations.

To Go Tuesdays: \$1 off crawlers and \$2 off growlers.

Wine Wednesdays: \$1 off wine.

Ladies Drink Specials on Thursdays: \$1 off drafts and wine for ladies.

Don't miss National Beer Can Appreciation Day on Wednesday, Jan. 24! Crowlers will be \$2 off all day.

Adult bingo is on Wednesday, Jan. 24 and March 13 at 7 p.m., hosted by the wonderful Cruise Planners Team of Jackie and Dan Rategan!

Experience the rhythm at Music Bingo with DJ DiFlo on Monday, Jan. 29, Feb. 19 and March 18 from 7 to 9 p.m. Arrive early to secure your spot, as it tends to fill up quickly!

First Friday Celebration on Friday, Feb. 2 from 5 to 7 p.m. Open to the Public! Live music, fun games, raffles, prizes and more.

Join in the family fun at Family-Friendly Bingo hosted by Realtor Sara Callahan. Enjoy free prizes on Saturday, Feb. 3 and Saturday, March 2 from 6 to 8 p.m.

The Ave Maria Business Meeting will take place on Monday, Feb. 12 and March 11 from 6:30 to 8 p.m. All small business owners are welcome to come and network!

Celebrate Valentine's Day with a special edition of Adult Bingo, hosted by the Cruise Planner's dynamic team, Jackie and Dan Rategan, on Wednesday, Feb. 14, at 7 p.m.

J&J Creation4U is back to host the Brew and Paint Party on Tuesday, Feb. 20 and March 12! It's only \$35 to secure your

SEE ALL AROUND AVE MARIA, A12 ►



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ALL AROUND AVE MARIA



COURTESY PHOTOS

Dive into Pokémon Pack Wars at Way Out Toys & Games every Tuesday from 6:30 to 7 p.m. for a thrilling, bingo-style game. For \$20, participants receive three packs of the latest Pokémon cards, engaging in four rounds of strategic play. Compete for victory and exclusive prizes in this fun-filled event, welcoming Pokémon enthusiasts of all ages and skill levels!

From page 11

seat and includes one drink. Seats fill up quickly, so R.S.V.P. to 239-354-4454.

Get ready to twist and shout at the Sock Hop 50s Dance Party on Saturday, Feb. 24 from 8 to 11 p.m. Dance down memory lane to the iconic tunes of Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley and Little Richard. Don't forget to dress in your best 50s attire!

Come celebrate St. Patrick's Day on Friday, March 15 from 6 to 9 p.m. They'll be bringing back their famous Irish Red, along with some delicious Shepherd's Pie Nachos from Mambo!

Get ready to salsa and dance the night away at Latin Night with DJ DiFLO on Saturday, March 23 from 9 p.m. to 12 a.m. Due to overwhelming demand, this event is back for a night of Latin beats and lively rhythms. Please note that this event is for ages 21 and up. Don't miss out on the fiesta!

For more information about Oil Well Craft Beer visit their Facebook page and website at oilwellcraftbeer.com.

The Pub & Grill at Ave Maria

Enjoy Happy Hour every Monday through Friday from 2 to -5 p.m., where you can indulge in a buy-one-get-one-free offer on select draft beers, well liquor and wine.

The Secret Ingredient

Celebrate your birthday and enjoy a special 20% discount on your favorite regularly priced item. Don't forget to bring your ID!

Every Monday is 55+ and Fabulous Day! Shoppers ages 55 and up save 10% off one regularly priced item.

Discover the excitement of their Weekly Wednesday Sale, where a special item is offered at a discounted price. Stay tuned to their social media channels to unveil the featured item each week!

All puzzles are 10% off on Monday, Jan. 29 for National Puzzle Day.

Join them for a Valentine's Day Couples Paint Party Celebration on Sunday, Feb. 11 from 3 to 6 p.m. Seats are limited and will fill up quickly, so please R.S.V.P. to 239-213-0990.

An after-hours Ladies PJ Party is happening from 8 to 11 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 16. Join TSI for light hors d'oeuvres, wine, spa products and more!

Save the date for the Cancer Alliance Fashion Show at Del Webb Naples on Saturday, March 9! Enjoy a 5 p.m. dinner, a fabulous 6 p.m. Fashion Show, and stay for raffles and a silent auction—all in support of the Cancer Alliance Network. Tickets will be available soon.

On Tuesday, March 19, TSI will have their AMU Annual Style Show and Luncheon. This Style Show benefits the Ave Maria University Scholarship Fund. Call 239-213-0990 with any questions.

Stella Rose Way

A locally owned gift boutique and home decor store offering a curated selection of gifts, local artisanal items, children's products, home décor and more.

With monthly special events, visitors can explore the boutique's offerings and discover Ave Maria souvenirs, making it a go-to destination for beautiful gifts and specialty home decor. Stella Rose Way aims to provide both residents and visitors with a convenient and charming spot to find the perfect present or add a touch of goodness and beauty to their homes.

For more information, check out their Facebook page and visit their website at stellaroseway.com.

Way Out Toys & Games

Kids and adults of all ages and skills are invited to participate in the Pokémon Pack Wars, a fast-paced, bingo-style game, every Tuesday from 6:30 to -7 p.m. For \$20, each player receives three packs of new Pokémon cards to keep and use over four rounds of play. Winners receive Pokémon prizes.

Every Thursday evening from 6 to 8 p.m., embrace the Lorcana Open Play experience – a gathering for all ages to delve into the captivating world of Lorcana. Whether you're a seasoned player or new to the game, this event provides an opportunity to learn, strategize and connect with fellow enthusiasts. Lorcana's blend of kid-friendly accessibility and strategic depth makes it a game suitable for everyone aged 8 and above. Need cards? Starter decks are available for purchase in-store, ensuring everyone can enjoy the fun of Lorcana Open Play.

AVE MARIA UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

Schedule is subject to change, check avemariagyrenes.com/calendar for away games and updates.

Saturday, Jan. 27

W. Basketball vs. Coastal Georgia, 2 p.m.
M. Basketball vs. Coastal Georgia, 4 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 3

RGB South Florida Club, TBD

Wednesday, Feb. 7

Softball vs. Florida National, 2 p.m. and 4 p.m.
W. Basketball vs. Warner, 5:30 p.m.
M. Basketball vs. Warner, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 10

RGB Miami Club, TBD
Softball vs. Fort Lauderdale, 12 p.m. and 2 p.m.
W. Basketball vs. Keiser, 2 p.m.
M. Basketball vs. Keiser, 4 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 13

Softball vs. New College of Florida, 2 p.m. and 4 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 16

Softball vs. Trinity Baptist (Fla.), 2 p.m. and 4 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 17

W. Basketball vs. St. Thomas, 2 p.m.
M. Basketball vs. RV St. Thomas,

4 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 20

M. Tennis vs. Palm Beach Atlantic, TBD
W. Tennis vs. Palm Beach Atlantic, TBD

Saturday, Feb. 24

RGB Eckerd Club, TBD

Monday, Feb 26

Lacrosse vs. Cumberland (Ky.), 6 p.m.

Wednesday, Feb. 28

M. Tennis vs. Florida National, TBD
W. Tennis vs. Florida National, TBD

Saturday, March 2

Softball vs. Calumet (Ind.), 1 p.m. and 3 p.m.

Monday, March 4

Lacrosse vs. Marian (Ind.), TBA

Wednesday, March 6

Lacrosse vs. Madonna (Mich.), 6 p.m.

Friday, March 8

Baseball vs. New College of Florida, 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.
Lacrosse vs. Lawrence Tech (Mich.), 1 p.m.

Saturday, March 9

Baseball vs. New College of Florida, 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.
RGB Millenia Atlantic, TBD

Monday, March 11

Baseball vs. Northwestern (Iowa), 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.
Lacrosse vs. Franciscan (Ohio), 6 p.m.
Thursday, March 14
Lacrosse vs. Georgetown (Ky.), 5 p.m.

Monday, March 18

Lacrosse vs. Oglethorpe (Ga.), 6 p.m.

Friday, March 22

Baseball vs Florida Memorial, 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.
Softball vs Keiser, 3 p.m.
M. Tennis vs. #9 Coastal Georgia, TBD
W. Tennis vs RV Coastal Georgia, TBD

Saturday, March 23

Baseball vs. Florida Memorial,

ALL AROUND AVE MARIA

12 p.m. and 3 p.m.
Softball vs Keiser, 12 p.m. and 2 p.m.
Lacrosse vs. Warner, 5 p.m.
M. Tennis vs #12 SCAD, TBD
W. Tennis vs #12 SCAD, TBD

Wednesday, March 27
Baseball vs. Fort Lauderdale,
12 p.m. and 3 p.m.

Wednesday, April 3
Lacrosse vs. Keiser, 6 p.m.

Friday, April 5
Softball vs. Webber, 3 p.m.

Saturday, April 6
Softball vs. Webber, 12 p.m. and 2 p.m.
Lacrosse vs. Life (Ga.), 1 p.m.

Friday, April 12
M. Tennis vs #3 Keiser, TBD
W. Tennis vs #3 Keiser, TBD

Saturday, April 13
W. Tennis vs #8 St. Thomas, TBD
M. Tennis vs #12 St. Thomas, TBD

Wednesday, April 17
Softball vs. Florida National,
2 p.m. and 4 p.m.

Friday, April 19
Baseball vs. Keiser, 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.
Softball vs. Florida Memorial, 3 p.m.

Saturday, April 20
Baseball vs. Keiser, 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.
Softball vs. Florida Memorial,
12 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Thursday, April 25
Baseball vs. Warner, 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.

Friday, April 26
Baseball vs. Warner, 12 p.m. and 3 p.m.

■ AVE MARIA RESIDENTS ONLY

Organizers request preregistration for these resident-only events via the Ave Maria Master Association (AMMA) calendar at avemariamasterassociation.com. For more information, call 239-867-4322.

Family Fun First Fridays

These monthly free events, held on the first Friday of each month, blend musical entertainment with family-friendly games and activities. The January event will embrace a Winter theme, featuring princesses, Way Too Tall Torrie the stilt walker balloon artist, DJ music and more. For the heart health commemoration on Feb. 2, attendees are encouraged to wear red for women's health, and the live musician Paul Demaris will perform from 5-7 p.m. at Oil Well Craft Beer in the Park of Commerce. Save the date for the St. Patrick's-themed celebration on March 1 in the Town Center, which will showcase a dance performance by the Celtic Spirit Dance Academy, music, face painting, and activities from 4-6 p.m.

AVE MARIA WATER PARK NEWS

The Water Park will have partial park closures while undergoing segment renovations beginning January 8th. Residents should look out for updates and information on water exercise classes etc. in their Friday Flash E-blasts.

COFFEE WITH A TWISS

This casual gathering with AMMA Executive Director Kim Twiss held from 10-11 a.m. every second Thursday of the month allows homeowners to ask questions and get updates pertaining to the Master Association and community news. Next dates are Feb. 8 and March 14.

Ave Maria Stewardship Community District (AMSCD) Meetings

Monthly AMSCD meetings are open to the public and held in the AMMA meeting room Feb. 7 at 9 a.m. and Mar. 7 at 6 p.m. Visit avemariastewardship-cd.org for more information, monthly meeting books and schedule updates.

Onspot Dermatology

Located in the parking lot off Roma Street and Avila Avenue (behind Tropical Cafe Smoothie and Oasis: The Kitchen Lounge), OnSpot provides various dermatological services in their state-of-the-art mobile office. Services will be available from 7:30 a.m. until 3 p.m. 15 minutes could save your life! Walk-ins are currently available; however, it is recommended that you book your appointment before. Please visit their website to book an appointment. Next dates are Feb. 9, Feb. 19, March 2, March 20 and March 30.

Embrace Life Series

Photographer and resident Patrick O'Flaherty DDS presents inspiring wild-life photography series set to music in the AMMA meeting room from 7 to 8 p.m. Feb. 20, March 19 and April 16. This presentation covers amazing wild-life shots taken on his voyages, and also has showcased enlightening photography in places he has visited with Alliance for Smiles Mission in counties all over the world. Admission is free.

Broadway Palms Dinner Theatre – Elvis: A Music Revolution

Join your Ave Maria neighbors for a dinner theater excursion to see the production Elvis: A Music Revolution, live on stage at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre in Fort Myers on Tuesday, Feb. 13. The \$80 per-person cost includes dinner at 5:30 p.m. followed by the 7 p.m. performance. Reservations are required via the AMMA calendar. Transportation is on your own; carpooling with friends is encouraged.

Community Yard Sale and Services Day

Offering Ave Maria residents an opportunity to sell gently used items and offer services to neighbors, this community-building event from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 24, in North Park, includes DJ music, family-friendly activities, food trucks, and other services. To reserve a booth, rent tables and chairs or learn more, visit avemariamasterassociation.com.

Fluid Art Resin Classes With Artist Tammy Decaro

Join Tammy DeCaro in this fun and creative class, "Pouring with Gadgets" on Wednesday, Feb. 28, from 6 to 8 p.m. Those in attendance will be using interesting household items like strainers, marbles and many others to create two unique abstract fluid paintings. Plan to bring two boxes or one large box that can hold two canvases 11x14 or 12x12". A clean XL pizza box is a great choice. Please visit the Ave Maria Master Association website to register.

Living With Wildlife

Living with Wildlife series resumes on Wednesday, March 6, featuring Beth Hamm. Join AMMA for a discussion on the current season, covering topics such as hatchlings and protective mommas. They'll address what to do if you encounter a 'nuisance gator,' the implications of 'feeding a gator,' potential issues with fishing, and any questions you might have. To participate, please register on the Ave Maria Master Association website.

SPRING FESTIVAL

Celebrate spring Ave Maria-style from 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Saturday, March 23, in North Park, featuring the annual Easter Egg Dash and Bunny Hop. A bunny parade kicks off the day, followed by egg hunt races for several age categories, an obstacle course for older kids and an egg stroll corner for children 3 and under, and a lollipop drop! Vendors and information booths will entertain and educate. Admission is \$5 per child and free for parents and kids aged 2 and under. Pre-registration is required and will be available at the avemariamasterassociation.com website calendar.

New Homeowners Social and Orientation

New Ave Maria homeowners, and homeowners who have not attended one before, are invited to a social and informational event in the AMMA meeting room, featuring a presentation by the master association direction about living in this community and the various organizations operating in Ave Maria. Check the AMMA website calendar for dates and times. The next Orientation is scheduled for Feb. 22 at 5:15 p.m. Social, 6 p.m. Orientation.

Adult Games Group

Adults looking for a friendly group to socialize with and playing card-type games (Skip-Bo, Sequence and others) or Mexican Train (dominoes) are welcome to join the group from 1 to 3 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays in the AMMA card room.

SPORTS AND FITNESS (RESIDENTS ONLY)

Swimming Lessons

Beginning March 11, the Ave Maria Water Park will offer an eight-lesson program sanctioned by the American Red Cross that teaches kids how to swim and be safe in the water. The eight, 45-minute lessons are \$65 and grouped by age: water babies (6 months to 3 years old), preschoolers (3 to 5 years old) and youth (6 to 12 years old). Families must register in person at the water park. For more information, call 239-348-8384 or email kellie.powell@fsresidential.com.

Free Fitness Classes at South Park

These biweekly fitness classes at South Park start at 9:15 a.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays. For more information for

these and other class locations, text instructor Nicolas Leon at 786-436-3323.

Tai Chi Fitness

Experience a meditative workout that increases strength, mobility and much more at 9 a.m. Wednesdays in the AMMA event room. For more information, contact instructor Mylyn Vedel at myvedel@gmail.com or 239-220-4181.

Yoga Fitness

Yoga instructor Alexandra Salazar returns to the Ave Maria Master Association for specialized classes geared towards senior adults. Classes will be held at 10 a.m. and will occur every other Friday. If you would like to know more or would like to register, please email salexa2009@gmail.com.

Zumba Classes

These classes are on Saturday mornings at 9:30 a.m. in South Park at the Amphitheater, with instructor Genesis North. For more information, cost and updates, please contact Genesis North via website at genesiszumba.as.me.

Quest Martial Arts Academy Classes

Led by Kenny Quintero, a 20-year veteran instructor, these martial arts classes for kids to adults, start at 5 p.m. Mondays and 9:30 a.m. Saturdays in the AMMA event room, teach students discipline and self-defense techniques while honing their focus, having fun and getting fit. For more information, call Crystal at 239-371-6073 or visit questmartialart-sacademy.com.

Sports Leagues & Organizations

There are various seasonal independent sports leagues and organizations operating in Ave Maria, so for more information on current availability, please visit the Ave Maria Master Association Website Calendar for any approved fitness and sports conducted by independent contractors.

Ave Maria Little League

Check out the Spring season information for this home-based and very first official league in Ave Maria who continues to have a winning history! League play includes baseball, tee ball and softball for kids 4 to 14. For detailed information and registration instructions, visit avemariablittleleague.com or contact avemariabaseball@gmail.com. 🌟



Ave Maria Little League Hits It Out of the Park for Youth Development

BY GLENN MILLER

Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

New Year's Day is often associated with college football bowl games. But on New Year's Day 2024, Little League softball and baseball were the sports of most importance at South Park in Ave Maria.

A handful of softball players were practicing informally on that spectacularly sunny day under the watchful eye of coaches and parents. A baseball coach was also at the park to talk about Ave Maria Little League.

Whether college football or adult pickleball or golf, a fundamental appeal of sports is camaraderie.

That is a theme 12-year-old pitcher and team captain Ireland McDaniel addressed as she sat at a picnic table with her parents.

What does the sixth grader like about playing softball?

"Just how you make friends really easily," Ireland said. "They perfect your imperfections."

As Ireland spoke, her parents, Shannon and Steve, listened intently. In the fall program, Ireland pitched nine hitless innings.

"I live vicariously through her," Shannon said.

The softball team's name is the Ave Maria Angels.

"Aptly named, right?" Manager Joe Asencio said.

He has two daughters on the team, Harlow, 12, and Lena, 10.

The young Ave Maria Little League baseball and softball teams programs are growing.

The boys 9-11 age group baseball team won the 2022 District 18 championship. That means they beat the older and more established programs from Naples and Golden Gate. That earned them a trip to the sectional tournament and the opportunity to play teams from beyond this corner of Southwest Florida, eventually losing to Venice in the title game.

As the community grows, so does the Little League program. Asencio said when he took over the program was in "disarray."

"The girls couldn't win," Asencio said. "And I mean not close. Not even competitive."

He said the team was losing games 20-0 and even worse.

"They were getting hammered," Asencio said.

The team was losing to more established programs such as those in LaBelle, Naples, Fort Myers, Golden Gate and Immokalee. Asencio wasn't sure of the precise record in 2023 but thinks it was 8-5. The days of getting hammered appear to be over.

In the fall season the Angels were 4-0.

"We're trying to build here from scratch," said Asencio, a military veteran with three years active service in the Army and six years in the Air Force Reserve. The discipline and attention to detail honed through all those years of military service is now part of what he brings to Little League softball and more.

"I try to bring good attitudes and that hard work ethic," Asencio said. "Give it your all."

Giving your all means practicing even on holidays such as New Year's Day. Ireland McDaniel was one of those players working out on the holiday. She was honing her pitching talent.

Ireland has big dreams that include someday playing in an elite collegiate program such as those at the University of Alabama or University of Oklahoma or Louisiana State.



COURTESY PHOTOS

"I try to bring good attitudes and that hard work ethic. Give it your all."

— Joe Asencio, Ave Maria Little League Manager

For now, the focus is Little League and making the Angels better. She hopes to see more girls come out to make that short-term dream a reality.

"If they commit to playing softball and want to get better at it, I feel the team is going to be really good," Ireland said.

Ireland McDaniel is, according to Asencio, the key to the team's success.

"I don't know how well we would do without her," Asencio said. "She sets an example for the rest of the girls."

Ireland is two years older than Lena Asencio, who has been inspired by the older girl's talent and work ethic.

"She's a pitcher now, too, because of her," Asencio said.

As Ave Maria grows and more families move into the community, more youngsters will likely sign up to play baseball and softball. Asencio recalls what he saw on the final day of the fall season at South Park.

"Literally 20 minutes before the game starts, I look out and I see a father with a daughter practicing," Asencio said. "Who's this? I went to go talk with him."

The daughter was signed up, growing the team's roster.

"She's going to be on the team," Asencio said.

cio said.

The baseball program is also growing and improving. Ariel Hernandez, the league's public information officer, pointed to the boys winning the 2022 district title against larger leagues as an example. Other leagues are so large that they select all-star teams from multiple teams to compete in tournament play. Not so in Ave Maria.

"So, my in-house team was my all-star team," Hernandez said.

The boys' program, which also includes two tee-ball teams, has about 90 to 100 participants. Given the dynamic nature of the community's growth, Little League officials expect it to grow even more.

"We're getting a lot of requests on social media," Hernandez said.

Little League coach Chris Luther is in his third season coaching baseball in Ave Maria. His son, Jameson, who turns 9 soon, is on the team and has progressed each season. Jameson started in T-ball, then moved up to coach-pitch and the catcher is now in player-pitch as a catcher. His favorite player is Miami Marlins center fielder Jazz Chisholm Jr.

His father has coached him at each level.

"We're now moving up through the ranks together," Chris Luther said.

One of the rewards of coaching for Mr. Luther is seeing the progress his players make in all facets of the game. Even over periods as brief as two or three months he sees improvement.

Baseball or a variation of it is a big part of life for the Luther Family. If Jameson and his dad are not at the park playing baseball, they can be found in the yard playing wiffle ball.

"All the time," Mr. Luther said.

League umpire-in-chief Jeremy Britag has been around the league longer than the Luthers. He has been in Ave Maria for six years. When he and his wife and family moved into their Maple Ridge home six years ago, they lived in the only house on their street. Now that street is filled.

"It's all built out," he said.

He's helping to build Ave Maria Little League. He wants the league to be about more than winning and losing.

"I want to make sure we just don't teach these kids baseball and softball," he said. "That they grow up to be great humans, just great adults. I always say baseball and sports in general provide discipline, a lot of life lessons." 🌟

Ave Maria Communities

JANUARY 2024

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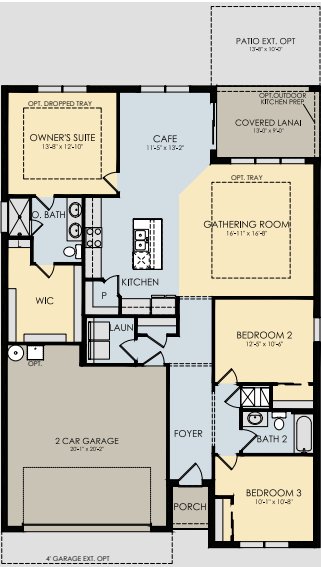
AVALON PARK

About the community

From the \$400,000s - \$1,000,000+

It's easy to stay active and have family fun at Avalon Park. Located within walking or biking distance to downtown Ave Maria, Avalon Park attracts families looking for exceptional schools, close proximity to neighborhood parks, and plenty of living space. Avalon Park offers spacious homesites, unique architectural exteriors, and 11 consumer-inspired

one- and two-story single-family homes that combine Pulte Homes' signature quality construction and personalized design opportunities. With home designs including up to seven bedrooms and 6 1/2 bathrooms in 5,000-plus square feet of living space, you are sure to find your dream new home to fit your family's needs now and in the future.



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versatile living spaces to make everyday moments easier and more enjoyable. With a clear focus on quality construction and a simplified buying experience, Pulte Homes will help you get into your dream home easily. That's More Life Built In®, and that's exactly what you'll find at Avalon Park.

Avalon Park at Ave Maria
4364 Washington Place, Ave Maria, FL 34142
239-842-1657



About the community

From the \$300,000s - \$1,000,000+

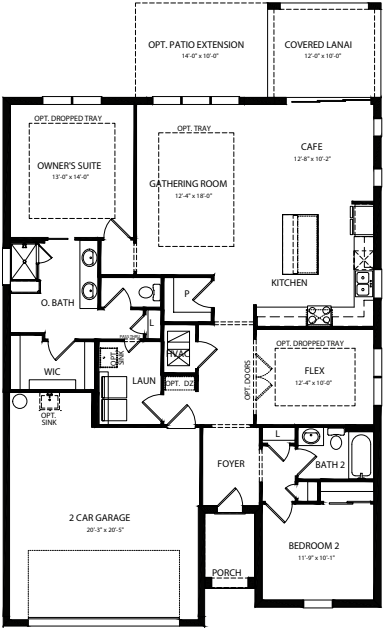
Del Webb Naples brings premier resort-style amenities and a lifestyle nothing short of extraordinary to Ave Maria. Here, daily possibilities for new adventures await. Where every day is different – and entirely up to you. From a dip in the pool to a friendly game of pickleball, in Del Webb Naples you’ll find countless opportunities to grow, thrive, and enjoy those new passions you’ve been waiting to explore. Del Webb Naples provides amenities, programs, and support needed for health and wellness,

conveniently located right where you live. No matter how full or fulfilling you want your days to be, you’ll find a way to energize your mind, body, and spirit the way you’ve always wanted to. Enjoy golf, bocce ball, bicycling, dance instruction, art, endless ways to socialize, and opportunities to give back to the community that surrounds you. No matter one’s stage in life, in Del Webb Naples you’ll never cease to be amazed at how rich your days can be. We believe you’ll like it here.



No one understands the importance of community like Del Webb. Del Webb communities are an extension of the homeowners who live there – a collection of passions and activities you love to enjoy with others. When you choose to build in a Del Webb 55+ active adult community, you get the benefit of more than six decades of homebuilding experience. With homes

designed for how you live, including the features that matter most to you, all backed by a warranty you can rely on, you’ll feel secure now and into the future. Our streamlined process makes it easy for you to build the home you’ve always wanted in the kind of vibrant community you’ve been looking for.



Prosperity

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Del Webb Naples
6028 Victory Drive, Ave Maria, FL 34142
239-842-9643



About the community

Maple Ridge at Ave Maria is a thoughtfully designed community with a myriad of home designs, all of which combine beautiful curb appeal with impressive interior layouts built for modern lifestyles. CC Homes is the builder behind this community and they are among the many reasons Ave Maria has become such a rapidly growing neighborhood attracting new residents from the Gulf Coast, Southeast Florida and beyond. With more than 75 years of combined experience in South Florida real estate, Mr. Armando Codina and Mr. Jim Carr along with Mr. Andres Miyares have set a new standard for quality new construction homes in desirable communities, with a wide range of pricing from entry-level to prestigious exclusivity.

CC Homes communities throughout Florida have been recognized for their incredible market appeal, outstanding quality, and resident satisfaction time and time again, having built thousands of homes and residences. Homes built by CC Homes are designed to improve people's lives. Modern features, smart floor plans, and upscale amenities combine for the ultimate Florida lifestyle. Homeowners at Maple Ridge are pampered with high-end designer features included in the base price. Maple Ridge neighborhoods include a brand-new clubhouse for residents with resort-style pool and cabanas, fitness center, billiard room, exercise park, concierge, coffee bar, exhibition kitchen, and kids' room.

Save Big with Quick Move-In Home Incentives, Available Now! 9 Model Homes Open Daily.



Starting from the \$300,000s

CC Homes is ranked as one of the top five new home builders in South Florida and Southwest Florida, offering affordable single-family luxury in Ave Maria's Maple Ridge neighborhoods. Homeowners are pampered with high-end designer features included in

the base price. Maple Ridge neighborhoods include a brand-new clubhouse for residents with resort-style pool and cabanas, fitness center, billiard room, exercise park, concierge, coffee bar, exhibition kitchen and kids' room.



Fairway

- 2,588 a/c square feet
- 3 to 4 bedrooms
- 2 ½ to 3 bathrooms
- Two walk-in closets in primary bedroom
- Covered terrace
- 2 or 3-car garage

Maple Ridge
5009 Alonza Avenue, Ave Maria, FL 34142
833-729-1783 | www.MapleRidgeFL.com



About the community

As part of the highly sought after new home community, Maple Ridge at Ave Maria- Silverwood offers exciting residential choices to buyers. Silverwood provides homeowners the perfect home at a great value. All of these single-family homes are beautifully designed with Mediterranean-inspired architecture and an inviting array of designer features included as well as some custom options available. Both Silverwood and Maple Ridge have a superb location within Ave Maria, so residents benefit from a great school district and sense of community.

Floor plan spotlight: The Huntington is a new construction, one-story home with three bedrooms, two baths, great room, eat-in kitchen, storage, master suite with walk-in closet and attached garage. Premium features included that are standard include designer brand faucets and fixtures, and tile flooring. Gourmet kitchens have stainless steel appliances, European-style wood cabinetry and quartz countertops. A spa-like master bathroom features double sinks with quartz vanity tops and a spacious shower.



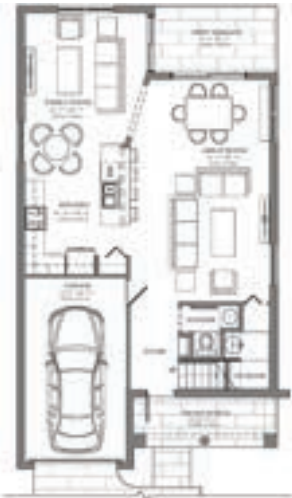
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CC Homes is ranked as one of the top five new home builders in South Florida and Southwest Florida, offering affordable single-family luxury in Ave Maria's Maple Ridge neighborhoods. Homeowners are pampered with high-end designer features

included in the base price. Maple Ridge neighborhoods include a brand-new clubhouse for residents with resort-style pool and cabanas, fitness center, billiard room, exercise park, concierge, coffee bar, exhibition kitchen and kids' room.



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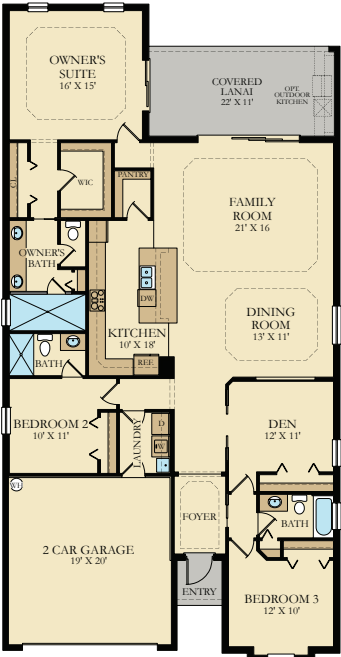
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About the community

Lennar is excited to bring its popular Everything's Included® homes and resort lifestyle amenities to the charm, convenience, and values of Ave Maria. The National Golf & Country Club will offer a fresh coastal aesthetic throughout the home designs and on-site amenities including an 18-hole Gordon Lewis-designed golf course, complimented by world-class amenities for the entire family to enjoy. A variety of floorplans will be offered in Terrace and Veranda condominiums, coach homes, and executive and estate single-family homes. The National Golf & Country Club will

feature its own clubhouse with a pro shop, formal and casual dining, a resort-style pool and spa, fitness center with yoga/aerobics room, spa treatment rooms and beauty salon. Active residents can take advantage of Har-Tru tennis courts, pickle and bocce ball, a putting green, chipping area, and a driving range. This all-encompassing amenity campus is designed to bring the community together, with spaces for friends new and old to gather. Whether you are a seasonal resident or looking to lay down roots, The National Golf & Country Club has the ideal home for you.



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TOP-RANKED

From page 1

the town’s establishment in 2007. Its ranking for 2023 is a boost from the previous year’s position at 18th place with 586 home sales. According to Mambuca, 2024 sales are expected to be brisk, as well, with conservative estimates set at more than 500 new home closings.

“Ave Maria is growing very rapidly due to the lifestyle we offer and the price point of new homes,” Mambuca asserted. “We offer different types of homes to fit a price that you like. Whether it’s growing families, mature families, golf enthusiasts or active adults, there’s something for everyone, for every budget, which is why Ave Maria’s master plan is so popular.”

The community has four builders—CC Homes, Del Webb Naples, Lennar and Pulte Homes—offering more than 25 fully decorated model homes available to tour. Prices range from the high \$200s to \$800s, and the average home price is in the \$400s.

“From underground utilities to reliable water service and amazing parks and recreation settings, everything about the town is very well planned out, and also very well maintained with a board that helps make decisions in the best interest of residents,” remarked Mambuca.

Another plus is Ave Maria’s rich sense of community. The Ave Maria Master Association (AMMA) puts together events for residents throughout the year, and within most neighborhoods there is a lifestyle director that also plans functions for their residents. Ave Maria Development hosts several signature festivals throughout the year, drawing thousands to the heart of town, while business-sponsored events and a vibrant farmers market in season invite people to connect with one another and build relationships.

A wealth of amenities enriches this compact town, which at buildout will have 11,000 homes and 1.8 million square feet of retail, office and business-park uses. Numerous connection points bring people together, such as an accredited university offering programming and sports games that are open to the public; the Ave Maria Water Park for a splashy good time; sports fields, children’s

playgrounds and rustic settings in several public parks; an ever-evolving Town Center with retail and dining options; and meticulously landscaped biking and walking paths. As a Blue Zone certified community, Ave Maria offers scores of opportunities to maintain an active, engaged life, featuring meaningful encounters with nature, family, friends and neighbors.

“People that move here are looking for more; they’re looking to get to know their neighbors, enjoy fun events and have convenient services nearby, from healthcare to beauty services to dining options,” Mambuca said, adding that this is precisely what Ave Maria offers. “People come from all over Florida and the nation looking for a convenient, peaceful life. They don’t want to drive far to get what they need. They want to have that sense of community. They’re looking for the lifestyle, and then they can find a home that fits their budget for their family. What more do you need?”

Thoughtful planning also goes into the scale and type of growth. As new neighbors move in, greater amenities are worked into the master plan. A retail center is coming soon to the Park of Commerce called Midtown. An elementary public school is slated to open for the 2026 school year, and land has been set aside for a possible middle school to follow. Future goals also include a hospital in partnership with Naples Community Hospital and an assisted living facility.

Many of Ave Maria’s businesses are locally owned and operated, allowing residents the privilege and luxury of working a golf-cart ride away from their homes. Some entrepreneurs began at the kitchen table or in a home office, and as they saw the potential to grow, opened a brick-and-mortar location in town. “What really makes them thrive is the support they get from the well-organized entrepreneurial community, helping each other thrive with business ideas and investments,” Mambuca pointed out.

Ave Maria Development (AMD) manages all of the commercial space in town, so they work closely with and help local businesspeople. “We’re more than just a developer. We’re the people behind it,” Mambuca said. “As an example, when the Ave Maria Veterans Association worked so hard to create the Veterans Memorial and residents supported it fully, Barron Collier Compa-



COURTESY PHOTOS

nies was quick to find the right space for the memorial and provide a 99-year lease for a nominal fee.”

To become the 16 top-selling master-planned community in the United States, this Big Kind of Small Town leaves little to chance. “I enjoy working for a developer that puts the residents first and is responsible with development,” Mambuca said, noting that AMD preserved 17,000 acres within and around Ave Maria as part

of their environmental stewardship and to maintain plenty of green spaces and natural beauty for generations to enjoy.

“As much as we are developers, we’re responsible developers,” Mambuca said. “We communicate with residents; we listen to their input. There’s a lot of thought that goes into the decisions that we make, always wanting to benefit the community and encouraging more people to want to move here.” 🌟

BIG KINDS OF SMALL TOWN FUN

Ave Maria University’s Memorable Homecoming Weekend



Ave Maria University wrapped up an energetic Homecoming Weekend, uniting the AMU community for a series of exhilarating events in October. The weekend commenced with the esteemed Hall of Fame Induction Dinner, lauding outstanding alumni like Marinna Shadley, John Preyer, and Conor Sullivan, with Fr. Alexander Pince receiving the Distinguished Alumni Award. The Alumni Career Success Panel provided invaluable insights as notable alumni shared their post-graduation journeys. The Gyrene football team added to the excitement with a thrilling victory over Webber International University, securing their fifth consecutive win. Oktoberfest brought a touch of fall magic with axe-throwing, hayrides, and lively competitions, creating a night to remember. Homecoming also witnessed the unveiling of two stunning mosaics for St. John Paul II and St. Mother Teresa Halls, donated by the classes of 2022 and 2023, enhancing the beauty of the AMU campus. Cheers to a successful and spirited Homecoming Weekend! 🌟



COURTESY PHOTOS

Charged with Engagement: Maple Ridge Lifestyle Director Creates New Fun for Residents

BY ERICA FISH
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

Sandy Martinez is making things happen at The Club at Maple Ridge and she's loving every minute of it. Nearing three months as the new lifestyle director at the club, which is the amenity complex exclusive to homeowners living in Ave Maria's Maple Ridge and Silverwood neighborhoods, she hasn't paused planning events, scheduling fitness classes, coordinating activities and booking socials.

Overseeing the needs and wants of all CC Homes residents, Sandy has dedicated herself to catering the best and is very excited to announce upcoming gatherings which seem to have the most favor like date nights coupled with entertainment, movie screenings, additional cooking and craft classes for the kids and DIY home decoration making hosted by in-town businesses.

"You get charged with energy when engaging with others and it only puts a smile on my face to witness how well received my planning has been by the Maple Ridge community," said Martinez.

And residents can anticipate Sandy as a permanent fixture of the club life.

"Sandy has been a great addition to the Maple Ridge team, and her years of neighborly engagement has rooted her a permanent spot," said Lori Russo, community association manager.

Maple Ridge has a wide demographic mix, from toddlers to families to retirees, and Martinez has a contagious personality to work with all ages.

Nearing eight years' residency, Sandy has been a favored household name by countless neighbors. How? You may ask.

Many Ave Maria residents agree a sense of place is no better affirmation when finding their purpose and next familial dreams, and this was the experience for Sandy, her husband and two daughters. When the family visited Ave Maria for the first time, they knew they found their permanent home.

Within hours of experiencing the town lifestyle, they signed the papers for a new construction home. Relocating from the bustling city of Miami, it was a definite transition when settling into the laid-back routine of Ave life, but it was exactly what they needed, recounts Martinez.

"I remember turning to face Sammy [husband] and saying this is where we're meant to be. Can you feel it too?" she shared. The family would move into their home in 2017.

Once the last mover box was unpacked, Sandy already had founded two non-profits: The Ave Maria WOW Ladies, dedicated to enhancing the town through activities and volunteer service and Los Adolescentes de Ave Maria (Ave Maria Teen Club).

Following Hurricane Ian, Los Adolescentes came together and hosted a bake sale in the Town Center, collecting all proceeds for storm relief. The club meets weekly for games, volunteer initiatives and group-building activities.

"We've always been an active family involved in community engagements and non-profits, PTA meetings, work events and relief efforts, and that did not change once we moved here," said Martinez.

Any Town Center events, festivities organized by the master association or town businesses, Sandy is sure to promote on her personal social media and group pages – all with thousands of followers – who engage with her content and later share participation photos.



Sandy Martinez (top left), the lifestyle director at The Club at Maple Ridge, brings her community together with exciting events, fitness classes and engaging activities. In these photos, residents showcase their creativity with DIY home decorations, sweet cookies and costume contests.

"I've been following Sandy's activity updates on social media since 2019, and she unknowingly helped me connect with other residents my age. One of my friend groups follows her page for an event insider into Ave Maria," said resident Audrey Grossman, 25.

Her first clubhouse event she organized, there was a capacity of 20 and triple the number of participants arrived. Every community event since has been at full-capacity and Sandy can't help but do a silent happy dance for how well received gatherings have been.

The household name is now a favorite for clubhouse events.

"This Thanksgiving, we arranged a pie potluck. There were dozens upon dozens of pies and over one hundred CC Homes residents who stopped by for a slice... For something as simple as a slice of pie and there being that significant of a turnout, all I can say is wow!" Sandy chuckled out.

A few years into living in Ave Maria, Sandy never expected she would fall ill with several rare immunocompromised diseases. When Maple Ridge residents learned of the devastating news, they did not hesitate to step up and offer help. Neighbors took shifts cooking and cleaning. They drove Martinez to appointments and formed a support system for her daughters.

When readapting to increased mobility, Sandy praises local boutiques Hoja de Menta and The Secret Ingredient for

having their stores open after-hours for one-on-one customer sessions where she could browse at her pace, try on clothes which accommodated her restrictions and not feel self-conscious of the physical implications her disease created.

"Selflessness is something hard to come by these days," Martinez said. "Every time I tell my story I try to say it without crying. The overwhelming gratefulness I have for this community is something I will always carry with me. Before I became ill, I was involved and wanted to support Ave Maria in any way

I could. I wanted to show off this town, and I still do," she added. "All the support I gave my community came back in triple, even quadruple!"

Kind efforts revive any weakened spirit or curious mind, and Maple Ridge's Lifestyle Director aims to continue this commitment for all community members wanting to experience the big fun, small town life.

Being a catalyst for friendship-making and memories, Sandy has been a landmark for people who live in the CC Homes communities and other parts of Town, and she looks forward to meeting whomever walks into her clubhouse where she can introduce the fun that happens when you become part of Ave Maria. 🌟





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**BLOOD SWEAT
& TEARS**
FEBRUARY 15

OUTDOOR

DUSTIN LYNCH
FEBRUARY 16

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& PALMER**
WITH CARL PALMER LIVE
FEBRUARY 21

SHEILA E
FEBRUARY 24

OUTDOOR

ASHANTI
MARCH 2

OUTDOOR

**MILLY QUEZADA &
MELINA LEON**
MARCH 9

**AN EVENING WITH
PRISCILLA PRESLEY**
MARCH 13

**THE TEMPTATIONS
& THE FOUR TOPS**
MARCH 16

OUTDOOR

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MINUTES AWAY
FROM MORE



BUSINESS INSIDER

BY MELANIE PEFINIS
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

Dr. Duane Olsen Family Chiropractic and Sports Rehab

As we step into the new year, many individuals set resolutions to address chronic health concerns that may have hindered them from reaching their optimal well-being. If the toll of 2023 has left you with a few kinks, Dr. Duane Olsen and Family Chiropractic and Sports Rehab are ready to help you start 2024 on a healthier note.



DUANE OLSEN

Dr. Olsen said, “We aim to enhance our patient experience and broaden our services in Ave Maria. The support and referrals we received in 2023 have been invaluable, and we aspire to surpass your expectations with our dedicated staff and providers.”



STEPHANIE OLSEN

The decision to establish roots in this area felt like a natural fit for Dr. Olsen and his wife. “Growing up in small towns, my wife and I cherished the sense of community, making Ave Maria the perfect place for us,” he shared.

The fusion of a health-conscious lifestyle and physical well-being is a central focus for both their family and the chiropractic practice. “We are committed to bringing joy, hope, and truth into your life, whether it’s through our professional endeavors or community engagement. Our passion lies in guiding individuals on how to raise healthy children and embrace a naturally pain-free lifestyle,” he explained.

Treatment at the practice may involve addressing issues related to the spine, nerves, and muscles. Alternatively, sessions may focus on discussing stress triggers such as family, school, or work stress that contribute to symptoms. Olsen emphasized, “If we believe we can’t help you, we love collaborating with other excellent local and holistic providers!”

Establishing a practice in Ave Maria holds special significance for Dr. Olsen and his team. “We wanted to provide our children with the opportunity to grow up in a manner similar to our own experiences. The longer we’ve lived here, the more our decisions have been enriched by encountering amazing, faith-filled people from around the world,” Olsen remarked. As we embark on the new year, perhaps we could all benefit from a few ‘adjustments.’



Blue Agave Mexican Restaurant

What is your go-to choice when you dine on Mexican food? Guacamole? Chips and Salsa? Tacos or Tamales? Whether you like it spicy or mild, Ave Maria is soon to welcome another restaurant to its munchies menu!

Mexican restaurant Blue Agave is opening soon to offer dishes from south of the border. Blue Agave is an independent family-owned business owned by



Bianca McMillan, Rosemary Dobrydney, ARNP, and Dr. Emily Walkey.

COURTESY PHOTOS

a first-generation family. They also own Juanita’s of Immokalee, another authentic Mexican café.

Allan Garcia of AR Builders of Southwest Florida explained the history of the restaurant dates back to the family’s agricultural background homed in the 1800s. After learning the traditional farming techniques of the homeland, the owners are bringing those ideas of freshness, quality ingredients and authentic flavors to Ave Maria.

For lovers of Mezcal, the restaurant will feature its own labeled tequila in various all natural flavors. “Mezcal started as a way of remedies but became popular to outsiders and became a way of enjoyment. It is like the Mexican version of moonshine!” Garcia laughed.

You can add the Mezcal to their vast menu of other Mexican cocktails as well as margaritas and the Mimosa Tower which will be featured at the daily brunch alongside the pancakes and other delicacies.

Opening in February, Blue Agave will offer a wide variety of authentic Mexican dishes. Aqua Chile, authentic moles, different types of meats, Mexican seafood, ceviche and Mexican octopus dishes.

“We are working on a specific menu for Blue Agave in Ave Maria. Be ready to be surprised from the interior to the menu to the atmosphere,” Garcia said.

Keep your eyes on social media for the

grand opening and get ready to take a sip of Blue Agave’s Mezcal to wash down your favorite spicy bite.

Little Flower Pediatrics Mobile Clinic

With all the recreational activities and play areas available to families in Ave Maria’s neighborhoods, scrapes and boo-boos are part of the package. Now a new mobile urgent care service has established for patients of all ages.

Little Flower Mobile Clinic is available to Ave Maria residents for minor injury, immunization, physical evaluation, sudden illness, or a routine check-up. Overseen by Dr. Emily Walkey, Little Flower Pediatrics is a pediatric direct primary care clinic in the Ave Maria Town Center.

Rosemary Dobrydney, ARNP, a nurse practitioner with over 20 years of family practice experience, is on board to oversee the mobile urgent care unit where patients can self-schedule appointments online.

Treatment for cold and flu symptoms, severe vomiting, urinary tract infections, sore throats, abdominal pain, headaches and minor injuries is available.

Physicals and phlebotomy treatments are also offered. The cost for a visit varies depending on the service from \$50 to approximately \$160. “Bringing this new mobile service to the town offers a con-



venient way to take care of your medical needs,” said Dr. Walkey.

Dr. Walkey prides herself on providing high quality care at an affordable price with treatments. So go ahead and take those training wheels off your tot’s bike and give it a spin. Little Flower has got your back, and your boo-boos.

Our Lady of Guadalupe Family Life Center

The journey from diapers to dormitories encompasses numerous changes in a child’s life. Rest assured, all children, from infants to teenagers, are welcome at Our Lady of Guadalupe Family Life Center in Ave Maria.

“Our Center is a Montessori homeschooling co-op located right here in Ave Maria. Our mission is rooted in a deep commitment to support parents in their pivotal roles as the primary educators and formators of their children” said Catechist Ann-Marie Altomare.

Their location right in the center of town is ideal for the approximately 40 families they serve. “Our location is great for families with a lot of children,” said Altomare. For those who are home schooled and miss out on the socialization and extracurricular activities available in regular classrooms, the Center’s unique Montessori approach answers the needs of over 100 children.

“We have programs for children from 2 up to 12 years old. We also support and help educate parents as well as work with teens and young adults who believe in the Montessori method and families who seek support in their child’s education,” she added.

Parents have commented on the approach to education and spirituality offered through the Center’s Montessori methods “completely transforms families.”

The Center also hosts events throughout the year for residents and visitors. They hope to continue to grow in the Ave Maria community, and as one parent of a 7-year-old exclaimed, “it’s just so important to the world. These kids are our future.” 🌸

“We are working on a specific menu for Blue Agave in Ave Maria. Be ready to be surprised from the interior to the menu to the atmosphere,”

— Allan Garcia,
Blue Agave owner



Children immersed in craft projects at Our Lady of Guadalupe Family Life Center, where the Montessori approach not only educates but also fosters a vibrant sense of community for these young minds.

Donahue Academy, a Tapestry of Learning and Growth Through Diverse Clubs

BY MELANIE PEFINIS

Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

By just taking one look at Donahue Academy's calendar of events, you can see the school is just as rich in extracurricular activities as it is in its academic curriculum. With a diverse range of offerings, from sports teams to specialty clubs, Donahue ensures that every student can find something that aligns with their interests.

Whether one has a green thumb and wants to join the Gardening Club or is passionate about international policy and global harmony, Donahue Academy provides outlets like the Model UN. The Student Life Committee organizes events, dances and Spirit Week, while the Scholar Bowl allows participants to test their knowledge against peers from other schools.

Cassie and Tyler Graham, both teachers at Donahue, have four of their six children currently enrolled at the Academy. In addition to Cassie acting as the Math Department Chair and Tyler as the Chair of the Humanities Department, Cassie is also head of the popular Running Club.

Between 30 to 40 students participate in the club. Cassie said the idea sprang from her coaching the cross-country program when she began teaching at Donahue eight years ago. The popularity of the program led her to create the Running Club which she said, “feeds our mission for students to learn humble fortitude.”

While other sports might promote feelings of superiority or a self-congratulatory attitude, her running club aims to “teach humility and how self-sacrifice will make us grow stronger,” she explained.

The Donahue Academy follows the Classical School model academically, emphasizing essential skills at each stage of development. The Grammar Stage (K-5) focuses on teaching fundamentals, the Logic Stage (grades 6-8) builds upon them, and high school students delve into calculus and statistics to establish a robust foundation.

Tyler, focusing on the Humanities, underscores Donahue's commitment to integrating academics, spirituality and community involvement. Through an interdisciplinary approach using great books and ideas, the program aims to equip students with the ability to engage in meaningful discussions beyond the school walls.

“We aim to teach authentic freedom for students to be in love with truth for truth’s sake,” Tyler emphasized.

Wrapping up the school's vibrant activities, the Donahue Yearbook Club stands poised to immortalize the memories and accomplishments of the academic year. 📖📚📅



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Ave Maria's Signature Events

BY SANDRA YEYATI

Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

With the new year, comes a fresh slate of not-to-be-missed events in the Ave Maria Town Center, including ginormous festivals, live musical performances, shopping extravaganzas and trolley tours—all organized and sponsored by the folks at Ave Maria Development. This year, they have upped their game with numerous new additions.

"We always try to make events bigger and better every year," said events coordinator Donna Marquez. "Our festivals are not just for residents, but also meant for people from out of town, so that they can see all that we have to offer—from businesses and restaurants to fun activities and amenities. We've really grown. When people get here, they're always surprised by what they see. With these big events, we're hoping to draw more and more people that wouldn't normally come to Ave Maria, so they can check it out, see how wonderful it is, and hopefully come back to visit the model homes and eventually buy their own place here."

Here are the 2024 Ave Maria Development Signature Events:

Farmers Market

Saturdays through April 27

This year, the Ave Maria Farmers Market is the biggest ever, with over 60 vendors from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Saturday through April 27. It's fun to socialize with neighbors, shop for the freshest, locally sourced foods and support the many small business owners that live in the area. Live music from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. adds to the festive vibe.

Numerous artisanal food vendors offer delights you won't find in any store, such as European-style breads; gluten-free baked goods; homemade sauces, jams, guacamole and flavored oils; and premium meats and seafood. This is also the ideal place to get to know your farmers at two produce booths and to purchase plants and flowers to beautify your home.

Also in the mix are purveyors of creative products, such as handcrafted soaps and beauty supplies, Indigenous home goods, T-shirts with fun sayings and inspiring quotes, fashion-forward accessories and beautiful works of art. Expect an array of local service professionals, too—people you can meet and talk to about real estate, interior design, financial planning, solar energy or Earth-friendly cleaning supplies.

Free Music, Trolley Excursions & Church Tours

Tuesdays through April 23

Every Tuesday in season through April 23, Ave Maria visitors are treated to 1-hour guided trolley tours running hourly from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Led by knowledgeable local historian Joe Marinelli, the excursion begins at the New Home & Welcome Center on Annunciation Circle and travels to all the neighborhoods and interesting spots around town.

A rotating slate of musical entertainment livens up the Town Center from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., with performances by saxophonist Jim Blackburn, the Jeff Hughes interactive band, songstress Wendy Renee, the Mason Williams duo, Latin singers Harmony 2, folk band Patchouli, singer and acoustic guitarist Chris Stultz, and the Caribbean steel drum band Steely Pan.

As a companion activity the same day, the Ave Maria Catholic Church offers free, 30-minute guided tours of its famous parish from 1 to 3 p.m., helping visitors learn about and explore the architectural and historical details of this intriguing edifice.



COURTESY PHOTO

Rock enthusiasts unite at the Blues, Brews & Barbecue Festival on Saturday, Feb. 17, as a lively crowd enjoys finger-licking-good barbecue, thrilling blues performances and more.



Savoring a scrumptious moment at the Ave Maria Farmers Market—where Saturdays are filled with over 60 vendors, live music and the joy of supporting local businesses!



Amidst the lively atmosphere of Margarita & Taco Festival, a spirited group forms a human arch, exuding laughter and fellowship in the heart of the celebrations.

Visitors are also encouraged to check out the Mother Teresa Museum at Ave Maria University, as well as the many wonderful shops and restaurants in Town Center. Tuesdays are super fun in Ave Maria. Make a day of it!

Taste of Ave

Saturday, February 3

Last year's inaugural Taste of Ave was a great success, proving that Ave Maria residents have everything they need right here in the community. It returns to the Town Center from noon to 5 p.m. Saturday, February 3, featuring live music by everyone's favorite hometown bands, Steinbeck Way and the Back Country Boys, as well as culinary delights by Ave Maria restaurants and local food vendors.

The popular event will include booths

for small businesses, local charities and Ave Maria University, as well as the Biz Kids Expo, a showcase of products and services by emerging entrepreneurs. An entire street will be dedicated to family-friendly fun, including four areas for interactive sports activities with inflatables; Adam's Animal Encounters, face painters, a balloon artist, and a photo booth for a free family memento of the day.

The Ave Maria Veterans Association and Veterans Club of Del Webb Naples will both be raffling prizes to raise money for charities, while the Collier County Sheriff's Office and Fire Department will be on hand to meet residents and offer drug prevention tips and safety advice. "To commemorate their service, we're sponsoring one free beer for any first responder or veteran that produces their ID

at the Welcome Center during the event," Marquez said.

Blues, Brews & Barbecue Festival

Saturday, February 17

Each year, blues aficionados come from far and wide to enjoy full sets by Southwest Florida's biggest names in blues entertainment. It is a massive party with finger-licking-good barbecue, quenching libations and thrilling performances by Deb and the Dynamics, Old School and Little Eddie & the Fat Fingers. Bring your lawn chairs and dancing shoes for Ave Maria's biggest in-season party from noon to 5 p.m., Saturday, February 17.

Food trucks include Smokin' Crow's BBQ, Gator Creek BBQ and Big Smoke BBQ, as well as a vendor selling gourmet candied apples for a unique sweet-treat, and delicious mocktails for children of every age by the Topsy Horseshoe.

Family fun will rule the day with a bunch of super entertaining activities, including axe throwing for both adults and children by Chuck It Axes; safe and fun archery activities; a giant slide from All Star Events; face painting, balloon art, a mechanical bull ride and the Cool Cruisers car show. Be sure to stop by the photo booth to get a special portrait to commemorate the event.

Margarita & Taco Festival

Saturday, March 16

Ave Maria embraces a Tex-Mex vibe at this year's festival from noon to 5 p.m. Saturday, March 16, featuring two outstanding country-music performances by Outta Hand Band and the Austin James Band. You might want to wear your boots and brush up on your line-dancing moves. This event promises to be a honky-tonk good time!

In addition to the Latin-infused cuisine and cocktails by many of the area's restaurants, specialized food trucks will be coming to town, including CJ's Pastelillos, Juanchitos Grill and Las Gorditas, plus delicious mocktails by the Topsy Horseshoe.

Annunciation Circle and Town Center's side streets will be vibrating with entertainment, including Mexican wrestling from 3 to 5 p.m., Adam's Animal Encounters, Chuck It Axes with axe throwing for adults and children, a large, inflatable obstacle course for kids to get their wiggles out; face painting, a balloon artist, airbrush tattoos and a free photo booth. Your face will hurt from smiling so much. 🌮🎉

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Calendar of Events

SPECIAL EVENTS

- Arts & Crafts Festival**
Saturday, Jan. 27 • 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM
- Sunshine State Steak Cook-Off**
Saturday, Jan. 27 • 2:00 PM - 6:30 PM
- Taste of Ave**
Saturday, Feb. 3 • 12:00 PM - 5:00 PM
- Blues, Brews & BBQ Festival**
Saturday, Feb. 17 • 12:00 PM - 5:00 PM
- Margarita & Taco Festival**
Saturday, March 16 • 12:00 PM - 5:00 PM

ONGOING EVENTS

- Farmers Market**
Every Saturday, Now thru April 29 • 9:00 AM - 2:00 PM
- Trolley Tours**
Every Tuesday, Now thru April 23 • 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM
- Live Music in Town Center**
Tuesdays & Saturdays • 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM

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Diamond Siblings: How Ave Maria University's McCormick Brothers Redefined Baseball

BY GLENN MILLER
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

The Ave Maria University baseball program is a brotherhood in more ways than one.

Its current and most recent head coaches are brothers. Nicholas McCormick, 28, was recently promoted from associate head coach to head coach replacing his older brother, Michael. Michael, 30, a former pitcher in the Chicago White Sox organization, accepted a job with the Boston Red Sox as a minor-league pitching coach.

On a recent overcast morning between Christmas and New Year's Day they discussed their baseball journeys and how they helped build the Gyrenes baseball program.

Michael is the only head coach in program history with a winning record, 79-75-1. He did it with his younger brother by his side as an assistant, hitting instructor and third base coach during games.

Now, still in his 20s, Nicholas is a college head coach.

"What I always wanted to do," Nicholas said, sitting in his office across the street from the baseball field. "Even when I was in high school and I was playing, I always knew that this was the route I wanted to take career-wise. Being a college head coach."

He fine-tuned his coaching philosophy over the past three years alongside Michael. They were teammates at Speedway High School in Indiana where the sports teams are called the Sparkplugs. They were also teammates at Eastern Illinois University.

The past three seasons they guided the Gyrenes. What did Nicholas learn about being a head coach from his big brother?

"How not to do it," Michael jokingly said and laughed.

Nicholas, of course, realized his brother was joshing. What did Nicholas learn about being a head coach from his brother?

"A lot," Nicholas said. "I'd say the biggest piece is the relationship aspect. That is a big part of this business. Always make sure to prioritize that and just generally speaking, how to manage people better from a leadership perspective."

In 2023, the Gyrenes finished second in the Sun Conference and earned their first postseason appearance in a decade, winning two games in a regional in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Five players were named second-team All-Conference.

The university appreciates what the brothers accomplished. In a November news release announcing the changes, it was noted that Michael was moving on "after elevating the program to national prominence during his tenure."

The program went on from 16 wins in 2021 to 36 wins in 2023.

Now, in 2024, they hope to do even better.

Outfielder Francisco Barbieri has been part of the transformation and is in his third year in the program.

The Canadian was recruited by Ave Maria.

"It's a hard sell for a team that doesn't win," Barbieri said in a telephone interview from his Brampton, Ontario home.

The Gyrenes posted eight consecutive losing records, from 2014 to 2021. But the McCormicks impressed Barbieri.

"They were honest," Barbieri said.

Barbieri was impressed enough to sign up.

"It's probably the best decision I've



TOP: Michael McCormick BOTTOM: Nick McCormick

ever made," said Barbieri, who is a junior athletically and a senior academically.

In the fall he and the rest of the team learned that their head coach was leaving to join the Red Sox organization.

"That was a bittersweet moment," Barbieri said.

He was happy for Michael and then happy to learn Nicholas would become head coach.

"The team wanted that," Barbieri said.

The McCormicks approach coaching in similar fashions. They know coaching is about more than making out line-up cards and tweaking swings and fine-tuning a pitcher's windup. It's a people business.

"Just always have an open-door policy," Nicholas said. "Use baseball as a platform to build relationships."

The brothers also built the program. In the first 11 seasons of Ave Maria baseball, the team had one winning season. That was in 2013 when the Gyrenes were 38-21. That was also the last time the Gyrenes had advanced to an NAIA regional.

In Michael's first season the team was

8-20. But in 2022 the Gyrenes were 27-25-1 and last year they were 36-18.

To get even better requires recruiting. Recruiting is the lifeblood of collegiate sports programs. How do they recruit students and athletes such as Barbieri to Ave Maria?

"Ave Maria University is a very niche school," Michael said. "For us, the baseball piece is kind of the last thing we look for. The first two being the spiritual standpoint and then they have to sustain the grades to be eligible. The last thing we look at is the baseball side."

The baseball side is what compelled the Red Sox to hire Michael as a coach. He will be working with young players mostly the same age as the Gyrenes, players just starting pro careers.

Although he will be working with players getting paid to play, the basics of coaching will remain the same for Michael.

"I'm taking the same approach," he said. "Just invest in the human being first."

The McCormicks have carved out lives for their families in Southwest

Florida, a long way from Speedway. Michael's wife, Teigan, is the Ave Maria head volleyball coach.

The McCormick brothers' parents, Marcus and Kelley, have purchased a home in Naples. Their grandmother also now has a Naples condo.

The Gyrenes are ranked No. 15 in the pre-season national poll, making it their highest ranking ever for the program. "With that obviously comes a lot of expectations, especially based off last year, one of the best seasons in program history," Nicholas said. Now, they hope to build on that success.

"The goal is to get back to a regional," Nicholas said. "Taking the next step to get to the World Series."

Most of the 2023 team returns. That returning core has the experience and confidence that might make those goals a reality.

The season opens Feb. 1 at Arizona Christian, which is Nicholas' alma mater.

Practice began on Jan. 8, which was also the first day of the spring semester. The message from the new head coach was simple.

"Just a continuation of what we said before we left for break, and announced Michael is joining the Red Sox" Nicholas said. "Reiteration of taking it one day at a time. Make sure we stay rooted in the moment and don't get too far ahead of ourselves. There's going to be ups and downs throughout the course of the season."

But based on what was achieved in 2023 and a strong returning core of players, optimism is high.

"The guys are fired up for the season," Nicholas said.

The current seniors endured lean years early in their collegiate careers. Nicholas said at least half of the starters are either seniors or students already in graduate school.

Those players will go into the season with a sense of continuity. Although their head coach is gone, their former associate head coach is now in charge.

"With me taking over, none of that changes, which is great for the guys," Nicholas said. "They can feel comfortable knowing that everything they've become accustomed to and enjoyed for the past few years, it all stays the same. Nothing changes."

Expectations are high. The players know that being ranked No. 15 speaks volume.

"It says a lot about where the program has come from," Barbieri said.

They know where they will be in early May.

The baseball worlds of Michael and Nicholas should collide in May. The Sun Conference tournament will be held May 2-5 at JetBlue Park, where the older brother will be coaching. The Gyrenes don't want the 2024 season to end in a regional tournament as it did last year.

"We have the team to win the national championship," Barbieri said.

The conference tournament offers an uncanny coincidence. In some ways, the distance from college baseball to the pros is vast.

But geographically for Michael it won't be too far. JetBlue is 34.6 miles away from Ave Maria University, according to Google Maps.

He may be moving on, but Michael still uses the word "we" when discussing the Gyrenes.

"I'll always be a Gyrene," Michael said. 🧡⚾️

COURTESY PHOTOS



LEFT: Winston Thomas converted one of his garages into a production studio. RIGHT: Nicole Ricca, the talent behind Willow Mint Props, is proud to stand by her logo.

COURTESY PHOTOS

Entrepreneurial Couple Thriving in Ave Maria

BY SANDRA YEYATI
Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

About 20 percent of American workers earn their living from home, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and at Ave Maria, you'll find a number of residence-based entrepreneurs. Take for example, Winston Thomas and Nicole Ricca.

Since 2018, the couple has lived with their three school-age kids in a five-bedroom, single-family home at Maple Ridge Reserve. Thomas, a Grammy Award-winning music producer and world-traveling DJ, converted one of their three garage bays into a production studio. Ricca commandeered a bedroom to sew and handcraft children's props and fancy outfits for private clients, including celebrities like Kevin Hart. Her business is called Willow Mint Props (willowmintprops.com).

Winston Thomas's Music Career

"I feel blessed that I'm able to make money off of what I love to do, which is music," Thomas said, adding that he has DJ-ed around the globe, including in Thailand, Japan, India, Dubai, Singapore, the Caribbean and Latin America. DJ BlackOut, as he's known, began spinning records in Long Island, where he grew up, following in his father's footsteps who DJ-ed for a living.

Although Thomas managed to get a few jobs at dance clubs in Manhattan and Queens, it was a visit to Miami that changed his life. On his first night at a club on South Beach, Thomas found himself sitting in the VIP lounge next to Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake. Right then and there, he decided to move to Miami, where he garnered multiple gigs at dance clubs around town, hobnobbed with recording artists and music managers, and booked jobs producing music.

In a career that spans 20 years, Thomas took home a Latin Grammy for his collaboration with Puerto Rican rapper and singer-songwriter Don Omar, won two Billboard awards for his production of Nicki Minaj's second album, "Roman Holiday," and produced the number-one hit on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 chart, "This Is Why I'm Hot," by American rapper MIMS. He has worked with mega-stars Pitbull and Flo Rida, and also helped develop the talents of Jason Derulo, a pop and R&B singer-songwriter with multiple platinum singles.

Meeting Nicole Ricca

Miami was also where Thomas met Nicole Ricca. "The artists that I was working with made music videos, and at the time in 2002, Nicole was one of the top models in those videos," Thomas recalled. "I developed a crush on her before we even met. I remember seeing her on MTV and saying, 'Wow, that's going to be my wife,' but I was just dreaming, because I'm sure every guy that watched those videos was thinking the same thing. I didn't think I would even meet her." Now, all these years later, the couple has three children: Nyla, 15, Aspen, 8, and London, 12.

Making the Move to Ave Maria

The family had been living in Pembroke Pines for about 13 years when they made the improbable move to Ave Maria. "We were renting a house for \$3,500, and that money was just going out the window because we didn't own anything, so we were definitely looking to buy somewhere, and my best friend, Pierre Malette, an accountant, was doing taxes for somebody that lived in Ave Maria, so he kind of kidnapped me one day and took me out there to check it out," Thomas recounted. Although he wasn't looking to move to the west coast of Florida, Thomas fell in love with Ave Maria after one short visit and subsequently brought his wife over to take a tour with him. The visit by Ricca, and later the kids, sealed the deal, as they all fell in love with the town.

Finding a Sense of Security

"The first time our Pembroke Pines neighbors spoke to us was when they saw us moving out," Thomas quips. "In Ave, all of our neighbors were really friendly right away. Our next-door neighbor cooked us dinner, which might be a regular thing out here, but it was so weird for us, and we loved it. The kids made new friends right away."

Thomas also remembers seeing unlocked bikes scattered on a street corner in Maple Ridge and was delighted to learn that school kids cycled to this bus stop in the morning, left their bikes there all day while they attended classes and after school rode their bikes back home. "That blew my mind, because if you leave your bike like that in New York, it's gone by the end of the day," Thomas pointed out. "I knew this was exactly where I wanted my kids to grow up."

The family loves the sense of safety

they feel in Ave Maria. "At the Fall Festival or Hometown Christmas or any other event in town, we allow our kids to run around, and we would never do that in Pembroke Pines," Thomas attests. "We feel safe. We know a lot of people in the neighborhood, and they know us. People actually look out for our kids."

Everything Ave Maria Magazine

Last November, the couple launched Everything Ave Maria, a monthly printed magazine mailed to every home in town. The idea came from Thomas' conversations with local business owners Danee Williams, of Oil Well Craft Beer, Phong Ho, of OASIS The Kitchen Lounge, and Jorge Arroyo, of Mercato at Ave, who were looking for a centralized means to publicize events and special promotions.

Thomas explains, "Our magazine promotes a little bit of everything. It's pretty much coupons, a business directory, events, crossword puzzles, write-ups of business owners or just people in Ave. We're also working on an Ave Maria com-

ic strip. We want it to be by people that live in Ave Maria, about people in Ave, for businesses in Ave." For the time being, he is investing sweat equity in their venture, taking photographs, designing graphics and laying out the magazine himself, and contracting a local writer and photographer for some of the content.

"We want Everything Ave Maria to become an important publication, and we're excited about the future. We're only 4,600 homes now, but we're slated to be 11,000 homes. That's a lot of people," Thomas notes. "Not only did my wife and I fall in love with everything about the town—how family-oriented it is and how we could afford to buy a new house that was built just for us—but as entrepreneurs, we see this as a place of a lot of opportunity, because it's new, and if you get yourself into something early, by the time it's done, you're going to be in a good position."

To advertise or learn more about Everything Ave Maria magazine, email info@EverythingAveMaria.com, visit EverythingAveMaria.com or call 239-388-1908. 🌟





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