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HAPPENINGS FROM OUR CLAY COUNTY SCHOOLS

OCTOBER 2023

## Dorothy White crosses 30-year mark at Wilkinson

By Don Coble  
don@claytodayonline.com

CLAY HILL – Hairstyles, fashion and music trends have come and gone during the past 30 years, but one thing remains the same – Dorothy White stepping into traffic to ensure Wilkinson Elementary and Junior High students arrive safely.

Short in stature but immense in fervor, White's service as a crossing guard since 1993 has made her beloved by the community.

That service was recognized recently by Sheriff Michelle Cook, who approached White before the early morning bell rang and offered her a card, a pin and a hug on behalf of the community.

Rain or shine, White continues to be a sentry for "her kids" at the intersection of Freedom Drive and CR 218. She has overseen generations of children on their commute to and from school – some even became the parents of current students. She is steadfast and excited at the prospect of overseeing grandchildren, the next generation to safely "follow in their footsteps."

"I'll be 75 (on Oct. 25)," she said. "I'm not quitting. I do this because I love the kids. I only get to see them for a short period of time, but they always make me smile."

Children haven't changed much in the past 30 years," White said. Although, some groups have been better behaved than others.

"I've had some issues with some, but I tell them I'm here to take care of you. I'm here to protect you getting across the

street," she said. "Most of the time, they say, 'Yes, ma'am.'"

She knows every child who steps into the intersection. She said this year's group of students are incredibly "adorable."

"I've got a set of triplets and some twins," she said. "They're all so wonderful. That's why I love my job."

The Wilkinson schools are in a rural area of the county, which sometimes entails crossing more than just school children.

"I crossed dogs and ducks," she said. "I've had horses and donkeys, too."

Her favorite memory was when a stray dog approached the crossing. A neighbor noticed the trotting animal and called the Clay County Sheriff's Office, fearing it was vicious. By the time the deputy arrived, the dog had plopped down beside White – sitting, staying and wagging a tail as the children crossed the busy road.

"There's a woman who walks her dog in the afternoons, but that morning she walked alone," White said. "She saw me with the stray dog. She offered to take it home if nobody claimed it. She still has that dog. His name is Murphy. When they visit, the dog runs up like he wants to hug me."

As the county grows, so does traffic on CR 218. And with that comes distracted, indifferent drivers. White said close calls

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PHOTOS BY CCSO

Dorothy White has spent the last 30 years in front of Wilkinson Elementary and Junior High, helping students cross County Road 218 to Freedom Drive.



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# Middleburg's Stilts trades banking career for education award

Economics, Government, U.S. History teacher selected as Warren Tracy Teacher of the Year

By Lee Wardlaw  
lee@claytodayonline.com

MIDDLEBURG – In a major victory for the County School District, Breyana Stilts, an Economics, Government and U.S. History Teacher at Middleburg High, was recently selected as the Warren Tracy Teacher of the Year by the Florida Council for the Social Studies.

Stilts reflected on her journey to becoming an educator, how she instilled her unique teaching style in the classroom and the significance of bringing home the prestigious award to the county where she grew up.

Stilts never taught high school before being hired at Middleburg.

"I was shocked. This was only my first year at Middleburg. After hearing that I had won the award, I was honestly kind of thrown into a loop," she said.

Stilts transitioned from a four-year career in the corporate banking world at Wells Fargo as an Account Resolution Specialist. She had only been an educator for one year prior to winning the award. She taught Intensive Reading to middle school children from sixth to eighth grade in Duval County in 2021-22.

Despite her surprise, Stilts attributed her success to the relationships she built with her students and her strong support from her colleagues.

"I built a really great relationship with my kids and had a really strong support system with the Social Studies team here, but even they couldn't prepare me for the kids' reaction (to the classes I taught)," she said.

Stilts was nominated by to students, colleagues and parents. Above all, she credited her students for the honor.

"That means they're taking the extra



STAFF PHOTO BY LEE WARDLAW

Middleburg High's Breyana Stilts emphasizes real-life scenarios, like filing taxes, budgeting, calculating deductions, planning finances, registering to vote and analyzing political platforms in her classroom.

effort. For some (students), it takes an effort just to get to school. To put in that extra effort and (take their time) to give a nomination is (impactful). They recognize how important this is to me," Stilts said.

"To me, that means they have a greater appreciation for this country's history than they did before. It means they take pride in their civic responsibilities and duties and actively participate in the community."

Stilts' teaching style is anything but traditional. She emphasizes a hands-on learning experience and ensures her students actively engage in their learning and exploration.

Instead of relying on traditional methods like textbooks and worksheets, she encourages movement and interaction in the classroom. "We don't do a lot of paper-based work or typical work that you would think of when you see a history book. We move around a lot. Yesterday, we had a gallery walk where we walked around and viewed (photographs) from the Second Industrial Revolution. We talked about the effects of communications and steel and how they influenced that (era)," she said.

Her teaching philosophy centers students at the forefront of their learning. Stilts believes that students must take charge of their education and be responsible for their learning.

"I can guide them, but they need to make it happen for themselves," she said.

Stilts' teaching style draws inspiration from her own experiences as a student. Stilts said Oakleaf High Principal Matthew

Boyack, who taught her world history at Orange Park, made an everlasting impact.

"He had such an impact on me that I still remember how I felt in the classroom. That's the kind of classroom (environment) that I want to create," she said.

Middleburg Principal Martin Aftuck, who was Stilts' Principal at Orange Park while she was a student, also played an influential role, Stilts said.

Stilts expressed gratitude for the blessing she had the opportunity to work with fellow educators who molded her teaching style.

Her economics and government coursework focuses on preparing students for real-life scenarios, like filing taxes, budgeting, calculating deductions, planning finances, registering to vote and analyzing political platforms. There is no greater honor than representing the county. "I don't think there's any greater than being able to represent (my) community," she said.

The hard work required to achieve the award is nothing new for Stilts. She earned her online Master of Library and Information Science from Wayne State in May while teaching children across Northeast Florida for the past two years. Her journey toward the award was not a one-time event but a continuing daily commitment.

"Every single day in the classroom is a testament to your teaching style. There are no missed opportunities. You have to come in every day and be ready to deliver an engaging lesson," Stilts said.



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# Daniels' inspiring tactics leads to state honor

## Orange Park teacher wins Florida Council for Social Studies Excellence Award

By Lee Wardlaw  
lee@claytodayonline.com

ORANGE PARK – Justin Daniels, a veteran educator and cornerstone of the Orange Park High community, recently earned the prestigious 2023 Florida Council for Social Studies Excellence in Teaching Award.

Daniels, a longtime Standard and Advanced Placement Social Studies teacher and department chair, has amassed a large trophy case during his educational tenure. But no honor has been bigger than this one.

When asked about his reaction to winning statewide honor, the eight-year employee leads more than 10 teachers in his department, serves as boys' wrestling and girls' tennis coach, and expresses pride for earning the recognition.

"If you get a general award, like 'Teacher of the Year,' that's great, but it's even more amazing to be recognized for working hard in a subject that you're really passionate about, something that you've really dedicated your teaching expertise and poured your life into," he said.

Daniels' journey to excellence started in the county. The homegrown teacher graduated from Middleburg High, where his former educators inspired him.

"I had an incredible educational experience (at Middleburg). I had fantastic teachers that (made me realize) that this could be a possible career path for myself," Daniels said.

The veteran educator credited his



STAFF PHOTO BY LEE WARDLAW

Justin Daniels brings a sense of excitement and honesty to challenge his students at Orange Park High to embrace learning social studies.

unique teaching style for helping him reach the big milestone.

"I approach my class every day with a sense of excitement. I'm transparent with the students. I'm honest with them," he said.

If they want to hear "stupid stories," Daniels tells them one. He replays scenes

from "Buffalo Rider," a 1978 movie where half of the plot literally involves the character "Buffalo Jones" riding a buffalo. "I try not to take everything so seriously," Daniels said. The jokes and laughter are all part of a hook to keep students engaged from the moment they walk into the classroom.

"When they walk into class, they ask, 'Are we going to see 'Guy on a Buffalo' today?' While it's irrelevant, they walked into my classroom and immediately engaged with me, which means they are ready for class. That's the whole point. I want them to be excited for class because what we're (learning) contains (immense) value," he said.

While very important, government and economics can be incredibly boring, which Daniels admits.

"Those are the two most boring classes they will ever receive," he said.

"By any means necessary" is his only option. He said both subjects will transcend the rest of his students' lives after leaving the classroom. "They're building to become active citizens and learn to manage their money. Those are two things that will impact (my students) immediately and the world around them," Daniels said.

In his classroom, "busy work" carries a negative connotation and is crossed off students' to-do lists.

"There is a negative connotation with what 'busy work' is. I don't want to fill their life with that. (Instead), it should be work that is engaging," he said.

Just ask students how they feel in his

classroom.

"Yesterday, we played a game, and a (child) said, 'Is class over?' And I said it's (already) been 40 minutes. He said, 'Man, that was so fast,' and I said, 'That's because we were doing something that is so engaging. It's not busy, it's active,'" Daniels said.

Building positive relationships that make a positive impact takes center stage.

"I went into administration for a bit, and being away from the classroom (I rediscovered) my purpose. Everything was constantly pulling me back into the classroom. I want to be amongst (the children), building positive relationships and impacting them. Social Sciences is a (subject) that will hold incredible value for the rest of their lives," he said.

Students, teachers and parents (named and anonymous) have to nominate their teacher of choice for that individual to qualify. Daniels said his students' decision to put him up for the award reflects they share the value of Social Studies with him.

"It's nice to see that they see value in this. It's (validating)," Daniels said.

Winning the Excellence in Teaching Award is not only a personal achievement for Daniels, but also reflects a storied winning tradition in the classroom in the county, he said.

"It's a testament to the long tradition of Clay County providing students with excellent opportunities, whether through social studies (or other subjects). The county's pathways to success are so immense," he said.

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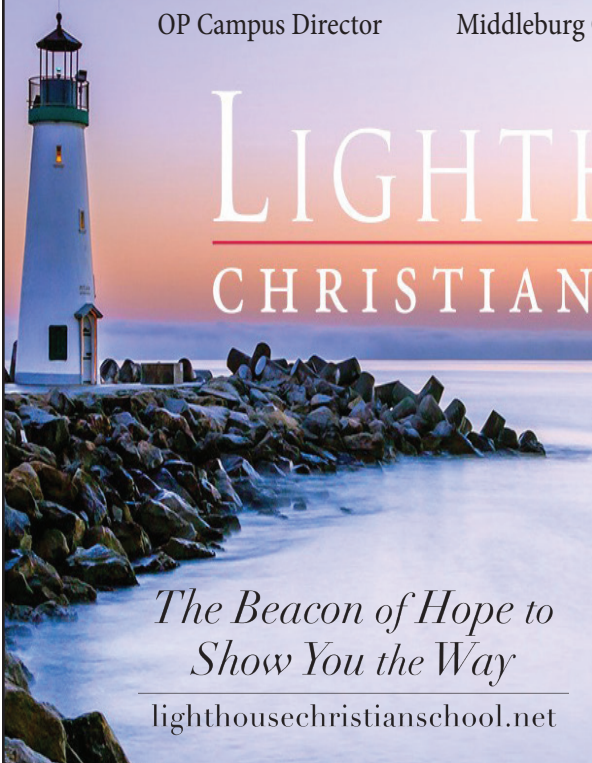


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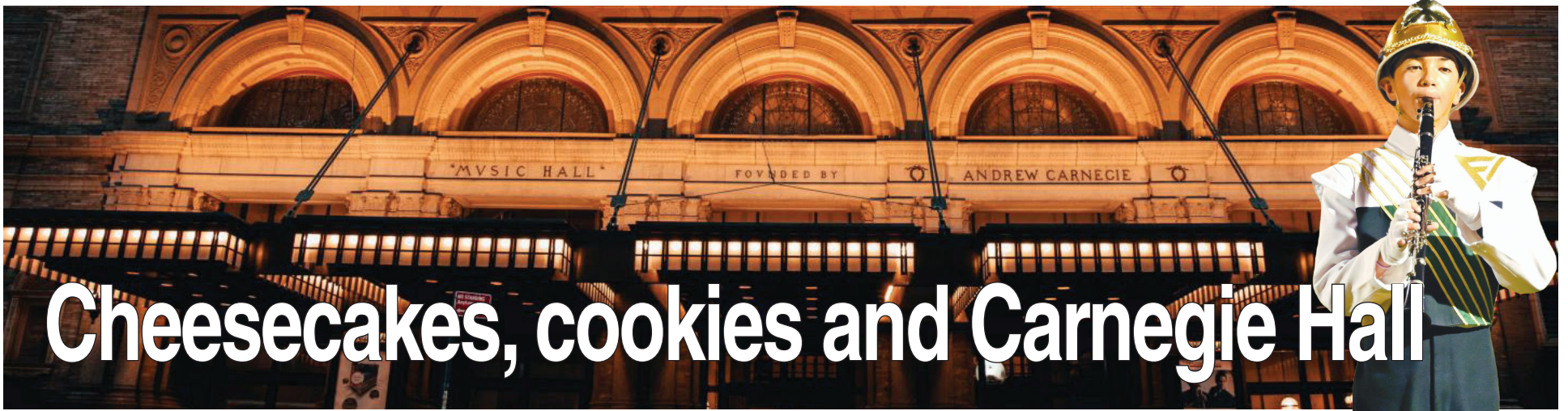


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# Cheesecakes, cookies and Carnegie Hall

## Fleming Island Band prepares for trip to New York City



By Zeinab Faraj  
For School News

FLEMING ISLAND – The Eagle Band is practicing tirelessly as they prepare to take their talents to Carnegie Hall in New York City. Nerves are running high as the adventure approaches.

Senior Kortnee, the Section Leader and Spirit Sgt. who plays the saxophone, is “overjoyed to be a part of this trip” to take on this “once-in-a-lifetime (opportunity).” Kophamer and other band members have challenged themselves to build their confidence by “sight-reading pieces of music we’ve never seen.”

When they take to the stage, Kophamer will be ready to feel the “adrenaline of the moment,” he said.

World-renowned composer David Gill-

ingham is also reportedly writing a piece that the band will perform in New York, and Kophamer is “very excited about that.”

Band One Director Alexander Buck is “absolutely thrilled and immensely proud” of band members. He believes the selection they have chosen to perform is a “testament to the hard work and dedication of our students (who have dedicated) countless hours of practice.”

The prospect of stepping onto the renowned stage has left an “overwhelming sense of excitement and anticipation,” Buck said.

Other than practicing, the obstacle of making the trip possible is fundraising. Buck said the band is “actively raising funds to support this incredible opportunity,” and he called on local businesses and community members for financial assistance.

“Your support will make a meaningful difference in the lives of our students, and together, we can make this Carnegie Hall trip a resounding success,” Buck said.

Senior and Woodwind Captain Tyler Wilkinson is “beyond excited” about taking the trip with his fellow band members. Wilkinson said playing at Carnegie Hall is an honor he will “forever cherish.” The band is “practicing tirelessly,” he said, not just for themselves but also to “make our school proud in New York City.”

The Fleming Island community is eager to show support for the band as they prime for their cross-country trip and touch up to what will be an exciting performance.

If you want to support the band, contact Buck at alexander.buck@myoneclay.net.

# Six OneClay Seniors named National Merit Semifinalists

Clay County District Schools is excited to announce that six students have been named as Semifinalists in the 2023 National Merit® Scholarship Program. Years of classroom preparation, intense studying, and outstanding test scores have prepared these students for the next level. The nationwide pool of Semifinalists, representing less than one percent of U.S. high school seniors, includes the highest-scoring entrants in each state.

These six academically talented high school seniors have an opportunity to continue in the competition for some 7,250



National Merit Scholarships worth nearly \$28 million that will be offered next spring.

To become a Finalist, the Semifinalist and a high school official must submit a detailed scholarship application, in which

### National Merit Semifinalists

Clay High School - Seyhan Bulut

Oakleaf High School - Pujan Patel

Orange Park High School - Justin Hart and Luke Rykalsky

Ridgeview High School - Nathan Bartholomew and Benjamin Lohse

they provide information about the Semifinalist’s academic record, participation in school and community activities, demonstrated leadership abilities, employment, and honors and awards received.

National Merit Scholarship winners will be announced in four nationwide news releases this spring, and we look forward to following along.

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# Students win bike lane design competition

Work will be painted on roads near their schools for Mobility Week

For School News

CLAY COUNTY – Two Clay County elementary students' artwork is getting viewed by thousands – in a different way.

The students won the Florida Department of Transportation Mobility Week Bike Lane Design Contest, and now, those winning designs are installed near Middleburg and Argyle elementary schools in recognition of FDOT's Mobility Week Partnership for Elementary School Kids.

The contest is part of an FDOT statewide initiative that promotes awareness of safe multimodal transportation choices, including bicycle and pedestrian safety. The bike lane design contest allows elementary school students to submit designs for a fun and creative bike lane symbol. Six Clay County District Schools elementary schools registered for the contest.

Argyle student Naomi Dorsey designed a colorful bicycle rider with flames from



the back tire. Middleburg student Andrea Navarro-Vasquez designed a pirate-themed bike and rider.

The winning artwork was turned into templates and delivered to the county's engineering department, and FDOT maintenance crews assisted with the thermal installation in the bike lanes. This fun symbol does not replace or cover up the original white regulation bike lane symbol. Still, it is a vibrant way to encourage discovering how active and sustainable travel choices like walking, biking, riding transit, or carpooling can reduce traffic congestion, benefit the environment, and improve community health.

Mobility Week is celebrated from Oct. 27 through Nov. 4.

PHOTOS BY CLAY COUNTY

Middleburg Elementary School student Andrea Navarro-Vasquez designed a pirate-themed bike and rider, while Argyle Elementary student Naomi Dorsey designed a colorful bicycle rider with flames from the back tire. Their works will be painted on bike lanes near their schools.



# Rings for Clay state champs



STAFF PHOTOS BY RANDY LEFKO

Clay High's girls weightlifting team got their state championship rings during halftime ceremonies recently with senior Anna Lee Harbison showing off her five state champion rings for her career.



STAFF PHOTO BY RANDY LEFKO

Retired Middleburg High girls volleyball coach Carrie Prewitt returned to her home gym after a 30-year career to be celebrated with the naming of the gym after her. Prewitt, a 30-plus year coach for the Lady Broncos, was on hand for the Middleburg vs. Fleming Island home game.

# Gym named after Prewitt; Forkum keeps Broncos

By Randy Lefko  
Sports Editor

MIDDLEBURG - Two eras of volleyball at Middleburg High crossed paths Thursday night as a former coach, Carrie Prewitt, was honored for her decades of commitment, and a new coach, Meredith Forkum, jet-bolted her team to one of the more decisive wins in her short career.

"Felt like it was like a blink of an eye and it was over," said Prewitt, who spent nearly 30 years in the Middleburg gym with a plethora of district and region titles and numerous Final Four finishes. "I was never expecting this because you don't do something like this expecting days like today."

Prewitt, who has been succeeded at the coach position by Forkum, a former player of hers and also a more recent assistant coach, noted that her lifespan has centered around the gym.

"I kind of realized the other day that for the past 30 years, I've spent more time in this building than in any building in my lifetime," said Prewitt. "Recently, I have taken time to take care of my mom, did some hiking in the final years and spent time with my kids and grandkids."

As for the celebration, which featured a ton of alums, friends and family members who flew in from around the country to share the moment, Prewitt, who was presented a huge portrait by Middleburg Athletic Director Casey Thompson and Principal Martin Aftuck, was toured around the gym to see her door display above the entrance way plus a huge banner on the outside wall of the gym's main doors.

"I hope that the things that I put into it, like the hard work, the dedication, the commitment to the players, things like that are what I hope they think about when they walk through the doors," said Prewitt. "If they put those kinds of expectations on themselves knowing the history of the athletes before them, then that's something I would be proud of."

For Forkum, in a county rivalry game with a 7-1 Fleming Island High team that also featured a first-time, alum coach in former Fleming Island High standout Amy Schermerhorn, the game was a typical great rivalry game in the Bronco gym that made her mentor smile.

"Coach Prewitt always prepared us for games like this in her long history here and I think this year's team is very aware of that," said Forkum, who saw her team, led by hitter Connor Rahn's 12 scoring kills with Brooke Forkum, Meredith's junior daughter, adding nine at the net, to a 3-0 win over the Golden Eagles (now 7-2). "Those two are our team leaders and they showed why. Sophomores Kate Lowery, five kills, and Camden Rahn also played well in the very loud gym."

Middleburg's record improves to 8-3; ranked fourth in 5A, with recent wins over Orange Park and Oakleaf in county play with the teams' three losses; 7A-Doral Academy (now 8-4, 20-8 region finalist last year), 3A-Trinity Christian Academy (now 14-2, 25-4 last year region finalist) and 5A-Jensen Beach (now 13-2, 29-3 5A state champion last year), coming in the Nike Invitational Tournament in Tampa early in the season.

For Fleming Island, junior Savannah Jackson tapped out eight scoring kills to lead the Golden Eagles with Emily Topp and Rauly Eason adding four a piece; Eason with three blocks also.

Schermerhorn has guided her Golden Eagles to wins over Fletcher and Creekside thus far with Christ's Church Academy with their lone loss to Buchholz on August 24. Eason and Jackson have been the 1-2 punch at the net with 81 and 64 kills apiece with Samantha Rupert at 54 kills.

On the schedule for Fleming Island is Bishop Kenny (4A Final Four last year, 5th in 4A 2023), Orange Park and Ridgeview to end September with top contenders. The Ridgeview game will be a good benchmark game as Middleburg and Ridgeview are dominating their district



Middleburg High retired volleyball coach Carrie Prewitt gets a portrait of herself prior to Broncos game against Fleming Island in commemoration of the gym being named Carrie Prewitt gymnasium. Below: Former Middleburg High volleyball stand out Meredith Forum, a recent assistant coach under Carrie Prewitt, takes over for the program and brings many of Carrie Prewitt's fiery sideline exchanges to the huddles.



4-5A but will not play each other in regular season play and Fleming Island is a solid late-season common foe. Ridgeview, 8-1, ranked third in 5A, with astounding play up front from Haley Robinson, finished with a silver medal at the JJVA River City Classic with the Panthers losing a 2-1 match to Trinity Christian Academy, ranked 13th in Florida and fourth in 3A. The second-place finish was the highest ever for Ridgeview in the prestigious tournament.

"We are getting great play in our defensive back with our Oakleaf transfer Sydney Little," said Ridgeview High coach Steven Henry. "She was a little tentative at first coming in as a senior and not wanting to take a spot, but she is too good (20-25 digs a game) to keep off the court."

Ridgeview advanced through the tournament with wins over 2A-Christ's Church Academy (now 7-5, 2A Final Four last year), Satellite (now 9-4), a Puerto Rico team; Colegio Evangelico Capitan Correa, and 4A-Bolles (7-5). The Puerto Rico team was the defending tournament champion, but was without the size of last year, according to Henry.

Ridgeview is led at the net by Robinson's 81 kills and 52 blocks with Brianna Adams adding 45 kills and Kennedy Baugh with 16 blocks.

Ridgeview coach Steven Henry's schedule gets no rest with a road game to

4A-Bishop Kenny (8-4) on Thurs., Sept. 21, a Friday noon game against Episcopal and then Fleming Island at home Tues., Sept. 26.

"We want to control our games to our strengths," said Henry. "I've seen a few Fleming Island games, but no Middleburg games yet. I try to keep that one a secret so we don't get ahead of ourselves. We block big up front and execute our scoring plays."

Around the county, also at the JJVA River City High School Classic, Orange Park was with one loss until Middleburg came to the Raiderdome, but the Lady Raiders rebounded to finish at 4-1; wins over St. Augustine, Keystone Heights, Belleview and Effingham (GA) (8-2 overall), Clay finished 2-3 with wins over Keystone Heights, St. John Paul II (4-7 overall), Keystone Heights finished 1-4; win over Sandalwood (2-9 overall), Oakleaf finished 4-1; wins over Nease, Sandalwood, St. John Paul II and Newberry (8-3 overall).

St. Johns Country Day School sits at 5-3 with three recent wins over Beaches Chapel, Duval Carter and Harvest Community. The Spartans, led by Brynn White's 63 kills and 15 blocks set up for a gauntlet week with Global Outreach Charter (6-3) on Mon., Sept 18 with Orange Park on Tues., Sept 26 and Ridgeview on Wed., Sept. 27, both on the road.



**Rep. Garrison helps celebrate American Founders' month**

Students at Ridgeview High in Ms. Moore's American Government classes were able to hear directly from Representative Sam Garrison. Donald, a student in Ms. Moore's class, sent an email to Representative Garrison inviting him to come speak about laws and the new cell phone policy in Florida schools this year. Way to go Donald and thank you Representative Garrison for speaking with #OneClay students at RHS about the legislative process in Florida.



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**White**  
from page 1

have become too common.

"We have problems just about every day," she said. "Some of these people are parents that just won't slow down. They're dropping off their kid at the elementary or junior high. I get upset because they know it could be their child that I'm crossing here."

One morning, a pickup truck sped through the school zone, and White raised her arm to shake her finger at the driver. He immediately slowed, rolled his window, stuck his head out, and yelled, "I'm sorry!"

White has tremendous love for "her kids." That's why the lockdowns from the COVID-19 pandemic took such an emotional toll. Classrooms transitioned online, so her job was put on hold. "I cried when that happened," White said. The hardest part, she said, was not seeing her little friends or saying 'Goodbye. Have a good summer.' to the sixth graders who were moving on to high school.

"Those were the toughest days," she said. "When we came back, I was the happiest person ever. I got to see a bunch of my kids, and I got to see new faces who were starting school. It was such a delight."



Sheriff Michelle Cook surprised White with a pin, card and a hug to commemorate her service.

Anyone driving west along CR 218 before or after school should look for White. Wave and she'll wave back. Just watch your speed and pay attention because she plans to be there for a long time.