

As we reflect on the past year at North Florida School of Special Education, one truth rises to the surface: everything we do is grounded in our unwavering belief in the potential of every student. It is with deep gratitude that we share this year's Annual Report, an expression of appreciation for the love, dedication, and support that define our community.

This year, our school theme, **Heart of the Woods: Rooted in Hope, Love, and Community**, has served as both a guide and a promise. In every classroom and through every partnership, we have seen the powerful ways these roots nourish our students, families, and staff. It is a theme that reflects not just who we are, but how we grow.

Our students continue to be the heart of it all. Their authentic joy inspires and renews us each day. In the face of challenges, they rise. In moments of triumph, they celebrate with pure delight. And in every interaction—with peers, teachers, visitors, and volunteers—they model the kind of world we all hope to live in: one that is inclusive, compassionate, and full of possibility.

This year brought milestones worth celebrating. Whether it was the continued success of our vocational training programs, meaningful performances in our inclusive theater, or the deepening of relationships with new and long-standing community partners, each accomplishment has been made possible by the roots we've cultivated together. They're strong, resilient, and reaching further than ever.

We are profoundly grateful for your steadfast support. It is through your generosity and belief in our mission that we are able to nurture a place where students thrive. Because of you, our students grow with confidence, surrounded by a community that sees and believes in their limitless potential.

As we look ahead, we remain rooted in hope. We carry forward the love that fuels our mission, and we are uplifted by a community, **our community**, that walks this journey with us. With heartfelt thanks,

Bert Brown, President Board of Directors Sally Hazelip Head of School

Sarry Harelip

MISSION STATEMENT

To discover and foster each student's unique abilities revealing their highest potential within an engaged community.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2024-2025

EXECUTIVE BOARD

President,
Bert Brown
Vice President,
Michelle Gilliam
Secretary,
Sally Anne Brown, Esq.
Treasurer,
Chris Leavitt
Immediate Past President,
John Macdonald, Esg.

AT LARGE MEMBERS

Josh Bauman Lee Bledsoe Claude Collier Sheila Collier Tim Crass Sharon Hackney **Donald Hinson** Dr. Bashyam Iyengar Allison Mulgrew Dr. Rita Nathawad Tammy Spriggs Penny Thompson Ray Van Landingham Oliver Dostie, **Junior Board Member** Andrew Hozier. **Junior Board Member**

Sally Hazelip Head of School FROM THE BEGINNING, WE KNEW WE WANTED TO HIGHLIGHT HOW DEEPLY CONNECTED WE ARE TO OUR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SINCE CHOOSING THIS THEME HAS STAYED WITH US, EVEN A YEAR LATER. TREES, AS IT TURNS OUT, COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER BENEATH THE GROUND. THEIR ROOTS INTERTWINE, SENDING NUTRIENTS TO A TREE IN NEED WHEN IT IS STRUGGLING.

AS THIS YEAR UNFOLDED, WE WITNESSED TIME AND TIME AGAIN JUST HOW ROOTED WE ARE HERE AND HOW WE SUPPORT AND UPLIFT ONE ANOTHER IN WAYS BOTH SEEN AND UNSEEN. OUR WOODS ARE ALIVE WITH MORE THAN TREES.

THEY HOLD LOVE.
THEY HOLD COMMUNITY.
THEY HOLD HOPE.















ROOTED IN HOPE HIGHLIGHT— GROWING UP AT NFSSE

Years ago, nine bright-eyed children stood before a camera during a photoshoot that would mark the start of something extraordinary. The "Angel of the Woods" campaign was just beginning. Our dream of a therapeutic equestrian center and new building for our lower school was taking root, and these nine students became the faces of that hope.

Today, they are no longer children. They are young adults, confident, capable, and growing into their potential in ways their families once only dreamed of.

This year, at Dinner on the Farm, we honored them again, not as symbols of what might be, but as living proof of what is possible. The Delores Barr Weaver Therapeutic Equestrian Center and Lower School Building was built with hope at its core: the belief that every student deserves opportunities to grow stronger, feel connected, and be seen for who they truly are.

For the families of these students, NFSSE became more than a school. It became a place where fears were eased, milestones were celebrated, and hope was given a home. That early hope has carried them through challenges, nurtured their progress, and deepened their sense of belonging.

These students remind us that hope, when planted in the right soil, grows strong roots.

The woods have watched them grow.

The animals, our chickens, pigs, and turkey, have heard their laughter.

The horses have carried them as they learned.

And we have had the privilege of walking beside them.

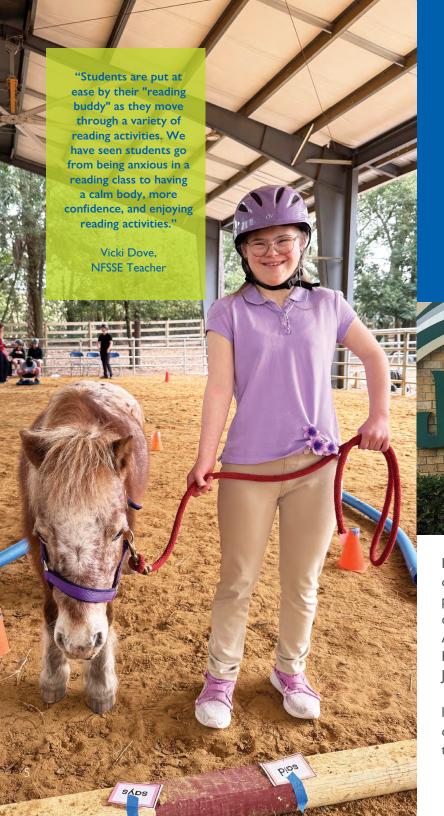












ROOTED IN HOPE

The spirit of hope has guided North Florida School of Special Education from the very beginning and over the years, we have nurtured the talents and dreams of countless students.

This year, we launched a transformative new program: Horse Powered Reading. Horse Powered Reading combines reading instruction with experiential learning alongside horses. This unique method promotes deeper understanding, engagement, and confidence in readers of all ages. Blending the power of equine-assisted learning with literacy instruction.

For our young adults, vocational pathways opened wider than ever. Each new initiative is planted with care, nurtured with purpose, and designed with our students' futures in mind. A shining example of hope in action is Camp Eagle, a partnership between NFSSE and Jacksonville University (JU) that empowered 12 transition and postgraduate students to live independently for the first time on JU's campus. Camp Eagle became a steppingstone toward self-confidence and independence.

"Camp Eagle was an invaluable experience that allowed our family to understand where our adult son's abilities lie in the overall pursuit for independent living. We were able to determine what his strengths are as well as opportunities we still need to work on in order for him to be successful in living on his own one day. He came home with a renewed confidence and maturity that showed us he will be successful with his goals."

Kim Hardwick, mom to Nick





Our hope-filled growth didn't stop there. Students from our Art With Soul microenterprise were selected to have their artwork displayed at Jacksonville International Airport in the new Art Across the Spectrum gallery, a moment of immense pride and visibility.





This year, we also marked a milestone in our journey: graduating our largest class of seniors yet. We introduced the inaugural Eagle Award, established to honor two graduating students it means to be an NFSSE Eagle. This year's recipients left an indelible mark on our school. Congratulations Luke Steinkamp and Kaci Himmelreich.

"I can't wait to see the list of Eagle Award recipients grow over the years—
it's going to be such a beautiful way to honor the many ways in which our students soar."

Sally Hazelin







With each new opportunity, we're not just expanding programs and spaces, we're expanding lives and unlocking limitless potential.





ROOTED IN LOVE HIGHLIGHT— NATHAN & BOBBY

At North Florida School of Special Education, love is more than just a word; it's the foundation that supports every student, every stride, and every story. This year, no story illustrates that better than the extraordinary bond between Nathan Kail and a gentle horse named Bobby.

Nathan, a young man in our postgraduate program, has faced deep personal loss. A few years ago, he lost his mother, his biggest champion and constant source of comfort. In the wake of her passing, the world felt quieter, heavier. But something changed the day Nathan met Bobby.

Bobby is one of the horses in our equine therapy program at the Delores Barr Weaver Therapeutic Equestrian Center. With patience and quiet strength, Bobby became a steady presence in Nathan's life. Their connection didn't happen all at once, it bloomed slowly, like trust often does. Today, Bobby isn't just a horse. He's a friend, a confidant, and a bridge to healing.

Through Bobby, Nathan has discovered that love doesn't end—it transforms. It shows up in unexpected ways and carries us through our hardest moments. Their relationship has given Nathan something powerful: a renewed sense of hope. With Bobby by his side, Nathan stands taller, speaks more freely, and lives with a quiet joy that's impossible to miss.

Love has rooted itself in their bond. It lifts Nathan up in times of sorrow and makes the bright days shine even brighter. And that's what we believe at NFSSE: that love, given space to grow, can change everything.



Nathan is one of my all-time favorites!
Beneath his tough, guarded exterior is a gentle spirit—and that's always what I see when he's here with Bobby.



Michelle Onorato

ROOTED IN LOVE

Step onto our campus and you'll feel love immediately, the kindness in a passing smile, the joyful energy in the classroom, the unspoken bond between a teacher and their student.

The connections here run deep. Friendships bloom between students of all ages and abilities. Families share encouragement, milestones, and proud tears. Teachers invest not only their time and expertise but also their hearts. Staff members become mentors, advocates, and second families. Volunteers become lifelong champions. From these connections grows a deep and abiding love—one that wraps around our entire NFSSE community.



One especially touching expression of this love was the memorial garden created by our Jr. Civitan Club. Designed as a space of remembrance and reflection, the garden honors the lives of loved ones our community has lost. With care and intention, students planted flowers, placed stones, and created a sanctuary where healing and hope can grow side by side. It stands as a testament to the empathy our students carry and the strength of a school family that walks through both joy and grief together.





Love takes many forms at NFSSE, and one of the most vibrant expressions of it shines through our drama program, People Like Us. On stage, labels disappear. This year's performance of Aladdin Jr. was a yearlong practice in friendship, hard work and growth. This was also the first year where our Student Tech-Team operated lights and sound for the entire performance, another dream realized. Students stepped into the spotlight and they also experienced shining the spotlight onto others. The magic of People Like Us is not just in the applause but in the way it nurtures confidence, fosters understanding, and builds bonds that extend far beyond the final curtain call.



That same spirit of love was woven through our Reverse Inclusion programs this year with partners like The Jewish Community Alliance, Greenwood School, and Jacksonville Country Day School. Friendship bracelets were crafted and exchanged in abundance. Laughter echoed through hallways and fields. Both NFSSE students and guests were deeply enriched by the connections and the joy they shared.

"Watching all of our children engage, learn, and play together was nothing short of inspiring. Regardless of any difference, everyone found ways to connect, share smiles, and build friendships. This experience was a powerful reminder of what's possible when we come together—and a gift to everyone involved."

Tonya Elstein, Director of Education at |acksonville Country Day School

Rooted in love, we continue to grow, creating spaces where every student is seen, valued, and empowered to thrive.

And as we look ahead, it's that enduring love that will keep guiding our way forward.





ROOTED IN COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHT— AL'S PIZZA

Our students are not just part of a school—they're part of a city that believes in them. We are deeply *Rooted in Community*, and through every volunteer hour, jobsite, and partnership, our students are building lives of purpose beyond our campus walls. This year, that belief was brought to life in a powerful way through a sizzling pan pizza.

Thanks to the vision and generosity of Al's Pizza, two student-run Al's Pizza locations opened at EverBank Stadium, operating during every Jacksonville Jaguars home game. From the very first kickoff, our students rose to the occasion, taking orders, prepping food, and greeting fans with pride and professionalism. With NFSSE staff by their sides, guiding and mentoring, they transformed the concessions into more than just pizza counters. They became platforms for possibility.

This partnership is so much more than a job. It is a living, breathing example of what happens when the community says yes to inclusion. It is what happens when a local business recognizes potential, when a stadium opens its gates a little wider, and when a city rallies behind young adults with intellectual and developmental differences.

Every game day, our students weren't just serving food. They were serving a message: that given the chance, they can and will succeed. The cheers in the stadium weren't just for touchdowns. They were also for every new skill learned, every challenge met, and every proud parent in the stands watching their child step confidently into adulthood.

The Al's Pizza partnership is just the beginning. It is a model for what vocational inclusion looks like when paired with collaboration and heart.



Partnering with NFSSE has been one of the most rewarding experiences for our team. Watching the students bring their skills and enthusiasm into a fast-paced environment like EverBank Field has been incredible. They remind us what hard work, dedication, and joy look like, and we're proud to stand alongside them as they grow into confident young professionals.



Chris Kelly, Director of Operations at Al's Pizza



ROOTED IN COMMUNITY

We believe that community has the power to transform lives. When people come together in support, encouragement, and shared purpose, remarkable things happen. This year, we've seen our roots in the Jacksonville community grow deeper than ever.

In addition to the incredible visibility our students receive while working at Jacksonville Jaguar games, there is more exciting

news from our local NFL team. Evan Engram, a former Jaguar, established the Evan Engram Scholarship. Evan chose to represent North Florida School of Special Education during the My Cause My Cleats game, inspiring fans to give back and resulting in nearly \$1,800 in donations—many in increments of \$17 to honor his jersey number. To further this impact,

Evan generously contributed. This scholarship has directly enriched the lives of our students and supported them in thriving on their educational journeys.

Another former Jaguar player, Mac Jones, became a consistent presence in our hallways. Mac and his family played a major role in our Heart of the Runway event, and he, too, proudly represented NFSSE during My Cause My Cleats. Their involvement is a powerful example of what it means to stand beside our students as champions and friends.





This year also brought the launch of the Building Bridges Supper Club, a new community dining experience held at our Berry Good Farms Café. Dinners brought together local chefs to work alongside NFSSE's Culinary Staff and Culinary Academy to create an elevated dinner menu. These dinners fostered conversation and connection between the creators of the dinner and those enjoying the meal. This year's Building Bridges Supper Club Guest Chefs included Dennis Chan of Blue Bamboo, Chad Munsey of The Bearded Pig and Rebecca Reed of B the Bakery, Chopped Sweets winner and star of Amazon's Dr. Seuss Cake Challenge.





Our Berry Good Thursday Market has also become a beloved tradition. We welcome the community to explore the creations of our microenterprises, from Barkin' Biscuits dog treats to vibrant, farm-fresh flowers grown by Berry Good Farms. This weekly market is more than an opportunity to shop—it's a chance to experience firsthand the vocational training, skill-building, and creativity that flourish on our campus each day.

Together, we are creating a more connected, inclusive world—one built on relationships, shared experiences, and the belief that when we root ourselves in community, everyone grows.

FRIENDS WHO ARE ROOTING FOR US!

Partners

Thank you to all of our partners! Our Classroom, Program, Scholarship and Vocational partners lay the foundation for our Giving Tree Annual Fund, and we are so grateful. These friends share their monetary and social capital with us and make a vast impact on our students and their families.

Classroom and Program Partners support a classroom or specific program close to their hearts.

Anonymous, "In honor of our children"-Classroom

John Baker III-Classroom

Martha and Eli Bekkum-People Like Us

Jess & Brewster J. Durkee Foundation-Classroom

Kirbo Charitable Foundation-Barkin' Biscuits

Clinton Family Foundation—Connecting Through Music

Ann and Ed McCarthy-Classroom

One Achord-Music

Dorothy and Lee Thomas-Art With Soul and Equestrian Center

Scholarships Partners provide financial aid to students and families in need of assistance to cover the cost of tuition.

Scott Bledsoe Memorial Scholarship

Evan Engram Scholarship

W.W. Gay Scholarship

Kim Smoak Scholarship

Spriggs and Jones Scholarship

Vocational Partners provide a paid internship for an NFSSE student gaining vocational skills in one of our microenterprises.

Marianne Hillegass John and Diane Kirkland

Thank you to each of our amazing partners. Your gift is essential to our school. Interested in becoming a Classroom, Program, Scholarship or Vocational Partner? Contact Emily Knight-Smith, Director of Advancement, at EKnight-Smith@NorthFloridaSchool.org or 904-724-8323 to learn more.



"Throughout our lives, theatre has been our passion. When we heard NFSSE started a theatre program, "People Like Us," we contacted the school to learn how we could get involved. We immediately became the program partners and have been delighted to be a part of it. Being involved with all aspects of theatre ourselves, we knew how uplifting and inspiring it would be for the students. We have seen how much the students have grown in confidence and ability, and we have received as much joy as the students who have participated in it. Being a program partner is the best investment with the greatest return you can receive."

Martha and Eli Bekkum

THE GIVING TREE LEGACY CIRCLE

The Giving Tree Legacy Circle was created to recognize those who support the school's planned giving program either through an outright gift to the North Florida School of Special Education Endowment Fund at The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida, or by including NFSSE in their will or estate plans.

These gifts ensure that the doors remain open to individuals with IDD. Planned gifts are a predictable source of funding, allowing us to sustain our mission for future generations. Join us in reaching our \$10M planned giving goal to ensure a bright future for years to come.

"Volunteering at NFSSE has changed my life, teaching me about people with special needs, bringing me a joy that is hard to define, filling my heart every volunteer day and at every volunteer event. One thing I have learned is that special needs people are just like you and me but oh so much more loving and caring. It didn't take long to realize that I wanted to offer something more to help this amazing school by creating an endowment in my living trust. I am so proud to be a member of the Giving Tree Legacy Circle and hope to set an example for many others to follow."—Marianne Hillegass

There are multiple ways to make a planned gift. You can make an outright gift to NFSSE's Endowment, include NFSSE in your will, retirement plan, life insurance, or establish a charitable gift annuity. If you have already included NFSSE in your will, please let us know so we can welcome you into the Giving Tree Legacy Circle. To learn more, contact Emily Knight-Smith, Director of Advancement, at 904-724-8323 or EKnight-Smith@NorthFloridaSchool.org



THANK YOU
TO OUR
GIVING TREE
LEGACY
CIRCLE MEMBERS

Anne Brown-Baker
Jan Bebeau
Kathleen and Joseph Brandt
Patty and Doug Campbell
Marianne Hillegass
Leslie Jones
Mary Virginia Jones
Carl Loop
Ann and John Macdonald
Kathy and Rusty Newton
Elise and Greg Nowikowski
Jenifer and Chip Skinner

Erin and Chris Skinner
Tracy and Randy Skinner
Justin and Briana Spooner
Brightman Thomas
Kit and Corky Thomas
Lanny Thomas
Linda Thomas
Page Thomas
Dorthy and Lee Thomas
Linda and Ray Van Landingham
J. Wayne and Delores Barr Weaver
Karen and Chris Western

BUSINESS PARTNERS

Our business partners make so much possible for our students. They provide a place for students to learn and grow into employees. Thank you to all of our community partners who embraced our students, took them under your wing, and gave them an opportunity to learn and flourish.

2024-2025 Business Partners

Al's Pizza

BEAM Thrift Store

Bitty and Beau's

Brooks YMCA

Burlington-River City Marketplace

Canopy

Chartwells

Chic-fil-A-Marsh Landing

Clean Juice at Town Center

Cultivate

Culver's

Eat Your Yard Jax

Gregory Paul's

HabiJax Restore

Happy Brew

Hope's Closet Thrift Stores-Arlington

Hope's Closet Thrift Stores-San Pablo

Iguana on Park

Jacksonville Humane Society

Jacksonville Icemen

lacksonville laguars

Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens

Longhorn Steakhouse-Marsh Landing

Lutheran Social Services

Medtronic

MOCA

MOSH

Natural Life

Noah's Agape Cafe

One Ocean

Panera

Pet Paradise

Publix Super Markets-Monument Road

Publix Super Markets-Neptune Beach

Publix Super Markets-Sawgrass Village

Publix Super Markets-Southside

Seaside Shops

Southside Methodist Church

Sweet Pete's Candy

Ucom Urban Serivces Inc.

VyStar Credit Union

We Rock the Spectrum

Learn how your business can become a job site by contacting Ann Atkins, Director of Transition and Postgraduate Programs at AAtkins@NorthFloridaSchool.org or 904-724-8323.

ENGAGED COMMUNITY

NFSSE's Mission Statement: To discover and foster each student's unique abilities revealing their highest potential within an engaged community.

We understand the significance of being part of an engaged community. At our school, everyone belongs. We all have a special spark to contribute to our communal fire. Amazing things happen on our campus each day, students are acquiring life-changing skills, making friends and forging ahead to a bright future. Thank you to everyone who attended an event at NFSSE. Our doors are always open to you.





Cocktails On Broadway



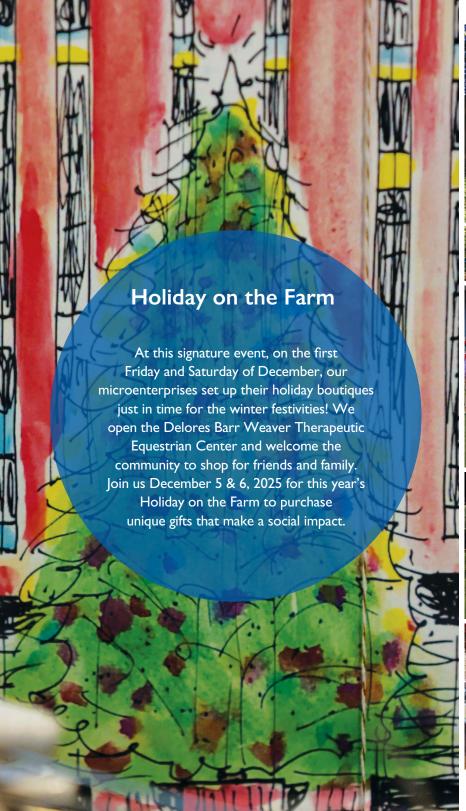
































































































BERRY GOOD FARMS **EVENT VENUE**

Our campus has taken off as a sought-after event space. NFSSE hosted thousands of guests at corporate cocktail parties, company picnics and holiday parties, children's birthday parties, weddings and bridal showers, a community concert, and our own signature events.

Our stunning and natural campus offers an ethereal and chic setting under a canopy of oaks adorned with vintage market lighting, a large wrap around deck and a covered pavilion for a reception seating up to 350 guests.

The advantage of utilizing North Florida School of Special Education as a venue include:

- Onsite catering for farm-to-table fare.
- Providing job opportunities and vocational training for NFSSE postgraduate students.
- An Event Coordinator to help create a stress-free and memorable event.
- Florals and decor designed by Berry Good Blooms.

To host your next event at North Florida School of Special Education, email info@NorthFloridaSchool.org or call 904-724-8323.























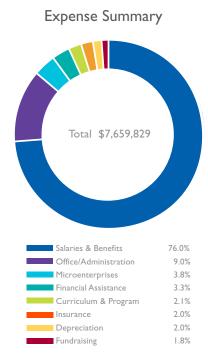


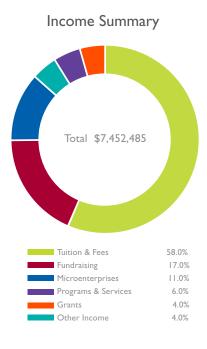






FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS FY 2024–2025





NFSSE AT A GLANCE FY 2024-2025

189 STUDENTS AGES 6 TO 18

47
TRANSITION
STUDENTS
AGES 18 TO 22

POSTGRADUATES
22 YEARS OF AGE
AND OLDER



Due to printing deadlines, the financials listed above are based on unaudited financial statements.

Please refer to NFSSE's 990's for audited financial reports.



Holiday on the Farm December 5 & 6, 2025

The Delores Barr Weaver Therapeutic Equestrian Center becomes the backdrop for a family-friendly farm festivity! Shop for holiday gifts at pop-up stores featuring Barkin' Biscuits, Art With Soul, Berry Good Blooms, Berry Good Farms and Berry Good Farms Culinary.

Berry Good Farms Weekend Festival

Join us for our signature weekend festival filled with delicious food, live music, entertainment and a celebration of the NFSSE community at the Delores Barr Weaver Therapeutic Equestrian Center.

Visit NorthFloridaSchool.org to learn more. For ticket sales and sponsorship opportunities, email Emily Knight-Smith, Director of Advancement, at EKnight-Smith@NorthFloridaSchool.org or call 904-724-8323

SAVE THE DATES 2025-2026 UPCOMING FUNDRAISING EVENTS



Heart of the Runway After Dark February 11, 2026

Enjoy an evening runway show featuring the Spring collections of Linda Cunningham and Dillard's while students model their Night to Shine Prom styles. This nighttime event is filled with energy and fun, a great way to celebrate with your Valentine or Galentines.



With an elevated runway and dramatic decor, the Delores Barr Weaver event. Experience the beautiful collection of Linda Cunningham and





Therapeutic Equestrian Center is transformed into an elegant fashion spring trends of Dillard's while enjoying an al fresco lunch with friends.



Concert on the Farm Friday, April 10, 2026



Kick off the weekend with a rocking good time at Concert on the Farm featuring live music, local food trucks and craft cocktails.



Dinner on the Farm Sunday, April 12, 2026



Our traditional Dinner on the Farm under the riding pavilion features a casual but elegant atmosphere and farm to table



Enhance. Empower. Enlighten.

223 Mill Creek Road Jacksonville, Florida 32211

Return Service Requested

NON-PROFIT ORG. U.S. POSTAGE

PAID JACKSONVILLE, FL PERMIT NO. 556



