

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Below: A collection of photos and toys rests on a shelf in the former bedroom of Leora Rutledge's children. Right: Exposed plumbing runs above the subfloor in the bathroom of Rutledge's home.



A Brutal Consequence

Drugs hit many families in Ocala National Forest like a wrecking ball. Leora Rutledge says her drug use cost her custody of her three sons, who were removed by the state Department of Children and Families. She agonizes over the consequences of her mistakes and knows she needs to get clean. She can legally visit the boys at her sister-in-law's home, but finding a way to get there is a hurdle she can rarely overcome.

POVERTY

Continued from A1

Enter Pastor Dave Houck, a religious leader familiar to the estimated 40,000 to 45,000 people living in the forest's borders, where faith-based organizations are working to close a gap the government can't.

Here, 22% of people like Lee live below the poverty line, compared to 15.5% statewide. That threshold is \$25,750 annually for a family of four; Lee's household of 12 is scraping by on about \$33,000.

Their only sources of income are James' earnings, \$263 monthly for the three children placed by DCF and \$178 monthly from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Today, Houck is visiting Lee to deliver food and spiritual support.

"Hot dogs are God's favorite food," he suggests with a smile for her next grocery order, "because all God's creations are in a hot dog."

Houck, himself a product of the forest's abject poverty, presides over Salt Life Church and the Help Agency, a not-for-profit charity he founded 26 years ago to benefit his forest flock.

Lee was one of the first children served by the Help Agency's mentor center that opened 15 years ago.

Lee and her husband were both born in the forest, as were their parents. Lee said she doesn't mind where she's at, but she wishes the financial burden of her life could improve.

"I need help," Lee said. "I'm used to a lot of kids, but I generally struggle to do it all alone, so I had to call in reinforcements."

Lee is one of the successes of the forest, Houck said.

"Basically, Sam came up in poverty," he said, "but she hasn't become a statistic. Her husband

works, and she's a good mom. Sam will make sure (the kids) are fed and clothed and healthy."

She, like her brother and sister-in-law, also has graduated from high school.

"She really stepped up for those kids," Houck said.

In a world with so much need and so few social services, getting ahead is a pushing-a-boulder-up-the-hill fight that few manage to win.

"The problem with the cycle of poverty is it's intergenerational, and it's taught," Houck said. "Parents teach their kids how to be poor. 'This is how we did it, this is how it's done,' but if you can catch a kid young enough... Kids have to have enough experiences to know that there are different things out there."

Inside The Forest

Not all forest residents live in squalor. The 607-square-mile forest is a checkerboard of government-owned and private property, and homes along the more than 600 lakes, rivers and springs are especially valuable.

For instance, one 10-bedroom home on a 16-acre farm currently lists for \$699,000, and an empty 85-acre hunting parcel is being offered for \$680,000.

But in the Scramble Town pockets of poverty, families are living in structures ranging from 1960s mobile homes to tents, garden sheds and shacks they've built from scrap metal and wood.

Lee's nephews were removed from a single-wide mobile home with particle board flooring, broken furniture and water-damaged drywall punctured by exposed wiring and plumbing. Three other ramshackle dwellings share the same patch of land.

Dirt roads in disrepair and a lack of internet access are two areas of

focus for Marion County Commissioner Carl Zalak, who represents the area. To keep open the few transportation options residents have, the government tries to ensure the dirt roads are not washed out.

Other than basic services, such as garbage pickup, the operation of a community center and public safety response, there's not much officials can do for a population "that has a tendency to be a little bit more alone and in isolation," he said.

Zalak added that Houck's private fundraising gives him the ability to serve residents as his charity sees fit in a way that elected officials can't.

"Government is not the answer," Zalak said. "Our community is."

To Houck, a community can't be successful without support from its residents and local representatives.

Missy McFarland, Houck's cousin who lives in the forest, said the forest still needs more resources. Without transportation options for many of the people living there, McFarland sees a huge issue for adults interested in going to college or getting jobs but who can't leave their neighborhoods.

"How do you expect these people to change their lives if they have no resources to do it?" she asked.

"There's great people in the forest. They're close and very loyal to each other. There are some very smart people out there. People think, 'They asked to live that way,' but most of the time, kids don't realize they're poor until they go to school."

Long Odds To Overcome

While the chaos in Lee's world blares at full volume, her sister-in-law agonizes in the childless silence.

It was Leora Rutledge's escape into drug use, Rutledge said, not the boys' dilapidated living conditions, that prompted DCF to remove them.

DCF has regulations on housing

that can lead to the removal of children from a home. Because assignments are not broken down beyond the county level across most of Florida, there is no way to get data on how many cases are from the forest specifically, according to David Ocasio, DCF Central Region public information officer.

However, in 2018, DCF had 8,633 children in family investigations in Marion County. Of those, 796 were removed from the home by DCF.

Statewide, there were 26,368 children removed.

While Florida law does not officially permit the removal of children because their parents are poor, this is "the underlying cause for almost all removal," said Robin Rosenberg, deputy director of Florida's Children First.

Florida's Children First, a nonprofit dedicated to the rights of at-risk children, believes a greater emphasis should be placed on supporting families so they can keep their children, Rosenberg said.

"When you aren't in poverty and you have money, you have family, you have ways of dealing with those problems," Rosenberg said.

Where people lack these characteristics, poverty often begins and can lead to a downward cycle, she said.

"Almost all the children in (DCF's) care are there because of their families' circumstances getting out of control," she said.

"Nobody wakes up in the morning and says, 'Today I'm going to neglect my child.'"

It's hard for Rutledge to come home and not see her boys waiting for her, but it's at least a 30-minute drive to Scramble Town, and she doesn't have a car. It took five days after the boys' removal before the Lees could bring her and their dad, Adam Tavernier, 33, for an afternoon visit.

DCF won't let them spend

the night.

Little Owen launched himself into her arms, hugging her as tightly as he could, forcing her to drop Colten's lunchbox and a tote bag with crafts. Mark clung to his father outside while Colten watched.

Although this was the first time the Tavernier children were placed in Lee's custody, she said it was the fourth instance in which she's needed to have one or more of the kids living with her. The most recent time before this was when Colten wasn't getting picked up from the school bus stop in the spring.

Lee kept him at her house from March until the school year ended in May to make sure he was getting to and from school.

Rutledge hunched over a Disney princess table, gathering her kids and their cousins for a sand craft she'd brought. Her long, thin legs protruded sharply from a short stool while she kept one hand on Owen, reassuring him she wasn't going anywhere just yet.

"I just want a better life for my kids and for us to always be there for them," she said.

She knows she needs to get clean, complete substance-abuse classes and be cleared by a mental health professional before she can take her kids home.

But she's fuzzy on the details, just knowing her first trial will be Jan. 2.

For now, she's unemployed and living with Tavernier and his parents while she sinks further into the clutches of deep poverty that few families here escape.

She has new motivation to hope but also new reason to despair:

She's expecting a baby in the spring.

Staff writer Alexandria Mansfield can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5401, or alexandria.mansfield@thevillagesmedia.com.



Leora Rutledge cries on the bed in her three sons' room, in Ocala National Forest. Her children, Owen Tavernier, 2, Mark Tavernier, 3, and Colten Tavernier, 7, were removed from her custody by the state Department of Children and Families. This is the first time she's set foot in the bedroom since they were taken.

Photos by Hannah Ridings Daily Sun

NATIONAL NEWS

AGREEMENT OFFERS HOPE FOR BIPARTISAN TRADE SOLUTIONS

Collaboration between Trump administration, House Democrats clears way for deal.

Robert Lighthizer, President Donald Trump's top trade negotiator, and senior Democrats said that with House passage of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement last week, they've found a formula for Republicans and Democrats to forge trade deals despite Washington's deep partisan divide. The agreement still must be approved by the Senate next month. **A6**

NATION & WORLD REPORT



The Associated Press

Nation: Robotic pets with multiple sensors for movement, sounds and touch are bringing smiles to veterans at an Illinois VA center. Therapists say the pets will be used to help veterans with dementia. **A7**

World: New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, was paralyzed by "catastrophic" fire conditions Saturday, while one person died as wildfires ravaged the country's south-east, officials said. **A3**

INSIDE

Florida News	A5
Lottery	A4
Local News	C1
World News	A2

THAT'S AMAZING!

GEORGIA FAMILY GETS CHRISTMAS SURPRISE FROM OWL IN TREE

A Georgia family got a real hoot from its Christmas tree. More than a week after they bought it, they discovered a live owl nestled among its branches.

Katie McBride Newman said she and her daughter spotted the bird on Dec. 12. They had bought the 10-foot tall tree from a Home Depot, brought it back to their Atlanta-area home and decorated it with lights and, coincidentally, owl ornaments.

"It was surreal, but we weren't really freaked out about it," McBride Newman said. "We're really outdoorsy people. We love the wilderness."

The family called the nonprofit Chattahoochee Nature Center for help. The nature center caught the bird and helped the family release it.

McBride Newman said she believed the bird had been hidden in the tree since they bought it.

— The Associated Press

Faces in The News

Hassan Diab

Lebanon's new prime minister said he will form a government of experts and independents to deal with the country's economic crisis.

World News, A3

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Pastor With a Punch

A half-hour north of The Villages, thousands of people struggle to put food on the table and obtain other basic necessities. The forces that trap generation after generation in abject poverty in Ocala National Forest are no stranger to Pastor Dave Houck. He's waged war against them most of his life, and he's got the scars to prove it. He's been cursed at and even shot at, but he's not backing down in the fight to save his forgotten flock.



Submitted photo

Pastor Dave Houck and his wife, Tammy, center, are surrounded by most of their children. From left, are Rebekah Houck, Joseph Demello, Andrea Lewis, Joshua Houck, Daniel Reyes, Robert Johns, Trisha Johns, John Johns, Jordon Houck and Aaron Houck.

By ALEXANDRIA MANSFIELD | Daily Sun Staff Writer

Dave Houck was just 9 years old and knee-deep in swamp water when Daddy taught him how to slay a dragon.

Stay alert.
Swallow the fear.
Wait for Daddy to hook the beast.
Dodge the powerful whips of the tail.
Steer clear of the snapping jaws.
Then flip it onto its back while Daddy finishes it off with an ax — in this family, bullets cost too much.

It was scary, sweaty, bloody work.
But it was food on the table for him and his little brother.

Houck didn't mind gator for dinner as much as his dad minded his mom being ridiculed for using food stamps at the grocery store. Better to keep their dignity and fend for themselves, he said.

Almost four decades later, Houck, 47, is still patrolling the pockets

of deep poverty in Ocala National Forest, the father of a forgotten flock still trying to fill their kids' dinner plates.

The dangers have evolved, but he still measures success by the meals he puts on tables. Through his unconventional ministry, it's swollen to tens of thousands each year.

An estimated 40,000 to 45,000 people live within the forest's borders about 40 miles north of The Villages. Here 22% of people live below the poverty line, compared to 15.5% statewide.

"Pastor Dave," as everyone calls him, comes across more like a rough-and-tumble biker than a man of the cloth — and that's neither accidental nor an affectation. If his 6-foot-3-inch, 270-pound frame wasn't imposing enough, add a crew cut, arms scarred by battles with gators and rattlesnakes (another supper option in his youth) and a long goatee befitting a Civil War general.

And, of course, his '97 Harley-Davidson Softail.

"Some rougher guys don't open up to a pastor," Houck said. "But they'll open up to a biker."

Please See **PASTOR, A8**



Photos by Hannah Ridings | Daily Sun

Above: Pastor Dave Houck loads donated food from Publix into his box truck. Houck distributes the food through his nonprofit, Help Agency, in Ocala National Forest.

Left: Houck smiles at Liana Villegas while she eats her snack after school in October at the Forest Lakes Park Center.

COMING MONDAY

Dave Houck has been joined in his battle against the nearly inescapable poverty of Ocala National Forest by a club of about 300 Villagers, who have collected more than \$100,000 in donations and donated more than 8,500 hours to help children living there. Sometimes their goal is as simple as putting a smile on a child's face.

"Even though these kids face amazing challenges," club President LaRae Donnellan said, "they're just kids and want the same things as any other child."



COPYRIGHT © 2019, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



6 90548 00003 9

VOLUME 22 | ISSUE 356

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

PASTOR

Continued from A1

He's been shot at. Twice. He's taken — and given — his fair share of punches. Once he arrived at a woman's house in time to stop a beating by her husband, only to scramble into a dog kennel to continue negotiations after the man grabbed a shotgun. In fact, he grew his goatee in part so he wouldn't be mistaken for a cop — a definite hazard as he moves through the dark corners of this remote world of abject poverty. It's scary, sweaty, bloody work.

But it's a last lifeline for many families fighting back against the crime, child neglect and lack of social opportunity that trap generation after generation in unrelenting quicksand. Houck himself couldn't break the forest's pull. At age 20, he fled to California. But within weeks, he heard a call from God to move back. He's since made it his life's mission to help the thousands of poor families scraping by in this rural wilderness. The Help Agency, a not-for-profit charity he founded, operates a food bank, provides free dental care, runs after-school programs and puts on summer camps. The work is made possible in large part by donations from senior citizens, especially those who power four SoZo Kids clubs (the word SoZo is Greek for "rescue"). Since the SoZo Kids Club of The Villages formed in 2016, it has collected more than \$100,000 in donations. Houck walks the walk. He can be found daily rolling up his sleeves to do minor home repairs, such as fixing a wheel-chair ramp or cleaning homes to help parents in danger of losing custody of their children to the state.

"The work he (Houck) does is never-ending; he can't shut it off," said LaRae Donnellan, Villages club president. "Maybe a child broke a leg at midnight, someone is being released from prison with no ride, a lawn mower broke or a pipe burst ... David is there to help. The man truly has a vision and a mission." Houck and his wife, Tammy, also have adopted eight children from forest families in crisis, raising them alongside their four biological children. "I have a lot of kids I don't own," Houck jokes. "Adopting kids is our superpower."

Help Hard To Come By

The 607-square-mile forest is a checkerboard of government-owned and private property. Many of the homes are trailers, but in the forest, people will live in "just about anything with four walls and a roof," Houck said, including sheds and shacks cobbled together with stray pieces of metal or wood. Some are living without electricity or running water, not knowing where their next meal will come. It's not uncommon for residents to live in the same dilapidated home in which they were born, often pooling meager resources with several generations under one roof. Neighbors look out for each other the best they can. This fall, Melany Peters opened a 10x12 shed on her property to Mary Henderson, 52, whom she met through their sons. Peters would welcome Henderson into her trailer, but it's already crowded with her mother and 27-year-old son with special needs. "It's been a horrible year for us," Peters lamented, her persistent smile at odds with those words.

Please See PAGE A11



Eugene Houck, his son, Dave, and the rest of the family moved to Ocala National Forest when Dave was 9.



Dave and Tammy Houck join Dave's mother, Sue, and father, Eugene, on their wedding day in April 1992.



Tammy Houck holds her newborn son, Aaron, with Dave in 1993. Today, their family has grown to 12 children.



Dave Houck and his wife, Tammy, ride a 2008 Victory motorcycle through "Tail of the Dragon" in 2013 in Deals Gap, North Carolina. The popular motorcycle destination boasts 318 curves in 11 miles and is bordered by the Great Smoky Mountains and Cherokee National Forest. Houck still owns the bike, he said, but it's been in the shop for a year.

Submitted photos



Say HELLO

Florida's best community bank.
Florida's best community credit union.
Coming together under one banner.

Still offering exceptional convenience,
face-to-face service, and best of all,
a financial institution where you can
belong to a strong community
of 350,000 members.

**Community Bank & Trust
is now
MIDFLORIDA Credit Union.**



Stop by to say hello to everyone you already know and to **future conveniences** like 7 to 7 drive thru, Saturday hours, a branch network of 65 locations throughout Florida and more!



THE VILLAGES | Financial Center 2285 Parr Dr. **Pinellas Plaza** 2535 Burnsed Blvd. **Summerfield/Spruce Creek** 11220 SE 179th Pl.
OCALA | Main 1603 SW 19th Ave. **Golden Hills** 6850 N. US Hwy. 27 **East** 1520 Silver Springs Blvd. **North** 7139 N. US Hwy 441 **Heath Brook** 5450 SW College Rd. **Bellevue** 10131 SE US Hwy 441
GAINESVILLE | Oaks 6120 NW 1st Place **Stadium Club** 1800 W. University Ave, Suite 130 | **And many other locations throughout Florida**

GET TO KNOW US AT MIDFLORIDA.COM/HELLO

Insured by NCUA.

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Continued from Page A8

The three family members recently underwent surgeries, Peters said, including neck and dental procedures. Henderson was scheduled for her own wrist surgery soon, and the women were worried about the lack of insulation in the shed as winter drew near.

Houck and three helpers answered the call.

“I think we got a bigger problem here than we thought,” Houck said as his crew worked while two dogs in a metal chain-link cage whined nearby.

He’d underestimated the workload and materials needed — and like many of his projects, this was one he’d need to come back to finish.

It’s never just a single day’s work for him.

A Legacy Of Sacrifice

Houck’s family “had nothing” when he was growing up in the forest, he said.

He was a first-grader when an on-the-job injury in Manatee County took Houck’s father out of the workforce. Daddy was making just \$343 monthly in workers’ compensation, and they could have a home in the forest for \$171.

What they did have, they gave away, Houck said. The sacrifices he saw his family make would foreshadow the rest of his life.

“My mother would let anyone live with us,” he said. “At one point there were 13 children.”

Finding a place to sleep took some ingenuity. Sometimes they put wood planks across the top of the bathtub to turn it into a bed.

Because he grew up with so little, other kids made fun of him, with a particular focus on his hand-me-down shoes.

“I was a target,” he said. “Fighting became a part of who I was.”

It’s part of the reason he

now puts such a focus on providing kids with new clothes and shoes rather than secondhand donations.

Houck didn’t imagine he would grow up to be a pastor and devote his life to helping the poor.

“All I ever wanted to be was a policeman — a sheriff,” he said.

But that wasn’t his fate, thanks to a handful of arrests, double-digit traffic violations and getting expelled from two high schools for fighting and skipping class.

He dropped out at 17. That’s when his dad tried to teach him the importance of an education — the hard way. He said Houck could only live in the family’s house if he was in school. Then he changed the locks.

Houck slept on the steps in front of the house until he agreed to go back to school.

“My dad wasn’t gentle,” Houck laughed. “But he was a good man.”

And his dad, who died two years ago, wasn’t a bad match-maker either.

Houck’s parents were religious, and he was raised as a self-proclaimed “church boy who didn’t go to church.” He only agreed to go to Christian summer camp because he was in a band and heard they were looking for a drummer.

There he met Tammy, a missionary’s daughter who “always wanted to be a pastor’s wife and work with kids and have kids.”

Houck said he wouldn’t have liked himself if he were in Tammy’s father’s shoes.

“My wife is honestly perfect,” he said. “She’s always been perfect — not like me.”

Houck’s bad-boy style was the exact opposite of what a preacher would want for his daughter. The tension wasn’t quickly remedied after their marriage either, a union for which Houck had never asked Tammy’s parents to bless.

Please See PAGE A13



Pastor Dave Houck’s jobs in the forest often include renovation and cleaning projects for those who are unable to manage the tasks alone. His work ranges from installing insulation to fixing ramps or battling roach infestations.

Photos by Hannah Ridings Daily Sun



Two of Dave Houck’s helpers, Jeremy Thomas and Skylar Stackpole, cut planks of wood to put insulation in Mary Henderson’s home, a shed on her friend’s property.



Henderson looks into her Ocala National Forest home. The 10x12 converted shed contains a few personal effects, including a mattress and box spring.



National Cremation SOCIETY®



An Act of Love

PREPLAN TODAY TO MAKE THE BEST CHOICE FOR YOU & YOUR FAMILY’S TOMORROW.

ADVANTAGES FOR YOU

- Provides peace of mind
- Package & Veteran savings
- Lock in today’s prices
- Safeguard against inflation

ADVANTAGES FOR FAMILY

- Lets them know your wishes
- Keeps insurance & savings intact
- Eliminates emotional overspending
- Avoids last minute decisions

Learn more about your options & the benefits of preplanning at one of our upcoming

FREE SEMINAR LUNCHEONS

DEMSHAR’S

1101 Main Street
Lady Lake, FL 32159

Mon. 12/23, Thurs. 12/26, Fri. 12/27
10:30 AM

RED SAUCE

1000 Canal Street
The Villages, FL 32162

Mon. 12/23, Tues. 12/24, Fri. 12/27
11:00 AM

TEXAS ROADHOUSE

745 N US Highway 441
Lady Lake, FL 32159

Mon. 12/23, Thurs. 12/26, Fri. 12/27
2:00 PM

CARRABBA’S ITALIAN

650 US Highway 441
Lady Lake, FL 32159

Tues. 12/24, Thurs. 12/26, Sat. 12/28
10:30 AM



CALL TODAY TO RSVP
(352)289-8920

Reservation required. Limited seating available. First time adult attendees interested in cremation.

From our family to yours —



We want to wish you and yours a joyous holiday season on behalf of everyone at Napolinos.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation for the trust you have placed in us! Staying true to our mission to bring you a unique and delicious experience, we have deepened our conviction to maintain this trust!

Thus, we are excited to announce our

Grand Re-Opening Celebration
January 3rd

Our expertise in the kitchen is matched only by the high quality of ingredients we put in every dish — Farm to table recipes that include natural chicken, milk fed veal, hand-crafted sausages and meatballs, premium quality artisan cheeses and meat, specialty crafted homemade sauces & locally sourced produce!



Napolinos

FAMILY OWNED & OPERATED

Thank you to all in the community for your continued support! We are not affiliated with any other restaurant in The Villages® community, Ocala or anywhere else in Florida. We are a family owned & operated one & only original since 2016!

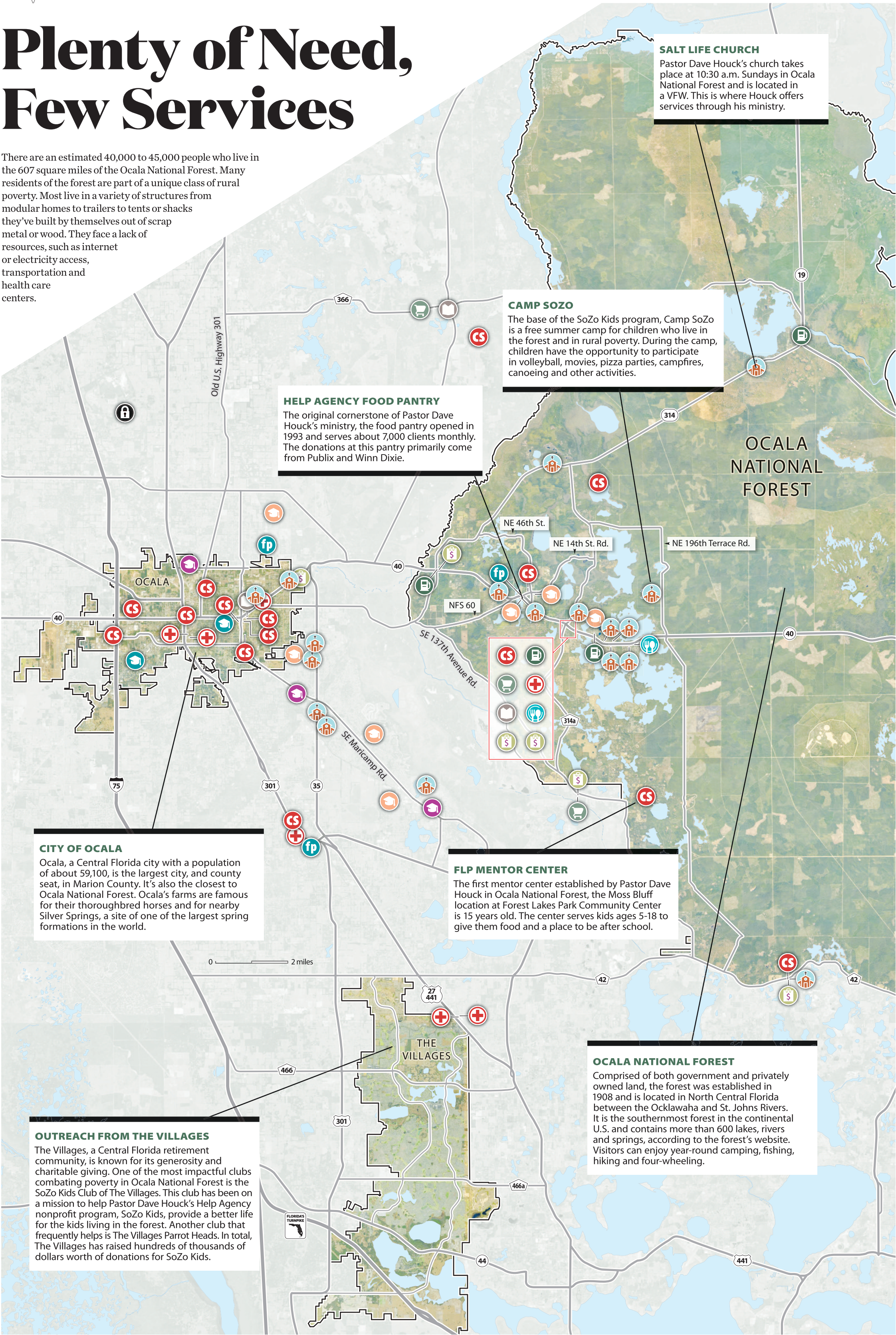
Still taking reservations for Christmas Eve & New Year’s Eve.
For any questions, call us at 352-399-6825

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Plenty of Need, Few Services

There are an estimated 40,000 to 45,000 people who live in the 607 square miles of the Ocala National Forest. Many residents of the forest are part of a unique class of rural poverty. Most live in a variety of structures from modular homes to trailers to tents or shacks they’ve built by themselves out of scrap metal or wood. They face a lack of resources, such as internet or electricity access, transportation and health care centers.



SALT LIFE CHURCH
Pastor Dave Houck's church takes place at 10:30 a.m. Sundays in Ocala National Forest and is located in a VFW. This is where Houck offers services through his ministry.

CAMP SOZO
The base of the SoZo Kids program, Camp SoZo is a free summer camp for children who live in the forest and in rural poverty. During the camp, children have the opportunity to participate in volleyball, movies, pizza parties, campfires, canoeing and other activities.

HELP AGENCY FOOD PANTRY
The original cornerstone of Pastor Dave Houck's ministry, the food pantry opened in 1993 and serves about 7,000 clients monthly. The donations at this pantry primarily come from Publix and Winn Dixie.


CITY OF OCALA
Ocala, a Central Florida city with a population of about 59,100, is the largest city, and county seat, in Marion County. It's also the closest to Ocala National Forest. Ocala's farms are famous for their thoroughbred horses and for nearby Silver Springs, a site of one of the largest spring formations in the world.


FLP MENTOR CENTER
The first mentor center established by Pastor Dave Houck in Ocala National Forest, the Moss Bluff location at Forest Lakes Park Community Center is 15 years old. The center serves kids ages 5-18 to give them food and a place to be after school.

OCALA NATIONAL FOREST
Comprised of both government and privately owned land, the forest was established in 1908 and is located in North Central Florida between the Ocklawaha and St. Johns Rivers. It is the southernmost forest in the continental U.S. and contains more than 600 lakes, rivers and springs, according to the forest's website. Visitors can enjoy year-round camping, fishing, hiking and four-wheeling.


OUTREACH FROM THE VILLAGES
The Villages, a Central Florida retirement community, is known for its generosity and charitable giving. One of the most impactful clubs combating poverty in Ocala National Forest is the SoZo Kids Club of The Villages. This club has been on a mission to help Pastor Dave Houck's Help Agency nonprofit program, SoZo Kids, provide a better life for the kids living in the forest. Another club that frequently helps is The Villages Parrot Heads. In total, The Villages has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of donations for SoZo Kids.

Graphic by Alexandria Mansfield, Reid Brown and Adam Rogers, Daily Sun


Gas stations 
Gas stations are frequent along State Road 40 and often within walking distance of each other. They can be scarce in less populated areas of the forest. Many gas stations also accept EBT cards and double as grocery stops.

Libraries 
Marion County Commissioner Carl Zalak said it was an important project to put a public library in the forest. Before this, the closest library with free internet access was in Ocala and difficult to get to without transportation.

Community Services 
Many government agencies are a 20-minute drive from the forest. The sheriff's office and Department of Motor Vehicles have locations in Silver Springs. The state Department of Children and Families is in Ocala.

Groceries 
The closest grocery store for many people in the southwest edge of the forest is a Winn Dixie on State Road 40. Other than this spot, some shop for frozen dinners and snack foods at gas stations and dollar stores.

Schools 
One elementary school is in Ocala National Forest, but there are no high schools on the southwestern side of it. There are a few schools adjacent to the forest, but most Marion County schools are closer to Ocala.

Churches 
Unlike government agencies, churches are spread throughout Ocala National Forest and are another source of help for many of its residents. The churches are a beacon of community for many.

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT



Photos by Hannah Ridings | Daily Sun

Left: Pastor Dave Houck, center, prays over Thanksgiving dinner beside his wife, Tammy, at his home at Camp SoZo in Ocala National Forest. The meal included fried turkeys for his more than 20 family members.

Above: Christmas comes early in the Houck household, and family stockings were hung on the wall on Thanksgiving.

Continued from Page A11

Today the Houcks live in a three-bedroom trailer with their son, Aaron, and a nephew at Camp SoZo, a 72-acre property he leases from the federal government. Houck built a treehouse nearby for his seven grandchildren.

During the summer, the free camp allows children to stay in a dorm while canoeing, watching movies, sitting by the campfire and chowing down on pizza, ice cream and s'mores.

Three more of Houck's children also live at camp full time. They're joined by, among others, Rick and Karen McKeever, two retirees who "are like parents" to Houck and his wife, living in a motorhome; Jeremy Thomas, who was invited by Houck after serving prison time for killing his mother's abusive boyfriend; and Jabari Woodard, a SoZo summer camp graduate who is now youth pastor for Houck's Salt Life Church.

Houck's family spent Thanksgiving sitting around two turkey fryers full of oil while some of his sons jump-started a child-sized four-wheeler over and over again. The strong smell of burning gasoline battled with the frying turkey's scent.

In the end, the turkey's sizzling skin attracted mosquitos, and Houck kept his .40 caliber handgun in the mesh

side pocket of a camping chair after getting a call that a bear was headed his way.

He and Tammy spent the afternoon regaling some of their kids gathered around the fryers with tales of the early days of their marriage. Even though Houck was broke, he managed to buy an engagement ring and wedding band from JCPenney for \$300 on credit. When he proposed in an Olive Garden, they celebrated with a cannoli.

The rattlesnake he caught, skinned and marinated for Tammy to cook when they were newlyweds is still a sore subject for Houck, who came home to find his hard work thrown out in the dirt driveway. Tammy said she wasn't going to cook snake then and she still wouldn't do it today.

A Family Mission

Houck landed on the idea of a food bank while sorting food for homeless AIDS victims in California. Back in the forest, though, he was making \$4.25 an hour mowing lawns to provide for his own family, which included a pregnant wife.

It was his mom, Sue, who kept it all running, he said.

"I tried to close the pantry four or five times in the late '90s," Houck said. "She just wouldn't let me."

Now, Houck drives a box truck to Winn Dixie and Publix

three times each week to pick up donations for about 7,000 clients monthly.

"Think that's a lot of food?" he said, pointing to a mostly full load one recent morning. "It's not. It'll be gone by the end of the day."

The people who hand out food at the pantry are just as poor as those receiving it, he said.

"My mother ran it a lot more efficiently because she was there every minute," he said. "That was her life."

Houck lost his mom 11 years ago. But her impact lives on.

"She was a saint," said Missy McFarland, Houck's cousin. "She kept it all going and made it what it was."

McFarland spent a lot of time at the Houcks' house until she moved to California at age 6. When she came back to the forest five years ago at age 39, Houck helped her recover from

years of drug addiction and prostitution, she said.

"He led me to God, and that's what saved my life," she said. "The whole SoZo program helped me have an outlet to feel normal again when I didn't see a future for myself."

Now, she does what she can to help her cousin and sees what he's up against.

"The forest needs more resources," McFarland said. "Even getting a job or doing homework needs to be online now ... but what if you don't have electricity or internet?"

A Forgotten Flock

Houck's tough-guy persona melts away when he talks about his children, both those he's raised and the hundreds to come through the SoZo Kids program.

Please See NEXT PAGE

Single Pay Whole Life Insurance*
SAVE 10%!

PRCUALife
Life Insurance & Annuities
Member Benefits

Christmas Special 2019

Richard Turkiewicz, FFO
(321) 377-3295 | Richard@Turkiewicz.com
PRCUA.ORG/CHRISTMAS-SPECIAL-2019

*Available for ages 2 weeks to 15 years and 5 months

ACCIDENT? INJURED?

Available 24/7 for a FREE Consultation

GLOVER LAW FIRM
(352) 205-4495

Gordon J. Glover
Attorney at Law

561 Fieldcrest Dr, The Villages, FL 32162
www.GloverLawFirm.com

HEMORRHOIDS

Don't suffer with hemorrhoids when there is a simple cure. The procedure takes only a few minutes of your time to receive a lifetime of comfort.

Specializing in Hemorrhoids and Other Anal and Rectal Disorders

MaoHao "Charlie" Han, M.D.
Board Certified
General Surgeon

All patients are treated with kindness and understanding as everyone fears pain.

**753-1612
323-8868**

Advanced Gastroenterology & Surgery Associates

**13838 US Hwy. 441, Lady Lake, (Behind Billy's Café)
8110 CR 44 Leg A, Leesburg**

AFFORDABLE DENTURES & IMPLANTS®

705 N. 14th St. | Suite 101

Matthew Agnini, DDS
GENERAL DENTIST

WE OFFER MORE THAN JUST DENTURES!

- EXTRACTIONS
- IMPLANTS
- IV SEDATION
- DENTURES & PARTIALS
- SAME DAY DENTURE REPAIRS
- FREE CONSULTATIONS

10% OFF
DENTURES & EXTRACTIONS*

AFFORDABLE DENTURES & IMPLANTS®

MATTHEW AGNINI, DDS | GENERAL DENTIST

AFFORDABLE DENTURES & IMPLANTS - LEESBURG II, P.A.
705 N. 14TH ST. SUITE 101
LEESBURG, FL 34748

FOR MORE INFO CALL
855.895.1587
EXPIRES 12.31.2019

Offer good only at Affordable Dentures & Implants - Leesburg II, P.A., Matthew M. Agnini, DDS, General Dentist. *10% discount good on dentures and extractions with purchase of New Denture Wearer Package, EconomyPlus or higher. Printed coupon must be presented at time of initial payment and cannot be combined with any other coupon, discount or prior order. Offer may change or end without notice. Limit one coupon per person. Offer expires 12.31.19. THE PATIENT AND ANY OTHER PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR PAYMENT HAS A RIGHT TO REFUSE TO PAY, CANCEL PAYMENT, OR BE REIMBURSED FOR PAYMENT FOR ANY OTHER SERVICE, EXAMINATION, OR TREATMENT THAT IS PERFORMED AS A RESULT OF AND WITHIN 72 HOURS OF RESPONDING TO THE ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE FREE, DISCOUNTED FEE, OR REDUCED FEE SERVICE, EXAMINATION, OR TREATMENT. 20254-

AFFORDABLEDENTURES.COM

NEW TO THE VILLAGES COMMUNITY!

NONSURGICAL FACELIFT

Before After

Join us for a FREE Seminar

Bring a Friend and Receive a FREE Medical Grade Facial*
* \$99 Value

LEARN HOW TO UNLOCK THE MIRACLE WITHIN YOU

PLATELET RICH PLASMA THERAPY (PRP)
Drawn from your own body. Treatments Include: • Joint Pain Relief by injecting into the affected site
• Promotes Hair Growth in men and women • Anti-Aging & Wrinkle Reduction for the face & neck
• Enhance Cosmetic Procedure

Tuesday, December 31st @ 1pm
Holiday Inn Express and Suites, 1205 Avenida Central North, Lady Lake
Call 352-900-2645
Lunch will be served. Seating is very limited, so call NOW to reserve your seat!

Also Included in Seminar: INTIMATE HEALTH AWARENESS

- O-Shot (for women) - Treats stress urinary incontinence, vaginal dryness, sexual dysfunction, and more!
- P-Shot (for men) - Cutting-edge sexual rejuvenation and enhancement with firmer, larger, and longer-lasting erections.
- Bio Identical Hormone Replacement Pellets

REINVENT Me
Plastics • Aesthetics • IV Lounge

Luis A. Alvarado, MD, ESQ
Obstetrics/Gynecology
Certified Hormone Replacement Provider
Head of Aesthetics

D.R. Chester, PA-C
Dermatology

One Seminar Attendee will win a FREE Biote Pellet Insertion

13696 US Hwy 441, Suite 100, Lady Lake, FL 32159 | 352-900-2645
Info@ReinventMeToday.com | ReinventMeToday.com

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Continued from Previous Page

Some of the kids Houck serves in the forest are the first high school students in their families — not the first high school graduates, the first students.

At his Sandy Acres mentorship center on Dec. 9, no child went home from the annual Christmas party empty-handed.

Houck's Salt Life Church claims a congregation of about 100 that meets in a VFW building.

Before a Sunday service, his helpers put black curtains around the edges of the room to cover the war paraphernalia, but they can't mask the smell of stale cigarette smoke coating the paneling.

It's all hands on deck at a quarter after 9 a.m. before the Help Agency's three vans bring in the churchgoers.

Snack tables are set with pastries and biscuits and gravy. A welcome table serves newcomers jars of honey next to a box accepting donations. The church doesn't ask for offerings.

As speakers start to play the first contemporary gospel songs of the day, the setup crew is rewarded with Subway breakfast sandwiches.

As God's creatures, everyone is beautiful to Houck — and he makes sure to tell them so. He greets his parishoners with high fives, handshakes and hugs while coaxing smiles from the kids.

He nods his head as he listens to the day's problems — medical, financial, children — and tries to get his flock moving in the direction of the folding chairs after the last van rolls in.

The service begins with a booming command from Houck for everyone to find a seat and finish their breakfasts.

Services start off with praise reports, and people timidly raise their hands to give thanks for a fruitful doctor's visit or good news from family members.

"I went to the cardiologist Wednesday — he says my heart is doing fine," one man announced.

"That's the stuff right there, man," Houck responded. "Great job. What else?"

"I had the tumor taken out of my neck," a woman called "Tinker" said. "The whole outside of it was benign, the center was malignant. Since

they took it out in one piece, it wasn't exposed, so no chemo, no radiation."

A few people clap, and one man whoops.

"My brain is back in my head, not in my ear," she continued with a smile, "and I'm good to go back to work."

More people clap.

Houck then calls on one of his own family members.

"I praise God for the wonderful world, and God is good," said Aaron Houck, the couple's 26-year-old son.

The prayer request section follows, and people wave wildly to ask for the pastor's prayers.

"Just a good friend of mine, his salvation and some peace," a woman requested.

"I had one text in," Houck said. "The Johnsons said they would not make it this morning, but they wanted to give a praise report. John's doctor visit did well this week, six months and his blood work came back great."

For more than three years, The Daily Sun has followed the Johnson family journey through financial struggles and medical crises as John Johnson, father of four and husband to Jenny, had to have a heart transplant. Jenny called Houck the family's "emotional and spiritual support."

"He's still battling CMV (a common virus)," Houck told the congregation, "but it's under control now, so prayer requests for that and a niece who is going to have a baby any day — the first baby. You know the Johnsons drive all the way from Belleview now, so for them to be here at all is a pretty cool thing, but it's good for them because they got a new house. If you'd seen them before, this is a really good thing."

The sermon today is about Moses, a man who was hated even while he was on the verge of performing miracles.

It's a story Houck holds close to his heart. Not everyone appreciates his family's sacrifice, and he'll never forget being cursed at for bringing the wrong flavor of Pop-Tarts in a food delivery.

One place where Houck is always welcomed with enthusiasm is prison.

For about a year, he's been participating in Xtreme Solutions, a faith-based program for about 400 men at Marion Correctional Institution in



Pastor Dave Houck prays for his congregation's needs at Salt Life Church in Ocala National Forest. The church claims a congregation of about 100 that meets in a VFW building.



Nine children surround Houck after school outside the Sandy Acres mentor center. The kids frequently run around and at Houck in an attempt to earn his attention.



Photos by Hannah Ridings | Daily Sun

Houck begins his sermon about Moses at Salt Life Church in Ocala National Forest. The sermon was part of Houck's "Legends and Legacies" series.



Houck shakes hands with an inmate at Marion Correctional Institution. Houck ministers to the prisoners through a faith-based mentorship program called Xtreme Solutions.

Ocala. It focuses on preparing prisoners for release back into society and is structured like a church.

"Dave can touch us because he's like us — a big man with a goatee could be in here with us," said inmate Rogelio Perez.

"You walk the walk, you don't just talk it," another one added.

"After you showed your commitment to us, how could we not be committed to you? How could we not be committed to Christ? How could we not?" asked another. "It gives us hope," said one more.

Each positive comment brought cheers of "Amen" around the room.

Please See NEXT PAGE

SUNDAY BRUNCH 10AM - 2PM

COCKTAILS · SPECIALTY OMELETS · SHRIMP & GRITS
SURF & TURF · FRENCH TOAST · EGGS BENEDICT · AND MORE



L PALMER LEGENDS Country Club

1635 PALMER WAY
750-4499

MON - SAT 11AM - 9PM
SUNDAY DINNER 2PM - 9PM

FREE Bloody Mary
With purchase of a
Brunch entrée.

Must present coupon at time of purchase. Expires 12/31/19.

Medical, Physical Therapy & Chiropractic Care

Are You Being Overcharged? We Can Save You Money!



Effective Solutions For:

- Sciatica • Knee Pain • Degenerative Discs
- Neck Pain • Chronic Pain • Auto Accidents
- Back Pain • Shoulder Pain • Numbness & Tingling
- Neuropathy • Spinal Stenosis • Arthritis



Dr. Chad Rose, D.C.
Clinic Director

Dr. Sanford Epstein, DO/Medical Director, Dr. Catherine Christenson, DNP/APRN



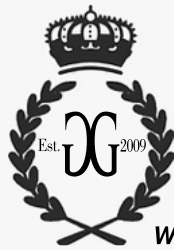
ROSE WELLNESS CLINIC
WE LISTEN, WE CARE, WE GET RESULTS

**NO-OBLIGATION
FREE
CONSULTATION**
Call (352) 775-2180 now to schedule

**PREFERRED
MEDICARE
PROVIDERS**

352.775.2180
WWW.ROSEWELLNESSCLINIC.COM

910 Old Camp Rd., Suite 92, Lake Sumter Landing™
The Villages, FL 32162 (next to Winn Dixie)



**Royal
Dental**
at The Villages

Where Everyone is Treated Like Royalty

- Nitrous Oxide & IV Sedation
Dentistry Available
- 0% Financing
(Some restrictions apply)

- ALWAYS FREE:**
- Second Opinion
 - Implant Consultation *Must present legible x-rays
 - Full Mouth Rehabilitation Consultation

NEW PATIENT SPECIALS!

**Comprehensive
Exam (D0150)**
**Full Mouth
X-rays* (D0210)**
\$59 **

**New patients only. Must present this ad at time of appointment. Expires 12/31/19.

**Regular Cleaning
(D1110)**
**Comprehensive
Exam (D0150)**
Full Mouth X-rays* (D0210)
\$69 **

If perio is present (D4341), a fee adjustment is applicable. **No insurance (D4910). *New patients only. Must present this ad at time of appointment. Expires 12/31/19.

**Zirconia
Crowns**
(D2740)
\$650 **

**New patients only. Must present this ad at time of appointment. Expires 12/31/19.

Implants (D6010) (Base Only)
**Regular
Size Implants* No Mini
Implants**
\$850 **

**New patients only. Must present this ad at time of appointment. Expires 12/31/19.

**We Offer
Implant
Over-dentures**

**New patients only. Must present this ad at time of appointment. Expires 12/31/19.

*Copies or emails of x-rays are an additional cost. **Valid only when insurance coverage & discount plans not applicable.

**GRAND
OPENING**
in Palm Ridge
Jan. 2020!

We take
most PPO
Insurance



**Accepting current & new patients
at BOTH locations**

8493 S.E. 165th Mulberry Ln.
The Villages, FL 32162
(352) 751-4446

Just off Hwy 42 (Next to Mulberry Recreation Center,
in the Mulberry Grove Professional Plaza)
GERMAN GAITAN, DDS, FAAID, FICOI

Open: Mon-Thurs
9am-5pm



from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Love Comes Full Circle

Pastor Dave Houck has helped people come out of prostitution, overcome drug addiction, escape gang life, find a home after prison and prepare for life outside Ocala National Forest. They are his friends, relatives and even nearly-adopted children, and they are the first to talk about what he has done for them. They all have one thing in common: They would not be where they are now without Houck. — *Alexandria Mansfield, Daily Sun*



Jabari Woodard

Woodard is a 22-year-old College of Central Florida student and youth pastor at Salt Life Church.

Since he was a child, Jabari “Bari” Woodard said he was told he would be a pastor one day. Although he hasn’t had a typical pathway to preaching, Woodard is well on his way to that goal. When Woodard first met Houck and arrived at Camp SoZo in 2014 as a teen, he thought the camp would be a fun summer getaway. The first event of the day for the Jacksonville kid wasn’t a cheesy icebreaker: It was digging up the septic tank. “My first impression of him was, ‘This dude’s crazy,’” Woodard said. “He’s a very headstrong type of dude, so when you meet him, you do what he says.” It only took a week for Woodard to warm up to the crazy pastor from the forest though. Now, Woodard has been living on the camp with Houck for about three years. Woodard grew up homeless. At the time, he said he didn’t recognize it for what it was. “Mom wouldn’t let us know we were homeless or going to a food shelter,” he said. “We were just having a sleep-over in a car.” As he got older, Woodard said he recognized the cycle of poverty more, and his mom taught him not to be a product of their environment. This came to a head for his family, he said, when his brother was shot walking in the street to a convenience store. His brother lived, and Woodard, who was 15, remembers seeing his brother bleeding and hearing a voice tell him “You’re not meant for this. Get out of here.” Woodard is now the youth pastor at Houck’s church, Salt Life, in the forest, and he’s in school for a pastoral degree.



Photos by Hannah Ridings | Daily Sun

Jeremy Thomas

Thomas, 25, went to prison at 16 years old and came to live with the Houcks when he got out eight years later.

“He hit my mom. No one is going to hit my mom.” When Jeremy Thomas, of Palatka, was 16 he said these words to a Putnam County Sheriff’s deputy. The next eight years of his life were spent in prison for manslaughter with a weapon, putting his life on pause from August 2011 until June 2019. In his home, Thomas said he felt a need to become “the man of the house” and protect his mother and younger sister from his mom’s abusive boyfriend. When a fight between the two adults escalated and Thomas got in between them, he chose to use the pocket knife he carried for protection. After the boyfriend died from his wounds, Thomas’s life changed forever. “I wasn’t a bad kid,” Thomas said. “I never got in trouble before this.” Six months before getting out of prison, Thomas met Houck. “As soon as I told him my story, he just wanted to help me,” Thomas said. Houck saw Thomas’s plan might not be the best to propel him toward success, and invited him to live at the camp and help out. The offer, Thomas said, seemed like a better way to start life over again. Thomas – who earned certifications in HVAC, carpentry, masonry, plumbing, electrical and tiling while in prison – said he wants to be an underwater welder and will start school at Marion Technical Institute in the spring. He still has four years of probation – including a monthly fee – but he’s teeming with a desire to prove himself and make up for lost time. “Meeting Dave was the push I needed,” he said.



Kristen Henderson

A 20-year-old University of Florida senior, Henderson spent three years of her childhood living in the forest being mentored by the Houcks.

Dave and Tammy Houck are a few of the best the forest has to offer, said Kristen Henderson, a 20-year-old senior at the University of Florida. “There aren’t a lot of good things out there,” she said. Henderson first met the Houcks when she was living in Ocala National Forest in fourth grade and began going to the mentor center near her house. “They were really nice and open to any kid that was there,” she said, “even the problem kids.” Despite leaving the forest at 12 years old when her grandma died, Henderson said the Houcks still had a profound impact on her life. “I can’t even imagine the personality I would have had I not been in the center,” she said. “It showed me how people can help others, even without a lot of time or money.” Henderson said she looks back fondly on the experiences the Houck family helped to give her, especially a trip to Epcot. It meant a lot to her and other kids who lived so close to the Disney theme parks and had never gone to one, she said. Faith has also been a characteristic in Henderson’s life, in part because of her time with the Houcks. She is very involved in her church and goes to Bible study four or five days a week. “Any time they’re on my heart now, I pray for them,” Henderson said. Aside from improving her childhood, Henderson said the Houcks have influenced her career choices. Henderson plans to pursue her master’s degree in social work after graduating in August and wants to work with foster kids.



Missy McFarland

McFarland, 39, is an assistant manager at Dollar General and mother of four sons.

Five years ago, Missy McFarland said she was living in a closet with her 3-year-old son and now-husband. She had been addicted to drugs for 15 years and a prostitute for 10, she said. She knew she was “living not a good life” but didn’t see a way out until her cousin, Houck, sent her a Facebook message offering to help her recover. At first, McFarland said she viewed the offer, which came at her mother’s urging, as a kind of intervention. Then, she saw it as an opportunity. She hopped on a plane from California to Florida with her son, leaving Enchante “Tay” McFarland behind. Most people choose to leave Ocala National Forest to get back on their feet. But McFarland, who hadn’t lived in the forest since she was 6, decided to go back to reclaim her life. She’s been sober since. Three months later, Tay followed. “My husband thanks me every day for leaving him,” she said. McFarland attributes much of her ability to change her life to Houck. She still helps Houck out whenever she can. “Whatever he asks me to do,” McFarland said, “food loads, backpacks, Christmas ... whatever he needs, he can call me.” Her latest effort has resulted in her becoming the president of the local Little League. After steering her life in a new direction, McFarland hopes to help others who might be in similar situations as hers. For now, she wants to cover up the tattoo on her neck of her former pimp’s name with a butterfly – a final transformation to match the rest of her life. “People tell me my story is powerful, but it’s not to me,” McFarland said. “It’s just my life.”