

## Around the region

### Out & About

#### Today

**Weekend fun:** The Florida Botanical Gardens will glow with more than 400,000 lights 6 to 10 p.m. through Jan. 3 at 12520 Ulmerton Road, Largo. Entertainment is provided every evening by local artists. Featured tonight will be folk rocker Terry Pivinski and the Lindblom Family Singers. \$2 minimum donation, free for 12 and younger. Call (727) 582-2247.

#### Sunday

**Annual Christmas bird count:** No experience is necessary to volunteer for this yearly nationwide bird census beginning at 8 a.m. in the North Pinellas area. For details, call Marianne Korosy at (727) 772-7584 or visit [audubon.org/Bird/cbc](http://audubon.org/Bird/cbc).

#### Monday

**Computer group to meet:** Bay Area Macintosh User Group Afternoon Chapter will meet 1-3 p.m. at Clearwater East Library, 2251 Drew St. Featured will be a Christmas party and iWork presentation of Pages, Numbers and Keynote. Call Bob Pittman at (727) 938-

0926 or visit [BAMCentral.org](http://BAMCentral.org).

**Bilingual reading group:** "Read to Me" is a new group for mothers with children from birth to preschool age meeting at 10 a.m. every Monday at the Largo Public Library, 120 Central Park Drive. Moms can practice their English or Spanish and instill a love of reading in their children. Call Britney Hord at (727) 587-6715 or e-mail [bhord@largo.com](mailto:bhord@largo.com).

**In harmony:** The Florida Suncoast Men's Barbershop Chorus is expanding its membership and looking for tenors, leads, baritone and basses who enjoy singing four-part harmony. The group meets at 6:30 p.m. Mondays at Crossroads Christian Church, 1645 Seminole Blvd., Largo. Call Clyde at (727) 736-7999 or visit [www.suncoastchorus.com](http://www.suncoastchorus.com).

**Singing is life:** The Palm Harbor Crystal-Aires Men's Barbershop Four-part Harmony Chorus invites all male singers to come and see if this hobby might appeal to you. The chorus meets at 6:45 p.m. every Monday at the Palm Harbor Community Center, 1500 16th St. Call Wes at (727) 784-8052 or visit [crystalaires.com](http://crystalaires.com).

### Beach event



JIM DAMASKE | Times

#### Today

Celebrate the end of day with arts, crafts and entertainment at Sunsets at Pier 60, Clearwater Beach and hear a variety of music nightly. Event begins two hours before sunset and ends two hours after, weather permitting. Call (727) 449-1036.

**Dixieland dance:** The Bayside Banjo Band plays Dixieland and old-time songs from 7 to 9 p.m. every Monday at American Legion Post 7, 1760 Turner St., Clearwater. Call (727) 447-9204.

#### Tuesday

**A worry-free new year:** Children ages 8 and older can make a "worry doll" craft at 2 p.m. at Countryside Library, 2741 State Road 580, Clearwater. Registration required. Call (727) 562-4970.

**Step back in time:** Heritage Village, 11909 125th St. N., Largo, Pinellas County's 21-acre living history museum, gives tours of vintage architecture and classes in the arts of bygone days. Closed Mondays. For details call (727) 582-2123 or visit [www.pinellas-county.org](http://www.pinellas-county.org).

**55 Alive:** Mature driving classes for drivers older than 50 are taught by trained volunteers in two, four-hour sessions. Graduates may be eligible for auto insurance discounts for the following three years. Cost is \$10. For details call toll-free (888) 227-7669.

**Lights and music:** The Florida Botanical Gardens will glow with

more than 400,000 lights 6 to 10 p.m. through Jan. 3 at 12520 Ulmerton Road, Largo. Entertainment is provided every evening by local artists. Featured Tuesday night will be the Tapped In dancers and accordion player Abe Lincoln. \$2 minimum donation, free for 12 and younger. Call (727) 582-2247.

#### Wednesday

**Drum circle:** Participate in a drum circle and welcome 2010 with a bang at 3 p.m. at Countryside Library, 2741 State Road 580, Clearwater. All ages welcome. Call (727) 562-4970.

**Downtown Clearwater Farmers Market:** 9 a.m.-2 p.m. every Wednesday through May on the 500 block of Cleveland Street between Garden and N Fort Harrison avenues. Colorful tents and booths are filled with farm-fresh produce, cheeses, baked goods, cut flowers, plants and more. See market manager for free two-hour parking at Garden Avenue garage with ticket validation. The entire event is stroller, bike and handicap accessible. Call (727) 461-7674 or e-mail [info@clearwaterfarmersmarket.com](mailto:info@clearwaterfarmersmarket.com).



Courtesy of Tarpon Springs High School

Members of Fred J. Page High School's band sit on the floor during a luncheon at the school in Franklin, Tenn., with members of Tarpon Springs High School's band and parents who traveled to Page High to present a card and a check for Matt Hodge.

» **BAND** continued from 1

## Tarpon band goes far to help youth

Springs band boosters, students, family members and band director Kevin Ford about helping.

Mike Amorello, 18 and Tarpon's drum major, said everyone was asked to bring \$10. Every one of the more than 100 band members contributed, he said.

"I encourage anybody who encounters an opportunity like that to do it," Amorello, a senior, said of raising money for the Hodges. "It was really humbling because it really brings you back to earth. Our little gesture brought a lot of hope to the situation."

Earlier this month, Williams, band parent Pat Longhofer and four band members traveled at their own expense to Franklin and presented the Hodge family a check and a huge card that band members made.

Sandy Hodge and her husband, Tim, who had lived in

Orlando for seven years, were astounded by Tarpon High's presentation.

"We were just amazed," Sandy Hodge said during a telephone interview. "They flew or drove 740 miles to meet us. We've had a lot of bands and drum lines that have reached out, locally and across the nation, but what separates Tarpon Springs is they wanted to journey here and meet him."

"It was not just enough to send a card or a check, but they spent the day. It's just so encouraging right now to know that people are thinking about Matt."

Arrangements were made for someone to sit with Matt while the two attended the presentation in his honor at Page High. Later, the Tarpon representatives went to visit him in a hospital.

On Aug. 22, Matt Hodge, who played the quads in Page High's

#### ON THE WEB

##### Follow Matt

To follow Matt Hodge's battle, go to [www.Caringbridge.org/visit/matthodge](http://www.Caringbridge.org/visit/matthodge). A free registration is required.

drum line, was on his way home after having dropped off his girlfriend when his car collided with a train going 50 mph.

The car spun around and hit a light pole, his mother said. There were no broken bones, but he remains in a coma.

"It must have caught him off guard," Sandy Hodge said. "He wasn't texting or on the phone because we have checked his records. But he's a very strong, very smart, intelligent young man."

Four months after the crash,

Matt is still considered to be in a coma but is able to track objects with his eyes and squeeze his girlfriend's hand. He recognizes voices. With his glasses, he's able to focus more on people's faces.

"He's come a very long way," Sandy Hodge said.

Nathan Longhofer, 17, and a senior saxophone player in Tarpon's band, made the trip along with his brother, Benjamin. Marcus Williams was the other band member to make the trip.

"When we were asked if we wanted to do this, the entire band immediately raised its hands," Nathan Longhofer said. "To help the Hodges get Matt back to the way he was and getting him back to what he loves the most — and that's playing percussion — that's a great cause."

Demorris A. Lee can be reached at [dalee@sptimes.com](mailto:dalee@sptimes.com) or (727) 445-4174.

## Gifts of the heart gain value with time

The making of Christmas fudge, I've come to find out, is a lesson in perseverance and sometimes, good reflection. This is well-known to the female relatives on my mother's side who partake in the annual ritual as a tribute, of sorts, to our late grandmother.

It's hard not to think of the woman who always made holiday fudge when you're standing at the stove, stirring a pan of sugar and condensed milk until it clings to the sides of the pan just so, or mixing marshmallow and chocolate in measurements I'm not allowed to share with anyone outside of family because that was the deal when she handed over her recipe years ago.

The weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas were always busy ones for her as she churned out batch after batch to be packed in foil and recycled note card boxes, and doled out to family and friends.

Her mouth-watering fudge was something you could always count on. No matter what Santa missed on your list, there was always a slab of the stuff with your name on it under the tree along with the other home made things she gifted: Irish wool mittens, scarves and hats, occasional sweaters and the awkward-colored crocheted vests she gave to all the girls a year or so after they went out of style.

Gifts of the heart-felt sort. Useful and thrifty, too, for the woman who didn't have much but always managed to make do.

After living a somewhat gilded life as a child, she learned the value of resourcefulness while raising a family during the Great Depression — with little help, I might add, from a husband who drank most of his paycheck come Friday night.

She knitted and sewed clothing for her kids using material from the hand-me-down dresses from family and friends. She canned vegetables, learned how to stretch a roast into three meals and went to work when a lot of her contemporaries didn't.

They were often hard times, but they were simpler times. And somehow, she saw the value in that.

"I don't know how you kids can afford to raise a family



MICHELE MILLER

Off/Beat

these days," she would say, shaking her head.

And that was back in the 1980s.

Times are a lot tougher than that for many who are trying to make do these days; many are cutting back and resorting to the thrifty habits of days gone by.

No doubt it would be easier if celebrating the Christian holiday wasn't mostly about making a big splash that would ripple the economy and warm our loved one's hearts.

Really, why does every kiss have to begin with some kind of diamond encrusted bauble?

I heard that once again while I was in the middle of making fudge this past weekend and my dad, who is in his 80s now, called to say "hello" and offer up his annual lament over the commercialization of a Christian holiday that is, after all, supposed to represent a wondrous, blessed birth.

When I was younger his "Bah, humbug!" attitude used to rattle me. But now I understand his stance and his reminiscent longings.

"Christmas wasn't like it is today," my dad said, reflecting on Christmas past, when it was tradition to wait until after church on Christmas Eve to decorate the tree with homemade ornaments and strings of cranberries and popcorn, which you would later lay outside on the bare maples to feed the winter songbirds. How there weren't so many presents under the tree, and those that were given out Christmas morning were always simple, modest tokens that, more often than not, were hand-made.

Gifts of the heart-felt sort. "It might not seem like much in this day and age," my dad told me. "But we were always happy with that."

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## Man won't stand trial in 2008 death

A Judge rules Charles Dear incompetent and he is sent to a mental facility.

BY MOLLY MOORHEAD  
Times Staff Writer

NEW PORT RICHEY — A man accused of strangling a woman and setting her house on fire last year has been found incompetent to stand trial.

Charles Edward Dear has been ordered to a mental hospital after a psychologist examined him and a judge this month concluded he is incompetent to face charges of arson and second-degree murder.

In legal terms, incompe-

tency means the defendant lacks the mental capacity to understand the court proceedings or assist in his own defense.

A defendant's competency can be restored through mental health treatment. Once found competent again, a defendant can then face trial.

On June 17, 2008, a house on Darlington Road in Holiday went up in smoke. Firefighters found no one inside.

Almost two days later, a 13-year-old boy went to the charred property looking for his friend, the son of the woman renting the house. The boys had been



Charles Dear, 45, is charged with arson and murder of Theresa Jones, 46.

house most likely was burned to hide evidence, the Pasco County Sheriff's Office said.

This June — one year after Jones' death — sheriff's detectives arrested Dear, 45, who had briefly rented a room from her.

building a motorbike together.

There, the 13-year-old found a body under a fresh patch of dirt in the back yard, with flies circling around it. Firefighters had missed it while they fought the blaze.

Medical examiners determined it was Theresa Jones, 46, the home's tenant. She had been strangled. The

Dear was originally booked on burglary and stalking charges. He had been a suspect in Jones' death, so a detective interviewed him about the case, the Sheriff's Office said, and Dear confessed.

Dear was convicted in 2005 of aggravated battery with a deadly weapon in Pinellas County and served more than two years in prison.

He also faces other charges unrelated to Jones' death, including several counts of auto burglary and one count of indecent exposure.

A status review in Dear's case is set for June 2010.

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“Painting draws me in the same way a good book does; both remind me of how different artists see the world.”

Colette Bancroft  
Book critic

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