



WHERE THE REAL FLORIDA MAGIC HAPPENS

INSIDE TRACK

CATS PROGRAM CONTINUES EXPANSION

Both Davenport High School, SEU embrace the tourism program.

An education program aimed at introducing the Polk County populace to the abundant entertainment options around them continues to evolve. The program has moved from the Welcome Center to hotel front desks, on to Southeastern University – and now to the Polk County Public School District.

While today it is known as the CATS program – short for Certified Ambassadors of Tourism and Sports – it started as the HIP Program. Aimed at the tourism industry, the Hospitality Industry Professionals tour was a way for those working at front desks and chambers of commerce to experience Polk County. The program migrated from tourism staff to the staff at the Welcome Center.

“We realized that if we broadened the scope of the program, we’d broaden the positive impact,” said Justin Laferriere, the Senior Visitor Experience Manager who oversees the Welcome Center.

As CATS, the program became an innovative



training and exposure program, not just for industry-focused groups such as hotels, but for locals as well.

“Our latest studies from Downs and St. Germain reinforce what has proven true for years – that visiting family and friends remains a top reason why out-of-town visitors come to Polk County,” said Laferriere. “So every dollar spent educating the public on things to do here comes back tenfold, minimizing dollars that could be spent elsewhere. It is one of the

best returns on investment we have.”

Featuring a half-hour online course and various on-location reviews, the program eventually expanded to Southeastern University, which, in 2020, added Tourism and Hospitality Management as a major.

In all, more than 500 have completed both the online and in-person portion.

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AVELO HELPS POLK SOAR

When Avelo Airlines launched twice-weekly flights between Lakeland Linder International Airport and New Haven, Conn., on June 13, 2024, it ended a decade-long absence of scheduled commercial passenger service at the Polk County airfield. The route was modest in scale but outsized in significance for a facility that, for more than a decade, was known for cargo flights and military contractor businesses.

For Visit Central Florida, it was the payoff to years of hard work. Since the last Direct Air flight in March of 2012, staff at Visit Central Florida, in partnership with the City of Lakeland, had made it a

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ARTS ARE PART OF THE POLK PICTURE

When folks think of tourism in Central Florida’s Polk County, most often they think of visitors to LEGOLAND Florida Resort, Bok Tower Gardens visitors or teams – as well as parents and fans – coming to RussMatt or the Senior Softball Tournament of Champions.

But just like snowflakes, every visitor is different.

According to the latest report from Tallahassee-based research firm Downs & St. Germain, while 5 percent of visitors came to Polk County specifically for an arts experience, more than 30 percent visited an art gallery or museum while they were here. Add historic sites, and that percentage jumps to nearly 50 percent.

Here in Polk County, some of the larger, better known nonprofit arts and cultural organizations in the area include Bok Tower Gar-

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MASTERCRAFT EVENT EARNS AIRTIME ON WFLA

A recent event on Champions Lake was featured on WFLA. Click below for the video

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