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Welcome to the 2nd Annual Best of the Lake!



By Katrina Elsen
Editor-In-Chief

Okeechobee residents take pride in their work and in their businesses and it shows. They inspire loyalty in their workforce and in their customers who are proud to tell others about their favorite businesses and business owners.

Lake Okeechobee News is pleased to salute that dedication through our Best of the Lake Awards.

The first Best of the Lake Awards ceremony was held in 2022. Thanks to an impressive outpouring of support from the community and the enthusiastic turnout at the awards dinner, we knew it was something that should become an annual event.

The Best of the Lake contest asked Lake Okeechobee News readers to nominate and vote for their favorite Okeechobee businesses.

These businesses do more than sell their products or services. They donate to fundraisers, coach ball teams and plan community events. They also pay the taxes that support local government and pay for infrastructure.

Favorites were chosen in 91 categories. The contest also recognizes the Local Person of the Year. Seven individuals were nominated for the 2023 Local Person of the Year: Andrea Medelin, Dowling Watford, Gregg Maynard, Janice Pietro, Leah Suarez, Shirlean Graham and Tyrone Smith.

Reader participation in the contest was impressive. The 2023 Best of the Lake contest attracted more than 50,000 online votes during the month of April.

Our businesses are the backbone of the community. As the oldest continuing business in Okeechobee, the Lake Okeechobee News is proud to salute them!

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Your hometown nonpartisan newspaper

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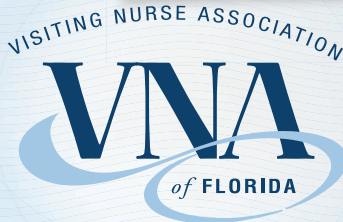
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Person of the Year



Leah Suarez

WINNER

The 2023 Okeechobee Local Person of the Year has faced many challenges in her life, and she's on a mission to help others overcome their own challenges.

While she didn't plan to make Okeechobee her home, it has become her village.

Leah Suarez describes herself as a "Navy brat." She was born in Charleston, South Carolina. She said she was brought to Okeechobee at the age of 14 "against my will and better judgment." When she left for college, she vowed never to return.

As fate would have it, she fell in love with Okeechobee native Joe Suarez. The couple married and made their home in Okeechobee, where they raised four sons and a daughter. They also have 10 grandchildren.

Joe and Leah are currently helping to raise four of their grandchildren. After the tragic death of his wife in 2017, Matthew Suarez and his children moved back in with his parents.

"It's always a zoo," said Leah. "It always has been.

We've fostered and adopted children."

In addition to managing the busy household, Leah, who earned a Bachelor's degree in Speech and a Master's degree in Nonprofit Management and Leadership, has worked in government and social service for more than 30 years.

In 2015, after a near-death experience, she was inspired to start Our Village Okeechobee. "I was having crazy dreams after surgery," she explained. She woke up to write a document that would be the foundation of a new non-profit organization. When she recovered from surgery, she had a meeting with friends and asked them to help. They helped with monetary donations and with their time.

Her original idea included a Children's Museum – "We're not there yet." The organization started in a spare bedroom, then moved into a tiny Cracker house on Southwest Second Avenue. In 2021, Our Village moved into a larger space at 205 N.E. Second Street. The organization is currently remodeling their Arts and Education Center and just hired a full time teacher.

The nonprofit helps with "whatever it takes" to help people live a better life. That might include enough food to tide them over and assistance in applying for other resources.

Our Village is funded by donations and grants and by money raised through the sale of donated household items. Leah spends a lot of time grant writing. This year, she has written about \$1 million in grant applications but adds she doesn't know how many of those grants will be funded.

The organization's goal is to give those in need "a hand up, not a hand out." That includes tutoring for children who are struggling, and as well as for adults. "We'll help anybody study for anything."

Through a partnership with a health clinic, they offer health care to those who in need. They also help with mental health problems.

Our Village recently added Nuestro Pueblo (Our Village in Spanish) to offer help with immigration issues.

"I'm here on a mission to help people," said Leah. "I'm going to do whatever it takes to get them to do whatever it takes."

Gregg Maynard

RUNNER-UP



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Matt Pearce

Runner-Up:
Woody Larson

DAIRY

WINNER

Sutton Milk

Runner-Up:
Larson Dairy

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AGRICULTURE
SUPPLIES**

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Runner-Up:
Rabon's Country Feed

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Eli's Western Wear, Inc

Runner-Up:
Rabon's Country Feed

TAXIDERMIST

WINNER

Florida Trophy Gators

Runner-Up:
McGee Taxidermy

FACES & PLACES

BANK

WINNER

MIDFLORIDA

Credit Union
Runner-Up:
SouthState Bank

BARBER SHOP

WINNER

Fifth Street

Barber Shop

Runner-Up:
All Clean Cuts

**BEAUTY SALONS &
ESTHETICIANS**

WINNER

Sacred Lounge Spa

Runner-Up:
The Purple Orchid

EMPLOYER

WINNER

Fast Break Inc

Runner-Up:
Walpole Feed & Supply

FUNERAL HOME

WINNER

**Buxton and Bass
Okeechobee Funeral
Home & Crematory**

Runner-Up:
Seawinds Funeral Home
& Crematory

FACES & PLACES

HAIR SALON

WINNER

Bad Apple Salon

Runner-Up:
Stafford's Salon

**INSURANCE
AGENCY**

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Gretchen Robertson

Ins Agcy Inc

Runner-Up:
Pritchards and Associates,
Inc.

LAW FIRM

WINNER

Glenn J Sneider Law

Runner-Up:
Fee, Yates & Fee

**LOCAL NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION**

WINNER

Our Village

Runner-Up:
Martha's House

**LOCAL PUBLIC
OFFICIAL**

WINNER

Noel Stephens

Runner-Up:
Celeste Watford

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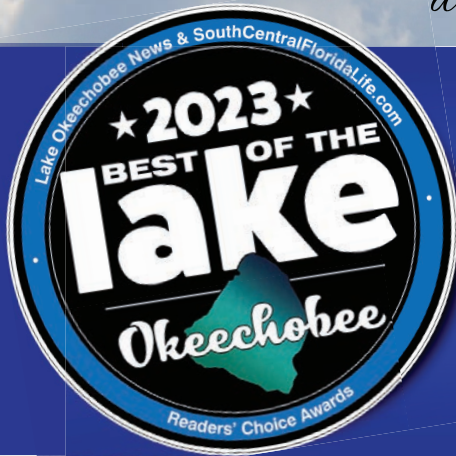
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Lake Okeechobee News presents the...

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*for Outstanding Contribution
to the Agriculture Industry*



PHOTO COURTESY FLORIDA AGRICULTURAL HALL OF FAME

Sonny Williamson
WINNER



Frank “Sonny” Williamson is a visionary leader in Florida agriculture, known for his commitment to responsible environmental stewardship of the land. He was an early proponent of conservation easements, which protect the land from future development while allowing the farmer or rancher to continue producing food.

The Williamsons worked with the University of Florida to research the management of phosphorus used in fertilizer for pastures. The ranch tracks the phosphorus that comes onto the ranch as feed and fertilizer and the phosphorus that leaves the ranch when beef cattle go to market. Through this careful management, Williamson Cattle Company shows a net reduction in phosphorus in the watershed.

In 2005, Sonny Williamson was inducted into the Agriculture Hall of Fame, which called him “arguably Florida’s — and the nation’s — premier agro-ecologist.”

A fifth-generation Floridian, Williamson was born in

Clearwater on Dec. 15, 1929. After graduating from the University of Florida with a degree in agriculture, he went to work on his father’s ranch, Williamson Cattle Company, in Okeechobee. He devoted much of his career to Williamson Cattle, building it into one of the state’s largest cattle producers. The company now also owns land in Texas and Alabama.

Ever mindful of agriculture’s interface with the natural environment, Williamson has been a firm believer that agricultural decisions should be made based on sound science. In the 1990s, when he served as a governing member and chairman of the South Florida Water Management District, he persuaded the district to fund agro-ecology research conducted by the University of Florida on Buck Island Ranch at Archibold Biological Station in Lake Placid.

Williamson earned a high level of respect among agriculturists, environmentalists and urban leaders and is known for his moderation and fairness. He

has held leadership positions with the Okeechobee County Farm Bureau, the Okeechobee Soil and Water Conservation Board, the Florida Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, the Florida Cattlemen’s Foundation and the University of Florida SHARE Council.

In 2004, Williamson Cattle Company was awarded the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association National Environmental Stewardship Award, presented by the Resources Conservation Service of the USDA.

In 2003, Sonny Williamson was named the Lancaster Sunbelt Farmer of the Year from Florida. That same year he received the Commissioner’s Agricultural-Environmental Leadership Award from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the Florida Environmental Stewardship Award from the Florida Cattlemen’s Association. He has been named an honorary member of Future Farmers of America as a result of his ongoing support of the organization. Sonny Williamson’s special talents as a negotiator and mediator were recognized by the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium in 2000 when he received the Ninth-Timer Powers Dispute Resolution Leadership Award.

Williamson’s progressive vision has helped keep agriculture strong and viable in Florida. He will be long remembered for his efforts to improve agricultural management to sustain the industry and protect the natural resources on which it depends.

FACES & PLACES

NAIL SALON

WINNER

Bella Rose Day Spa & Salon

Runner-Up:
Pro Nails

PHOTOGRAPHER

WINNER

Brandi Watford Photography LLC

Runner-Up:
Janelle (Folk) Photography LLC

PLACE TO WORSHIP

WINNER

Christ Fellowship Church

Runner-Up:
First Baptist Church

REAL ESTATE AGENT

WINNER

Lori Mixon

Runner-Up:
Emma Brown

REAL ESTATE COMPANY

WINNER

Mixon Real Estate Group

Runner-Up:
The Tucker Group, LLC

VETERINARY HOSPITAL

WINNER

Northlake Veterinary Hospital

Runner-Up:
Okeechobee Veterinary Hospital

FOOD & DRINK

ASIAN RESTAURANT

WINNER

Bucio Chinese

Runner-Up:
Omino Japanese Restaurant

BAKERY

WINNER

SweetyT's

Runner-Up:
Nutmeg's Cafe

BAR

WINNER

Parrott Island

Runner-Up:
Good Spirits Lounge

BBQ

WINNER

Blue Moon BBQ

Runner-Up:
Blitzkrieg BBQ & Grill

BREAKFAST

WINNER

Ding A Ling Deli

Runner-Up:
Pogey's Family Restaurant

BURGER

WINNER

Ding A Ling Deli

Runner-Up:
Okeechobee Livestock Market

FOOD & DRINK

COFFEE

WINNER

Serenity Coffee Shop

Runner-Up:
Dunkin

DELI/SANDWICH SHOP

WINNER

Ding A Ling Deli

Runner-Up:
Nutmeg's Cafe

DESSERT

WINNER

SweetyT's

Runner-Up:
Nutmeg's Cafe

MEXICAN RESTAURANT

WINNER

Los Cocos Mexican Restaurant

Runner-Up:
Taqueria Yanez

OUTDOOR DINING

WINNER

Parrott Island

Runner-Up:
Good Spirits Lounge

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STEAK

WINNER

**Speckled Perch
Steakhouse**

Runner-Up:
Parrott Island

GO & DO

**ATV/
POWERSPORTS**

WINNER

ARS Powersports

Runner-Up:
Okeechobee Outdoors, LLC

**CHILDREN'S
ACTIVITIES**

WINNER

OXA Sports

Runner-Up:
Ray's Combat Kickboxing

**FISHING TACKLE &
BAIT SHOP**

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Fast Break Inc

Runner-Up:
Gerrard's Tackle Shop &
Guide Service

GO & DO

HOTEL

WINNER

**Hampton Inn
Okeechobee - Lake
Okeechobee**

Runner-Up:
Days Inn & Suites by
Wyndham

**PLACE TO
PLAY BINGO**

WINNER

**Seminole Brighton
Casino**

Runner-Up:
American Legion

RV PARK

WINNER

**Okeechobee KOA
Resort**

Runner-Up:
Silver Palms RV Resort

**SHOOTING
RANGE**

WINNER

**Center Mass
Gun Range**

Runner-Up:
OK Corral Gun Club

**HEALTH &
FITNESS**

**ASSISTED LIVING/
SKILLED NURSING
FACILITY**

WINNER

**Grand Oaks of
Okeechobee**

Runner-Up:
Okeechobee Health Care
Facility

CARDIOLOGIST

WINNER

Shakoor Arain, MD

Runner-Up:
Iqbal Ahmed, MD

CHIROPRACTOR

WINNER

Platt Chiropractic

Runner-Up:
Iqbal Ahmed, MD

**DENTIST/
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WINNER

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Runner-Up:
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Runner-Up:
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FAMILY DOCTOR

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Runner-Up:
Dr. Ludmila Mishelevich

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Okeechobee Fitness Center
Runner-Up:
Premia Fitness

HOME HEALTH CARE

WINNER

Visiting Nurse Association of Florida
Runner-Up:
All About Your Caregivers

HOSPICE

WINNER

Hospice of Okeechobee
Runner-Up:
Treasure Coast Hospice

HOSPITAL

WINNER

HCA Florida Raulerson Hospital
Runner-Up:
Cleveland Clinic Martin Health System

HEALTH & FITNESS

LOCAL PHARMACY

WINNER

Heartland Discount Pharmacy
Runner-Up:
Publix

MASSAGE THERAPIST

WINNER

Sacred Lounge Spa LLC
Runner-Up:
The Purple Orchid

PHYSICAL THERAPY

WINNER

Physical Therapy of Okeechobee
Runner-Up:
New American Physical Therapy

URGENT CARE CENTER

WINNER

Okeechobee Urgent Care
Runner-Up:
MD Now

HOME & DECOR

ELECTRICIAN

WINNER

Schoonmaker Electric LLC
Runner-Up:
Bass Electric

FENCING/GATES

WINNER

Adron Fence
Runner-Up:
Chobee Fencing, LLC

FURNITURE STORE

WINNER

Morgan's Furniture
Runner-Up:
Badcock Home Furniture & More

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Runner-Up:
JT Guttering Systems Inc

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Runner-Up:
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Runner-Up:
Okeechobee Home Inspection - Mike Feltrin

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Shutters & Gutters

Runner-Up:
Awnit

LAWN CARE

WINNER

Nunez Lawn Care & Landscaping

Runner-Up:
BLB Lawn Care, Bo Bowers

PEST CONTROL

WINNER

Highland Pest Control

Runner-Up:
Ace Pest Control, Inc.

HOME & DECOR

PLUMBER/ PLUMBING SERVICE

WINNER

Wise Choice Plumbing

Runner-Up:
Daniels Plumbing

SELF STORAGE COMPANY

WINNER

Okeechobee Store-N-Lock

Runner-Up:
Lake and Trail USA Storage

SIDINGS/ WINDOWS/ ROOFING

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Runner-Up:
Big Lake Roofing & Repairs LLC

RV, BOAT & AUTO

AUTO BODY SHOP

WINNER

Lehman Auto Body

Runner-Up:
Gilbert Collision Center

RV, BOAT & AUTO

BOAT REPAIR

WINNER

Lakeshore Marine Inc

Runner-Up:
Cam's Mobile Marine Service LLC

BOAT STORAGE

WINNER

Lake and Trail USA Storage

Runner-Up:
Okeechobee Store-N-Lock

CAR SALESPERSON

WINNER

Tommy Shorter

Runner-Up:
Bobby Steirert

CAR WASH/AUTO DETAILING

WINNER

Rio Car Wash

Runner-Up:
Auto Spa Mobile Detailing and Pressure Cleaning LLC

NEW CAR DEALERSHIP

WINNER

Gilbert Chevrolet

Runner-Up:
Gilbert Ford



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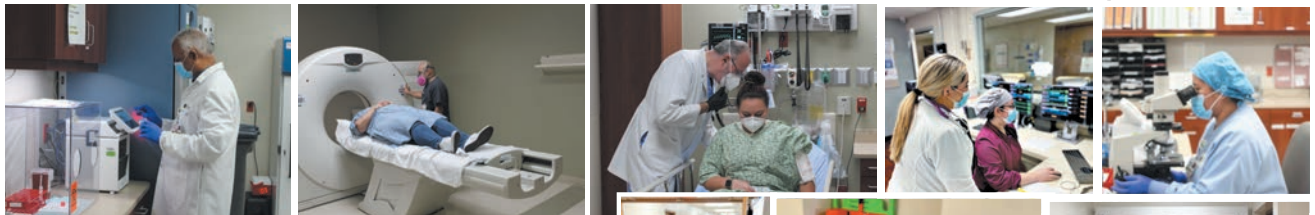
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RV, BOAT & AUTO

OIL CHANGE

WINNER

Quik-Change Oil & Lube Services Center

Runner-Up:
Gilbert Ford

RV DEALER & REPAIR

WINNER

Florida Outdoors

Runner-Up:
N/A

TIRE SALES & SERVICE

WINNER

St. Lucie Battery & Tire

Runner-Up:
Tire Zone

USED CAR DEALERSHIP

WINNER

Gilbert Ford

Runner-Up:
Commuter Cars of Okeechobee

SHOPPING

BOUTIQUE/GIFT STORE

WINNER

Lillies & Lace Boutique

Runner-Up:
Trigg Co Designs

SHOPPING

CELL PHONE SALES & SERVICE

WINNER

Verizon Wireless Zone

Runner-Up:
Okeechobee Cell Phone Repairs

CONVENIENCE STORE

WINNER

Fast Break Inc

Runner-Up:
Wawa

DRIVE-THRU CONVENIENCE STORE

WINNER

Thirsty Cow Drive Thru

Runner-Up:
Big O Drive-Thru

FLORIST

WINNER

Pat's Floral Design & Gifts

Runner-Up:
Countryside Florist

HARDWARE STORE

WINNER

Ace Hardware/W&W Lumber of Okeechobee

Runner-Up:
The Home Depot

SHOPPING

LOCALLY OWNED MEAT SHOP

WINNER

The Meat Shack

Runner-Up:
Mosquito Creek Grocery

PET STORE & SUPPLIES

WINNER

Okeechobee Feed

Runner-Up:
Pet Supermarket

WESTERN WEAR

WINNER

Eli's Western Wear Inc

Runner-Up:
Tractor Supply Co





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Our winners are:

Gilbert Chevrolet

• **New Car Dealer**

Gilbert Collision Center

• **Auto Body Shop**



BOBBY STEIERT
Best Salesperson



Tommy Shorter
Best Salesperson



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STK# NC3334
\$45,494



**2023
Chevrolet
Silverado 1500
Custom Crew Cab**
STK# NC3375
\$41,003



**2023
Chevrolet
Silverado 1500 LT
Crew Cab**
STK# NC3377
\$47,334



**2023
Chevrolet
Silverado 1500
WT Crew Cab**
STK# NC3378
\$42,077

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