



**Panthers come out swinging**  
South Florida State College beat Broward College in Saturday's softball season opener.  
**LOCAL SPORTS, Page A7**

# Lewd behavior addressed by schools

By PHIL ATTINGER  
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Schools have programs in place to address, and hopefully prevent, lewd behavior among students, Highlands County School District officials say.

The tools in use are designed to prevent the type of behavior that led to a Lake Placid Middle School student having an expulsion hearing regarding allegations of lewd and indecent behavior.

Lt. Greg Pearlman, head of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office Special Victims Unit and supervisor over the school resource officer division, said the case in question involved verbal abuse more than physical. However, it concerned School Board member Bill Brantley enough to request the expulsion be discussed separately from other expulsions at the Jan. 23 School Board of Highlands County meeting.

Brantley asked if the Board could compel the student to enter a rehabilitative program or have a psychological evaluation in regard to the alleged behavior. John McClure, Board attorney, said Board members couldn't compel someone to seek treatment. They could only say whether or not a student may attend public school.

A motion to approve an expulsion failed for lack of a second, and now — by default — the student will have an expulsion hearing.

PROGRAM | 6

# Many Puerto Ricans adrift in US hotels after Hurricane Maria

By CLAUDIA TORRENS  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — After they lost their home in Puerto Rico to flooding during Hurricane Maria, Enghie Melendez fled with her family to the U.S. mainland with three suitcases and the hope it wouldn't take long to rebuild their lives. It hasn't worked out that way.

More than four months later, the family of five is squeezed into two rooms in a hotel in Brooklyn. While her husband looks for work, they are stuck in limbo, eating off paper plates and stepping over clothes in cramped quarters as they try to get settled in an unfamiliar city.

"After the hurricane hit we told the kids that every day was going to be an adventure, but not like this," said the 43-year-old Melendez. "This is turning out to be really hard."

Around the U.S., many Puerto Ricans are similarly



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In this Jan. 23 photo, Leslie Rivera comforts her son Aaron inside their hotel room at the Rodeway Inn in Tampa, where they're living after Hurricane Maria destroyed their home in Puerto Rico.

ADRIFT | 6

# Pavilion upgrade



KIM LEATHERMAN/STAFF

The pavilion in Stuart Park will be replaced with one that is roughly the same size but without the problems the current one, seen here, has. Lake Placid's Caladium Festival is held in the park every year with musicians staged in it.

# Town pricing pavilion construction

By KIM LEATHERMAN  
STAFF WRITER

LAKE PLACID — A new pavilion for Stuart Park in the uptown area of Lake Placid is being planned. Town officials are in the process of acquiring bids for the new facility.

The current pavilion, 135 W. Interlake Blvd., has been plagued with a myriad of problems, including flooding when it rains. During festivals many musicians have amplifier and microphone cords that traverse the wet floor causing a dangerous mix.

The new pavilion would be almost the exact dimensions of the current one. A slightly crowned floor should keep water from pooling in the middle of the floor and concrete steps would replace the sharp incline that leads from the barbecue pit to the pavilion.

The plans include installing a ramp and handrails that are compliant with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. The ADA ramp would be placed on the west side of the main structure directly south of the barbecue area.

Brantley Construction responded to the Request for Proposal with a quote of \$52,955. This bid includes demolition and removal of the current pavilion; replaced with a new 52-by-32-foot building. The bid shows that Brantley would lay a new concrete foundation over the existing one and have a 5.5-inch center with a 4-inch slope. Sinks, paint, irrigation and the concrete steps are included. Brantley plans to remove several inches of topsoil and re-sod below the level of the pavilion. An option to install receptacles, outside



The steep slope from the pavilion to the barbecue pit at Stuart Park will soon be replaced with concrete steps. A new ramp, one that is compliant with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, will be located to the south of the pit.

**FAST FACTS**

Lake Placid town officials are accepting bids for the construction of a new pavilion in Stuart Park.

Current bidders are:

Brantley Construction: \$52,955

E.O. Koch Construction: \$67,778

The bids are similar, although Koch's plan calls for demolition of the exiting concrete slab and laying of a new one while Brantley's plan does not.

lights and new ceiling fans is an additional \$3,000 and an allowance of \$800 for ceiling fans.

E.O. Koch Construction put in a bid for \$67,778. The bid includes much of the same as Brantley's but Koch's plans call for demolition of the existing concrete slab and laying of a new one.

Both plans will be compliant with Highlands County Building Code and wind resistance code.



FILE PHOTO

From left: Gini Shevick and Dan Holden helped clean up Lake Placid's Stuart Park of Hurricane Irma-related storm debris on Sept. 30, 2017. Shevick, Holden and other volunteers cleaned that park in preparation for the 4th annual Barktoberfest held in October.

# Auction to be held at Harder Hall

## Furniture, other items, available

By JAY MEISEL  
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — It's almost as if time stood still in Harder Hall.

For at least a decade, boxes full of tables, chairs, chests of drawers, window air-conditioning units, lobby furniture, hideabeds and restaurant equipment remained stored in the long-vacant historic hotel.

A former owner had planned to reopen the hotel and use those items as part of that.

But, none of that came to be.

And now, as the current owners, South Florida Senior Living,

plan to convert the structure into an assisted living center, those never used items are no longer needed.

Higgenbotham Auctioneers International of Mulberry will conduct an auction of those items at 10 a.m. on Feb. 17 at Harder Hall. It will be held in a warehouse near the building. Items can be previewed two hours before the auction starts.

"All inventory will be sold to the highest bidder regardless of price," a press release from Higgenbotham said.

Marty Higgenbotham, the owner, said he will



FILE PHOTO

Higgenbotham Auctioneers International of Mulberry will conduct an auction of excess items at 10 a.m. on Feb. 17 at Harder Hall. Those items will include furniture, window air-conditioning units, restaurant equipment and carpet underlayments.

AUCTION | 6



**FROM PAGE 1**

Adding to the worries for large numbers of Puerto Ricans is that hotel reimbursements from the Federal Emergency Management Agency

The Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College estimated in an October study that between 114,000 and 213,000 Puerto Ricans would move to the U.S. mainland over the next 12 months. Most were expected to settle in Florida, followed by Pennsylvania, Texas and

New York.

FEMA says there are nearly 4,000 families, more than 10,000 people, receiving hotel assistance from the agency in 42 states because their homes in Puerto Rico are too damaged to occupy. The agency extended the expiration for the program from Jan. 13 to March 20 at the request of the island's governor, but all cases are reviewed for eligibility every 30 days and the payments could end for some people sooner. It's impossible to know how many are in temporary housing without any aid or staying with families.

Leslie Rivera, from the central town of Caguas, has been shuffling among hotels in Tampa, Florida, since December with her three kids, ages 13, 10 and 2. She was approved for subsidized housing and expects to be settled soon but it has been difficult.

"I feel like I am on the streets because I have no clothes. I have nothing for my kids," the 35-year-old said with tears in her eyes.

Marytza Sanz, president of Latino Leadership Orlando,

which has been helping displaced families, said many don't know where they will go after FEMA stops paying for their rooms.

"There are people with five dollars in their pockets," she said. "They can't buy detergent, deodorant, medicine."

In Kissimmee, in central Florida, Desiree Torres feels nervous. She has spent more than two months in a hotel with her three children. She says she can't find a job and several local shelters have told her there is no space for her and her

children.  
“I can’t sleep at night,” said the 30-year-old Torres, who lost her home in Las Piedras, a southeastern town near where the eye of the storm first crossed the island. “I’m worried about my kids.”

After the hurricane, Melendez and her family were forced to sleep for more than three weeks in their garage because of flooding and sewage that entered the home. They left their four dogs with a friend and managed to get on a humanitarian flight. They spent 10 days

at Melendez's father-in-law's Manhattan apartment and a month and a half in a Brooklyn shelter. A Puerto Rican activist helped them enter the hotel.

"My kids were in a Manhattan school. We would wake up before 5 a.m. at the shelter to take them there. Now they are in a Brooklyn school," she said. "Where will they be tomorrow?"

For now, they survive on a \$1,700 monthly disability payment that Melendez receives along with about \$300 a month in food stamps.

## FROM PAGE 1

serve as the auctioneer. He said they don't necessarily plan to sell all desks to one buyer or all chairs to another buyer. "Everyone can buy what they want," he said. The restaurant furnishings, however, may be sold together, he said. In all, he said, they'll have "a bunch" of stuff to auction off.

South Florida Senior Living finalized its \$2.3 million purchase of

Harder Hall last year. The hotel, which was built and opened in the 1920s, has been vacant for more than 25 years.

South Florida Senior Living plans to convert the existing structure to independent senior living and then also add assisted living units on the property.

Matthew Musgrave, project manager for South Florida Senior Living, could not be reached for comment on when that work will begin.

For Higgenbotham, Harder Hall will be a bit

**FROM PAGE 1**

Meanwhile, schools deal with such situations on a case-by-case basis, according to their current programs and policies.

“Individual schools would have plans in place,” said Melissa Blackman, assistant superintendent of Student Support Services. “In general, they work with the Sheriff’s Office.”

The Sheriff’s Office supplies school resource officers to all county schools except those inside Sebring city limits, whose officers are from Sebring Police Department. On-site law enforcement investigates incidents between students that could meet the level of a criminal charge. Each school has policies to deal with offenses that still involve

inappropriate behavior, to include lewd acts or comments, Blackman said.

Those programs train students on how they should behave toward each other, what is considered appropriate behavior and what they should not send over electronic communications.

Blackman said she did not have all the individual schools' policies readily available Friday, but was working to compile them.

In the last two years, the school district saw incidents of sexting, pornography and illicit relationships involving students, teachers and sometimes both. Lake Placid Middle was plagued then by a multiple-student sexting case.

It broke in early 2016, with nude and partially nude selfies and videos circulating among

students. When one male student received them and reported them, School Resource Officer Ross Porter and school staff started a criminal investigation.

Initial reports were about 20 girls took part in inappropriate photos and 11 boys faced disciplinary action for having and disseminating images. They were sixth- to eighth-grade students, ages 11-16.

Eventually, seven students were charged with violating the Florida sexting law and five were recommended for expulsion. Then deputy superintendent Rodney Hollinger said sexting was a concern in schools countywide. In a public education effort, the school district hosted a meeting in late February 2016 at the Genesis Outreach Center at First Presbyterian Church for parents and students to discuss teen sexting.

With an uptick in reporting at that time, the district soon saw three teachers and a few students in four schools from Lake Placid to Avon Park under investigation in pornography and sexting cases.

In other cases, a school paraprofessional allegedly provided alcohol and cigarettes to students, an Avon Park High School

teacher had a lewd image of a male student, two other teachers faced Department of Children and Family probes, a Lake Placid High School teacher was suspended for allegedly drinking during a field trip and another LPHS teacher was charged with lewd behavior with students.

In the most recent lewd behavior expulsion

case, the student in question allegedly had four known victims with many witnesses, Brantley said.

Brantley said he feared how many more victims the student may have had.

“With the world we live in today, we don’t need to have (this) in our schools,” Brantley said last Tuesday.

**FROM PAGE 5**

Warrior Project (woundwarriorproject.org) and VITAS HEALTHCARE (VITAS.com). Words of comfort to the family can be made by visiting [scottfuneralservices.com](http://scottfuneralservices.com). Arrangements entrusted with the Scott Funeral Home, 504 W. Interlake Blvd., Lake Placid. 863-465-4134.





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