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# GOP gov's race heats up

**Gray Rohrer** 

USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Less than 12 months until the election, U.S. Rep. Byron Donalds, who has the backing of President Donald Trump, is comfortably ahead in polls for the GOP nomination to succeed Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

But there are signs the sleepy race is sparking to life: Donalds' rivals are lining up to attack the Naples Republican and chip away at his lead in the polls.

Former House Speaker Paul Renner released an extensive economic platform on Nov. 14 focused on affordability – a topic top of mind for voters in the recent off-year elections in New Jersey

and Virginia

Lt. Gov. Jay Collins is a former Green Beret in the U.S. Army who was elected to the Florida Senate in 2022. DeSantis selected him to fill the vacant lieutenant governor position in August, fueling speculation he'd later run to replace the

See PRIMARY, Page 4A

# 'They're a gift'



Southwest Florida nonprofit Trailways welcomes adult campers with any type of disability living with family or a caregiver

Amy Bennett Williams Fort Myers News-Press & Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

e thank you for the food that's in front of us ... We thank you for this week of camp that we have had. We're thankful for the wonderful reminder that we – all of us – are special."

 Don Pullen, associate pastor, The Village Church at Shell Point offering the blessing for Trailways Camp's Thanksgiving feast

Campers file onto the dock In tie-dyed, autographed T-shirts, whispering, jostling, teasing. Some bump over the boards on electric scooters, some wheel

down in chairs; others steady themselves on a helper's shoulder.

See TRAILWAYS , Page 10A

Participants, volunteers and staff of the Trailways Camp take a group photo on Oct. 23.

ANDREW WEST/FORT MYERS NEWS-PRESS

& NAPLES DAILY NEWS

THINGS TO DO
THIS HOLIDAY



"ING memo

Begin Thanksgiving at a 5K in Southwest Florida

A few runs will be held Thanksgiving Day in Southwest Florida and here's what to know about them.

PAGE 4A

## Cape hopes new flagpole will be tallest in Florida

Seeks to raise \$500,000 for 250-foot-high staff

## Mickenzie Hannon

Fort Myers News-Press & Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

The tallest free-standing American flagpole in Florida could soon rise in Cape Coral, but only if the city can raise \$500,000 in community donations to build it at Bernice Braden Park.

City officials have launched a "Raise the Flag" campaign to fund the 250-foot structure, a height that would surpass Florida's current record holder in Clearwater, in time for the nation's 250th birthday in 2026.

City Manager Michael Ilczyszyn brought forth the idea. "That will not only put us on the map but also generate some attraction," he said. The proiect relies entirely on donations and

See FLAGPOLE, Page 11A

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## **Trailways**

Continued from Page 1A

It's their last day at Trailways and spirits are high. The photographer mounts his ladder, urging them to squeeze together, to smile. As they do, a whoop of laughter lifts from the crowd, echoing over the sunlit river.

Mission accomplished, say camp founders Sharon and Jerry Miller. who've been married more than 60

In a world that can narrow mercilessly for these campers, Trailways is busy widening it, one moment at a time.

The last four days have been full of classic summer camp stuff: Swimming and s'mores, horses and archery, crafts and canoes – all on the green banks of the Caloosahatchee on the rural fringe of LaBelle in Hendry Countys.

Yet for all the sports, smiles and singing, a harder truth intrudes. Florida policy for disabled adults is changing, as the state eliminates certificates of completion, which may isolate special needs people even further.

In August, the Florida Board of Education changed the rules for disabled students who can't earn a standard diploma. It eliminated certificates of completion and replaced them with "alternative pathways," a bureaucraticsounding shift with real consequences. Some celebrated the change, but advocates for young adults with cognitive or developmental disabilities fear jobs, vocational education and post-highschool opportunities will be farther out of reach, since students with severe disabilities that prevent them from receiving a diploma will have no formal recognition for the time they spent in school.

When they leave school, there's nothing," camp co-founder Sharon Miller says. "They get less identifiable. They just sit on a couch doing gaming systems. That's the babysitter now.

Things can change drastically once special-ed students are out of school. According to the Florida Department of Education, last year, 1,618 students in Lee, Hendry, Glades, Charlotte and Collier counties left school. Without the accustomed structure and support, they find themselves in a new world, Miller says. Transportation and poverty often exacerbate their isolation, as they're suddenly faced with few community activities, limited social outlets and scarce respite services for their caregivers.

Trailways Camp works to fill the gaps for both groups.

At the 150-acre Riverside camp and retreat center, Trailways welcomes adult campers with any type of disability who live with family or a caregiver. Each session is just four days, but the time can become a lifelong transformative touchstone. For many campers, it's their first night away from home. For their caregivers, it's the first uninterrupted rest in years.

Gratitude is a given.

At the November camp session, a Thanksgiving feast gathers campers,



Trailways Camp participant Emily Rivera, left, gets a high five from volunteer Virginia Lattner after hitting the bullseye during an archery activity on Oct. 23.



Lattner congratulates a camper on Oct. 23. PHOTOS BY ANDREW WEST/FORT MYERS NEWS-PRESS & NAPLES DAILY NEWS

volunteers and community members at long orange-draped tables overlooking a gold sunset over the river. A corgi grins from under a chair as conversation and laughter mingle in what Jerry Miller calls "joyful chaos."

#### 'I love it here'

Megan Leyland counts her time at camp as a life high point. "I love it here," says the 33-year-old. "I have cerebral palsy," says the Fort Myers resident, who lives in a group home. "I used to have seizures but I don't anymore."

Best part of camp? "I loved canoeing," Megan says. Fishing was fun too. "I caught a catfish."

A keeper?

"Tossed it," she says with a smile. Another highlight: "I love the horses that came - I got to paint a black and white spotted one."

#### 'Every minute of every day even during the nighttime'

In a desolate landscape with scant support, Trailways stands out.

Florida consistently ranks at or near the bottom in funding for developmentally disabled adult services. And when they are available, waitlists are discouragingly long - often longer than five years, according to a paper produced by the University of South Florida's Center for Inclusive Communities.

Paul and Kathy O'Reilly know the challenges firsthand. In New Hampshire, Paul cared for his disabled son, Mike, who died at 57. "It's one of the downsides of their population," Paul says. "They don't live as long as we love them."

After Mike died, the O'Reillys bought an RV and took to the road. Once they were in Florida, they found themselves drawn to help people like Mike again.

The New England-to-Florida transition was a jolt of culture shock, they say, with a stark difference in offerings. "I was taken aback when I came down here (and) I started looking for the same type of services as up north," Paul says. "No good. Not the same. They have these programs in strip malls," he says, shaking his head.

Things are no better for caregivers, they say.

"Respite is in very short supply around here," Kathy says, which is particularly problematic because caring for adults with special needs requires constant supervision "every minute of every day," she says. "When you have a special needs individual in the home, no matter how high functional they are, they need constant supervision – every minute of every day - even during the nighttime. You don't sleep. It's like when you have a newborn."

"Except when it's an adult, they're not going to grow up," Mike says. "You put your life on hold."

#### 'I'm going to trust this walk'

Camp founders Jerry and Sharon Miller understand all these challenges too. They've lived them. Two of their sons were born with physical disabilities and developmental delays. Years passed without answers – even after visits to major medical centers such as Einstein, Hopkins and Mayo. Finally, the boys were diagnosed with Zellweger spectrum disease.

The medical establishment's limits pushed Sharon into a pioneering advocacy role, transforming her from a passive patient into an active researcher and innovator. "The lifespan was ex-

pected to be five years," she says. "Robert lived 'til 34 and Benjamin lived 'til

Sharon describes a transformative shift in her heart, when she moved from feeling responsible for "fixing" her boys to recognizing "They're people - real people. And they're a gift."

What followed was a moment of spiritual surrender, when she grabbed onto what she calls Jesus' arm and said, "I'm going to trust this walk."

Long before they contemplated retiring to the Sunshine State, the Millers were already walking the walk, building solutions. After Robert died in Texas, they ran camps for people like their boys to honor their memories.

They created the infrastructure while learning what worked. When they moved to Southwest Florida and recognized the same void in services for what Jerry calls invisible people - "adults with disabilities (who) were out of sight and out of mind" – the couple got to work again. "We want them in sight and

Partnering with what was then the Southwest Florida Community Foundation (now the Collaboratory), they created a fund, built partnerships, recruited volunteers and, in 2012, opened the region's first and only residential camp for disabled adults.

The work is demanding but joyful. Except for a \$75 registration, the camp is free, with volunteers and medical staff woven into the experience. Activities include boating, swimming, dancing, fishing, art, talent shows and campfires. Four annual sessions host about 20 campers each, serving roughly 100 people a year. The waiting list is long but for many families Trailways is less a camp than a lifeline.

Now the Millers hope to extend that lifeline even further. Thanks to an unexpected bump of donations from a golf tournament, they're holding a camp on Sanibel next year. They're developing nonprofit partnerships to franchise the Trailways model so other organizations can run similar camps, and they've launched fundraising events – from art auctions to golf tournaments – to help make it happen.

The camps are alchemy of sorts: the Millers' way of turning their challenging family journey into something to help others in similar circumstances. It's not easy, but that's not the point, and they're grateful for the mission.

And they're grateful, Sharon says, "For God's gifts to us of four such different children who could give us so much more than we could ever give them."

## Learn more, help out

Trailways' website is https:// www.trailwayscamps.org/

Volunteers are always welcome. Information: https://www.trailwayscamps.org/volunteer/

Trailways' second annual golf fundraiser is March 30 at the Shell Point Golf Club, 17500 On Par Blvd., Fort Myers. To learn more, email organizer Brandie Dickerson: https://birdease.com/TrailwaysCampsFundraising/contact



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