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JULY 2026

Dogs Make It Better

Shari Ajayi trains service animals for those living with PTSD

Finding Your Patriot

That Revolutionary War ancestor might be hiding in plain sight

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ON THE COVER

Canine Comrades for Veterans & First Responders turns rescue dogs into service dogs.



Photo by
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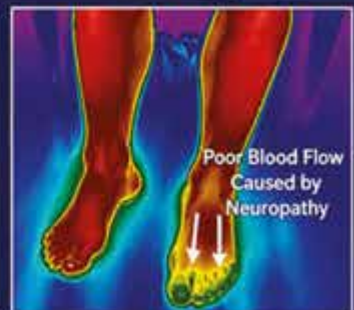
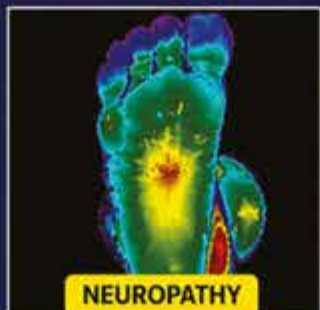
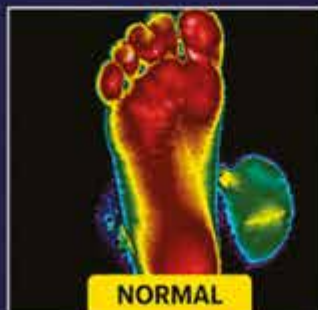
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Shani Ajayi is the kind of person who likes to fix things. When she sees a problem, she sets out to do something about it. A great many military veterans and first responders experience PTSD, which can lead to other problems. Shani found a way to take action. She founded Canine Comrades for Veterans & First Responders.

"My brother retired from the Army with severe PTSD," Shani said. "I saw firsthand how it affected both him and our family. One day, I received a contact from somebody on Facebook. I didn't know this person, but they were in a veterans' group with my brother. They reached out, 'I've been on his profile, and I think you may be related to him. He's not doing well.' I found my brother at a hotel in Grand Prairie.

On my way there, I called the police, and they were there when I arrived and took him to a hospital for therapy. A service dog was later recommended. Our family has always loved dogs. So it seemed like a good idea. But it's very difficult to find affordable dogs with adequate training."

That's when Shani realized there had to be a better way. "I started researching and realized if this was what my brother was experiencing while trying to find a trained service dog, everyone else was having the same problem. And if you find a well-trained dog, it can cost \$30,000 plus."

Canine Comrades for Veterans & First Responders takes rescue dogs from local animal shelters and puts them through extensive training to become true service animals, to help veterans, police officers and firefighters with PTSD navigate daily life. It's rigorous training, with exacting standards, and not every dog they take into the program is cut out to complete it and be certified. But those dogs find useful roles as well.



"Some of the dogs we take in have trauma of their own that has to be resolved first," Shani explained. "We do basic reconditioning and obedience training. The obedience training is five weeks, and we take a very gentle approach. They have to overcome any insecurities they have about cars or other stressors. Remy, one of the dogs we're working with now, had a problem with doors. Now she's doing much better." After a 90-day evaluation, including a temperament test and an AKC Good Citizenship test by an approved tester, dogs can advance to phase two — Public Access Training. "We train in a house environment around people, taking dogs into public spaces like Walmart or Cedar Valley College to learn how to interact with crowds and unexpected obstacles. Remy's plan is to be a facility dog at the DeSoto Police Department when she graduates from our program.

"We don't just train the dogs. We also train the people, so we've already been meeting with the DPD officers who will be working with Remy. I remember when two big officers, a captain and a chief,



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came in full uniform to discuss the selection of Remy's new handler. Remy came out to greet, and the officers were like, 'Oh, hi, baby!' She's going to help with community interactions, going to crime scenes where there are children, to comfort them, and to schools and public events, to help explain what the police do." As Commander of American Legion Post 656, Shani recently nominated one of the DPD's finest, Corporal Montemayor, for Law Enforcement of the Year. "He won district and is now up for state," she said. "He is incredibly forward-thinking with his mental wellness initiatives."

The dogs who go on to phase three training learn specific tasks to help veterans and first responders deal with the effects of PTSD. As certified service animals, they can go anywhere their human goes, except an operating room. The first service dog they graduated was named Cypher. "The vet who received Cypher wasn't able to leave his house. He struggled to

go to the garage, which is set up as his mancave," Shani said. "Cypher was trained to watch his six and do crowd control. He provides emotional support and acts as a blocker, a physical barrier to keep other people at a distance that feels safe to the veteran. Cypher helps him process reclaiming his mancave and neighborhood. In February 2026, the veteran won the first annual Cypher Award at the Circle of Comrades event. The award was presented by the manager of DeSoto Walmart for being an exemplary team. Now the veteran is on a new mission with a new life because of Cypher."

"As of February 2026, 17 veterans a day were taking their own lives," Shani shared. "When I started this, we were focused on veterans. Then I realized that first responders deal with a lot of the same issues. Trauma is trauma. The statistics on first responders are harder to come by, because there are those who go undocumented. They survive their careers but lose the battle of PTSD."



There's a shortage of qualified trainers. "Service dog training takes a lot of time, and not every dog that starts the training can qualify. Some organizations have over a two-year waitlist. So I'm also training youth who have aged out of the foster care system to work as trainers. It helps with the shortage and gives them a valuable skill. Our board has also expanded with a new director of strategic growth, a chaplain and our directors of vocational development. With a generous grant we received from Walmart in Lancaster, Texas, we are saving lives together as a community." **NOW**



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The good news is that this is one of the most answerable questions in genealogy. Here's how to find out.

Before opening any database, write out everything you know about your family, and talk to older relatives. Family stories aren't evidence, but they are excellent starting points. "Great-grandma always said we had someone at Valley Forge" is absolutely worth following up on.

From there, build a documented chain from yourself back through each generation. Every link needs a record to support it — birth certificates and marriage licenses for recent generations, then census records, church registers, wills and land deeds as you push back into the 1800s and 1700s. FamilySearch.org is free and a great first stop. Your local library may also provide free access to Ancestry.com and Fold3.

Here's something many people don't know: You don't need a soldier in the family to qualify as a Revolutionary War descendant. Both the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) recognize a broad range of qualifying service, including civil service roles, signing loyalty oaths, paying special war taxes and providing material support to the cause. Far more Americans have qualifying ancestors than they realize.

Two federal record collections are your most powerful tools. Compiled Military Service Records (CMSRs) are searchable for free on FamilySearch and document roughly 80,000 individual soldiers from muster and pay rolls. But the real treasure is

the Revolutionary War Pension Files, available on Fold3 and Ancestry.com. Veterans applying for pensions decades after the war had to prove their service, so they wrote detailed narratives describing battles, naming comrades and often listing wives and children. A single pension file can answer years' worth of genealogical questions.

Also check the DAR Ancestor Database at dar.org and the SAR Patriot Research System at sar.org before you do anything else. A relative may have already proven part of your lineage, and an approved post-1985 DAR application can count as proof for the generations it covers.

The standard for proving ancestry is higher than just finding a promising name. You need evidence of the parent-child relationship at each generation, not just evidence that someone existed. Keep copies of every document, and note exactly where you found it. Family tradition, no matter how vivid, is not accepted as proof by lineage societies. The records have to do the talking.

Somewhere in the pension files and muster rolls, in old wills and church registers, your family's chapter in this country's founding may be waiting. All it takes is curiosity, patience and a willingness to follow the evidence wherever it leads. Happy hunting! **NOW**

Resources:

1. *Daughters of the American Revolution*. "Using the Genealogical Research System (GRS)." dar.org/research.
2. *National Society Sons of the American Revolution*. "Apply in 4 Easy Steps." sar.org/how-to-apply.
3. *FamilySearch Wiki*. "Revolutionary War Pension Records and Bounty Land Warrants." familysearch.org.
4. *Fold3*. "Revolutionary War Pension Files." blog.fold3.com.



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Zoomed In: Adam Walker

It's been a long run. For the last nine-and-a-half years, I've had the honor of telling hundreds of your stories: mayors, teachers, students, athletes, authors and artists. I've met 7-year-olds and centenarians. You've amazed me and informed me and shown me what a varied and vibrant community our three cities make. Our libraries, schools and nonprofits make life better. Our kids are amazing, and our elders have wonderful stories to share.

This is my last note to you, but you'll be in good hands. Keep sharing your stories. Keep building the life you want for yourself and your children and grandchildren. Keep welcoming newcomers and celebrating those who've invested their whole lives. I'll still see you at the shops, parks and events.

— Adam Walker
SouthwestNOW Editor



Joy Siler, administrator for the Cedar Hill Museum of History, welcomes visitors.



Mayor Rachel Proctor and City Councilors Ken Waters and Crystal Chism join members of the Asian community at DeSoto's AAPI Festival.



Edgar Bustillos takes Kitty for a walk and treats before taking her to the groomer, so she'll only hate him for a couple of hours.

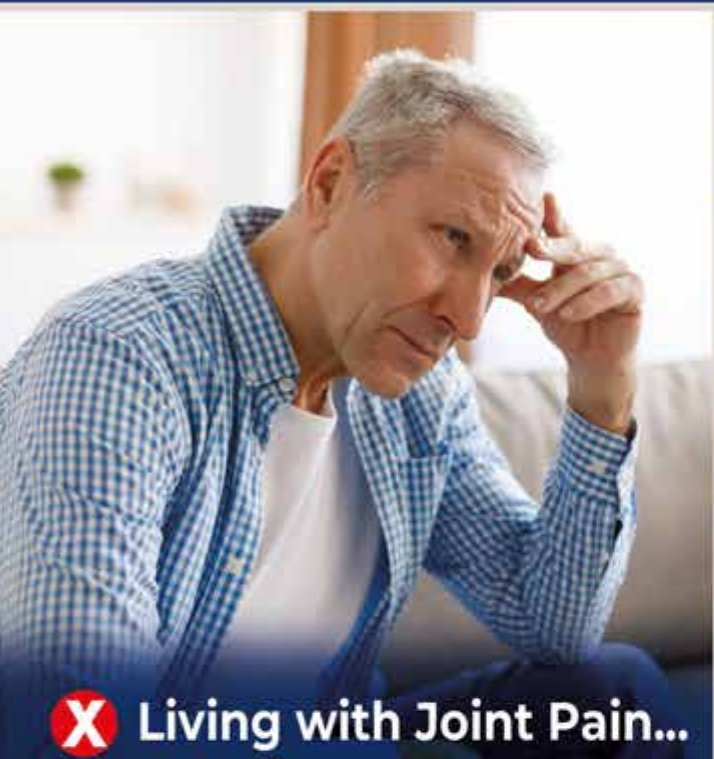


DeSoto City Council Member Pierette Parker of NexMetro engages the community in conversation.



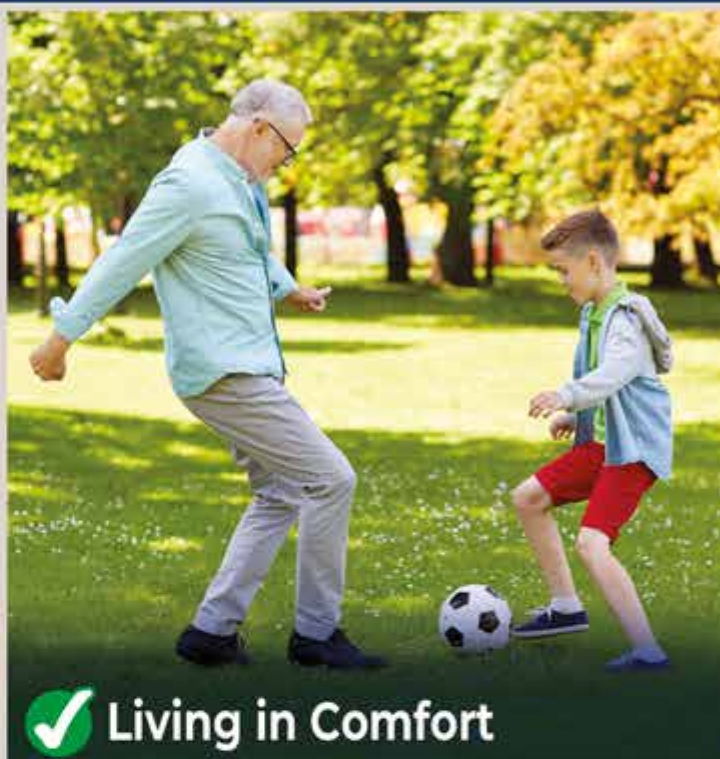
Cecila Villalobos and Cecilia Meza read books about sharks at the Duncanville Library.

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Zoomed In: Vincent T. McDaniel

By Adam Walker

Vincent T. McDaniel is an officer with the Cedar Hill ISD police. He took a few minutes out of his day to stop by the Traphene Hickman Library, to catch up on some newspaper reading in the periodical room on the second floor. "I enjoy reading the newspaper, but it's something I haven't done for a while," he explained while returning his paper to the racks. "There's a convenience store that usually has a few newspapers, and he'll set one aside for me. But I haven't been by recently. This is the quiet part of the year, when school's out, so I decided to stop by here and catch up on what's happening. It's a nice library."



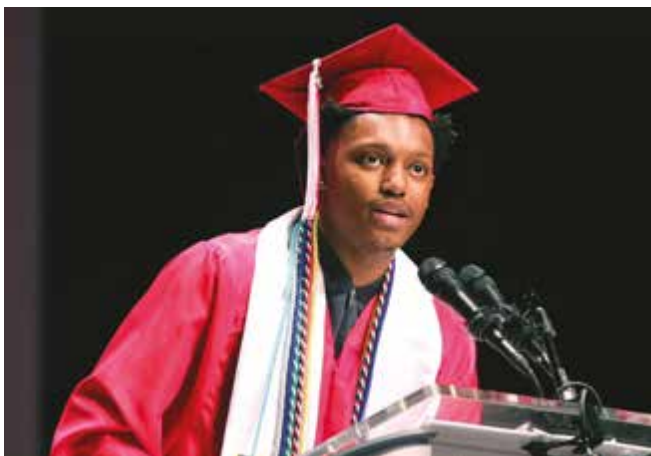
Val McCoy and her daughter, Sophie, arrange beautiful flowers at DeSoto Florist.



The Cedar Hill Chamber of Commerce kicks off this season's Farmers Market with smiles all around.



Jabarie Aval cools off with a snow cone from Snow on the Rox in DeSoto.



Cedar Hill High School Class of 2026 Vice President Lathan Kidd addresses his fellow graduates.



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Bringing the best of the community home.



— By Emma McKay

With your little ones out of school, summer poses a fun time to make long-lasting family memories. Whether you're going on vacation, to the local pool or staying in your own backyard, there are a few health hazards to be aware of, so you can keep your family safe while creating joyous memories.

DEHYDRATION

Dehydration occurs when your body loses more fluids than you take in. Because the human body is 78 percent water, it needs around 64 ounces a day to function. If not properly hydrated, you can experience dizziness, fatigue, headaches and even heatstroke.

When spending the day in the sun, you lose a lot of water through sweat, so keep a water bottle close at hand. Even though you may feel refreshed while swimming in cool water, you can still become dehydrated. Listen to your body. The earliest sign of dehydration is feeling thirsty. Other signs to look for are dry mouth/dry lips, flushed skin, loss of appetite, dizziness and headaches. To prevent dehydration, drink lots of water and occasional sport drinks to replenish your electrolytes.

DROWNING

Playing in the water can be a great way to beat the Texas heat, but the risk of drowning is present. According to the CDC, there are an estimated 4,000 unintentional drowning deaths in the United States each year.

Drownings can occur in a matter of seconds in as little as 2 inches of water, so be sure to keep an eye on your children while they play, and keep backyard pools fenced off when you're not around. If you have a pool, ensure the drain cover is in place and isn't cracked, so no one gets caught while swimming near it. Young children should always wear appropriate life jackets that support their weight and keep their heads above water.

Enroll your children in swimming lessons. Not only is this an important safety skill to have, but they'll also get to socialize with kids their age. If you don't know how to swim, check if anyone offers adult swimming classes in your area.

There's no shame in learning later in life. Finally, learn CPR. If the worst-case scenario occurs, it's important to know how to keep your loved ones safe until medical professionals arrive.

SUNBURNS

While most sunburns will only last for a few days, frequent burning can lead to rapidly aged skin and skin cancer. Even if you have melanated skin, you're still at risk of sunburn and its long-term effects.

Wear sunscreen daily. Ultraviolet rays can still get through even on overcast days. When spending an excess amount of time outside, reapply your sunscreen every 90 minutes. Before going into the pool, let the sunscreen completely dry on your skin, so it doesn't immediately wash away. You can also wear protective clothing such as wide-brimmed hats, UV ray filtering sunglasses and long-sleeved shirts or pants.

If you get sunburned, there are a few ways to treat it. Apply cooling creams — such as aloe vera or hydrocortisone — to the affected areas. Cover your burned skin when you must be outside, and take cool showers to keep the pain at bay. Bathe in oatmeal or baking soda. Leave the blisters alone, so you don't worsen your skin's healing process.

HEAT INJURIES

Dehydration, sunburn and prolonged exposure to the sun can lead to heat-related injuries, such as heat exhaustion, heatstroke, heat cramps and heat rashes. According to Blackstone Career Institute, "most heat-related injuries start with dehydration from spending too much time in the sun."

To avoid heat illnesses, take the same precautions you would to avoid sunburn and dehydration. Limit your time outside between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., when the day is at its hottest. Find activities to make memories with your kids away from the sun, such as going to an indoor water park, playing glow-in-the-dark mini golf, exploring a children's museum or having an under-the-stars picnic. **NOW**

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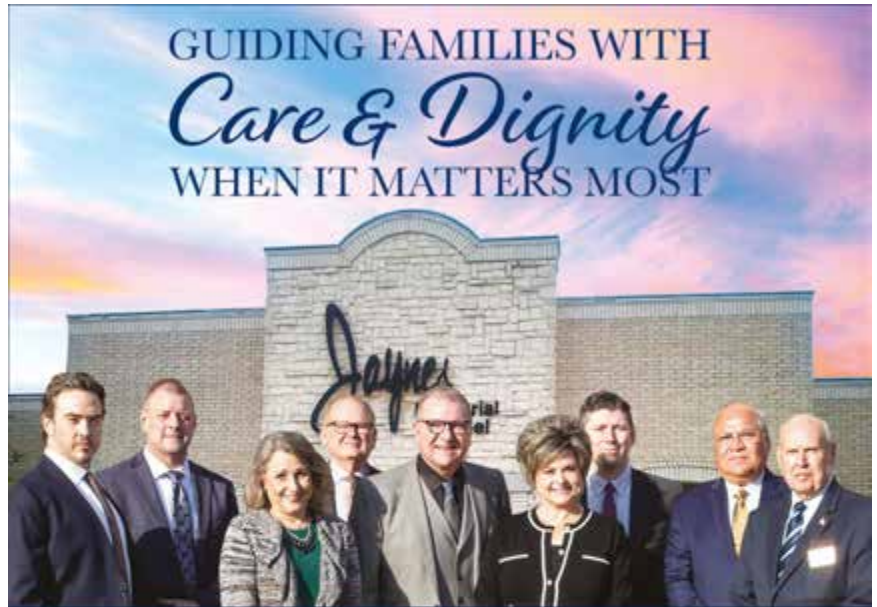
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HAPPY
4th
of July



Independence Day calls for outdoor gatherings filled with friends, family and festive foods that capture the spirit of summer. Whether you're hosting a backyard barbecue or heading to the park, these recipes can help make your Fourth of July picnic truly memorable. **NOW**

American Flag Fruit Cake

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 tsp. baking powder
1/4 tsp. salt
1/2 cup unsalted butter, softened
1 cup granulated sugar
3 large eggs
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1/2 cup whole milk

Frosting:

8 oz. cream cheese, softened
1/4 cup powdered sugar
1 cup heavy whipping cream

Decorations:

1 cup fresh blueberries
2 cups fresh strawberries, sliced

1. For the cake: Preheat the oven to 350 F; grease a 9x13-inch baking pan.
2. In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt.
3. In a large bowl, beat the butter and sugar until light and fluffy.
4. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Stir in the vanilla.
5. Alternately add the flour mixture and milk to the butter mixture, beginning and ending with the flour.
6. Pour the batter into the prepared pan; bake for 25-30 minutes until a toothpick comes out clean. Let the cake cool completely in the pan.
7. For the frosting: In a medium bowl, beat the cream cheese and powdered sugar until smooth.

8. In a separate bowl, whip the heavy cream until stiff peaks form. Fold the whipped cream into the cream cheese mixture until well combined.

9. Spread the frosting evenly over the cooled cake.

10. To decorate: In the upper left corner, arrange the blueberries in a rectangle to create the "stars" section of the flag.

11. Arrange the sliced strawberries in horizontal rows across the rest of the cake to create the "stripes." Leave white frosting stripes between the strawberry rows to complete the American flag pattern.

12. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour before serving.

Classic BBQ Pulled Pork Sandwiches

2 Tbsp. brown sugar
1 Tbsp. paprika
1 Tbsp. garlic powder
1 Tbsp. onion powder
2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. black pepper
4 lbs. pork shoulder
1 cup chicken broth
1 1/2 cups barbecue sauce of your choice
12 hamburger buns
2 cups coleslaw

1. In a small bowl, mix together the first 6 ingredients.
2. Rub the spice mixture all over the

pork shoulder, coating it completely.

3. Place the seasoned pork in a slow cooker; pour the chicken broth around it.

4. Cook on low for 8-10 hours until the meat is fork-tender and shreds easily.

5. Remove the meat from the slow cooker; shred it using two forks. Discard excess fat; return the shredded meat to the slow cooker.

6. Stir in the barbecue sauce; keep warm until ready to serve.

7. Toast the hamburger buns lightly if desired. Pile the pulled pork onto the bottom buns; top with coleslaw. Cover with the top buns; serve immediately.

Baked Beans

6 slices bacon, chopped
1 medium onion, diced
4 15-oz. cans navy beans, drained
1 cup ketchup
1/2 cup brown sugar
1/4 cup molasses
2 Tbsp. yellow mustard
1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce

1. Preheat oven to 350 F.
2. In a skillet, cook the chopped bacon until crispy; remove and set aside.
3. In the bacon drippings, sauté the onions until softened.
4. In a large baking dish, combine the beans, bacon and onions. Stir in the remaining ingredients.
5. Bake, uncovered, for 45-50 minutes until bubbly and slightly thickened.



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Family Friendly FUN

— By Bill Smith

The official website for the city of Cincinnati, Ohio, speaks to both residents and visitors as it mentions, "Explore miles of nature trails, connect with your neighbors or gaze at the stars. You can find it all in Cincinnati."

Cincinnati was only a small community in 1788 when the first settlers arrived by flatboat at Yeatman's Cove. It was soon chosen as a military outpost known as Fort Washington, and more pioneers arrived and settled around the fort. The city was originally called Losantiville, but it was renamed "Cincinnati" after a Roman soldier named Cincinnati. The city exploded in growth during the early 1800s and went through several nicknames, including "The Queen City of the West" and "Porkopolis." After some major architectural projects such as Music Hall, the Cincinnati Hotel and Shillito Department Store, the nickname "Paris of America" was earned.

Visitors might find interest traveling to the city's historic sites. There are 52 neighborhoods in Cincinnati with listings of historic structures. Additional information about the various sites is available at the City Historic Conservation Office, the Ohio Historic Preservation Office or the National Park Service.

The Cincinnati Museum Center is a cluster of museums that surely could be a complete vacation. The CMC includes Cincinnati History Museum, The Children's Museum, Museum of Natural History & Science, Robert D. Lindner Family OMNIMAX Theater, Cr(eat)e Culinary Studio, Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center and Cincinnati History Library and Archives.

Does a zoo sound like a destination for you and your group? The Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden is a popular attraction that is more than 150 years old and could easily consume a day of your visit. There are animal encounters designed to be "up-close and personal," as well as rides and food. The gardens around the zoo have seasonal displays of tulips in the spring.

Baseball fans will want to learn about the Cincinnati Red Stockings



— America's first professional baseball team — at Cincinnati Reds Hall of Fame and Museum. If you are there during the season, catch a game at Great American Ball Park.

If you really want to entertain the kids for a day during late spring and summer, enjoy Kings Island & Soak City Water Park. The park features rides, live entertainment and food for everyone in the 364-acre amusement and water park. Soak City boasts of 36 water slides, wave pools, rushing rivers and kids' play areas. The park offers roller coasters and more with names like Orion, Diamondback and The Beast!

Of course, the Ohio River is a significant attraction. Book a cruise that may include a meal and/or a special event. Some might say the best time of year for an Ohio River cruise is the fall when the air is crisp and the leaves are changing.

Those interested in music will not be disappointed, as every summer the city offers a variety of music festivals, including Cincy Blues Fest, Cincinnati Music Festival and Voices of America Country Music Fest. Cincinnati features a huge amphitheater, but smaller venues with more intimate settings offer live music across the city.

With an entertainment menu like Cincinnati offers, tourists are welcome, and accommodations abound. Choose a cozy bed-and-breakfast or a name-brand hotel. Camping or glamping is also available around lakes and hiking trails.

Restaurants are plentiful and varied, but you will want to find a place that offers Cincinnati's signature dish, a bowl of chili. Surely, you will want to compare it to your favorite Texas experience! A few choice chili parlors include Blue Ash Chili, Camp Washington Chili, Dixie Chili and Gold Star Chili.

Explore the Midwest. Take a trip to Cincinnati! **NOW**

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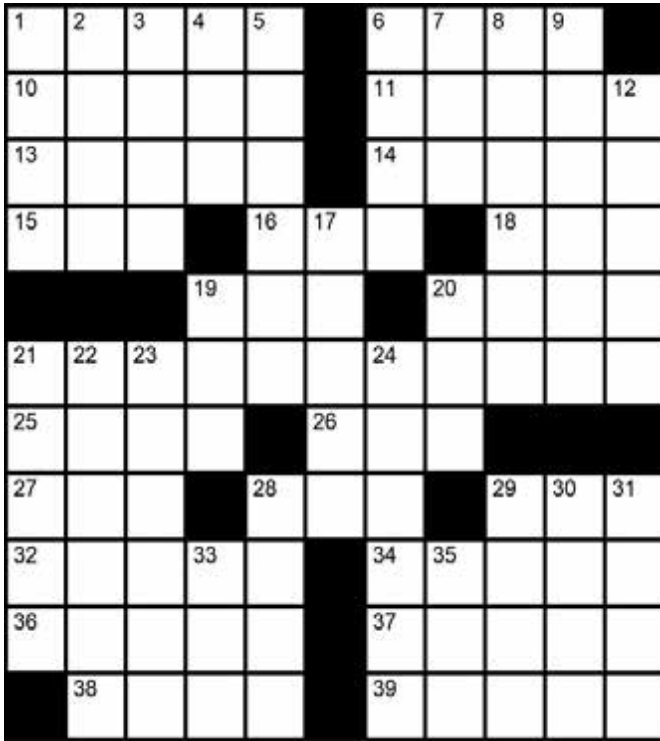
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Across

- 1 Nasal grunt
- 6 Against
- 10 Look attentively
- 11 Barnyard butters
- 13 --- Is Born (2018 movie)
- 14 Star ---, a culinary and medicinal spice
- 15 Little Red Book chairman
- 16 "Black" CIA activities
- 18 Write
- 19 He does give a hoot
- 20 Sound power units
- 21 Wrongly feign loss if breathing and moving

Down

- 1 Crawled, perhaps?
- 2 Organization which looks aloft
- 3 "The Simpsons" bus driver
- 4 "His Master's Voice" company
- 5 Tosses
- 6 "Jumpin' Jack Flash, it's --- ..." (The Rolling Stones)
- 7 Quebecer's turndown
- 8 Taiwanese capital
- 9 "Thou art the thing ---" (Shakespeare, "King Lear")
- 12 Inward feeling
- 17 Devious maneuvers
- 19 Single unit
- 20 Diner sandwich
- 21 Spills the beans
- 22 Positioned
- 23 Gerard goes out to fix the road
- 24 With justice
- 28 Funeral fire
- 29 "Animal House" party attire
- 30 Bad aroma
- 31 "--- of the D'Urbervilles" (Thomas Hardy)
- 33 Thermometric abbreviation
- 35 It's put down for a dance

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					19	O	W	L		20	B	E	L	S		
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Serenity Advanced Dentistry

After shadowing different careers in college, Dr. Cristina Allala discovered her calling in dentistry. Ten years later, she brings specialized expertise and a spa-like atmosphere to Cedar Hill through Serenity Advanced Dentistry, a solo, minority, woman-owned private practice.

Dr. Allala graduated from Baylor College of Dentistry in 2016 and completed her Bachelor of Science from The University of Texas at San Antonio in 2012. Since opening her practice, she has built a loyal following of patients who have followed her from her previous office, drawn by her gentle approach and commitment to patient care.

What sets her practice apart is her advanced certification in Level 2 moderate sedation — a qualification most dentists do not have. This certification requires at least 60 hours of specialized instruction and successfully administering sedation to at least 20 patients under supervision. For patients who experience dental anxiety, this option can transform their experience, making procedures like extractions comfortable and stress-free.

"Another thing that sets our practice apart is our skill with dental surgeries," Dr. Allala said. "Here are some of my favorite quotes from patients:

"Regarding implants: 'My implant surgery went smoothly. They explained everything, kept me relaxed, and I had very little discomfort afterward.'

"Regarding tooth extractions: 'I had oral surgery done and was extremely nervous, but the doctor and team made me feel comfortable the entire time. The procedure was painless, and recovery was easy.'

"Regarding tooth fixed dentures: 'My experience with fixed dentures was great. Dr. Allala planned everything digitally, the surgery went smoothly, and I had no complications. I can eat comfortably now, and they feel like my own natural teeth.'"

Serenity Advanced Dentistry offers most dental procedures under one roof, including sedation dentistry, dental crowns, dentures, emergency treatment, oral surgery, dental implants, root canals, teeth whitening, extractions, clear aligners, gum grafts and periodontal therapy. The practice emphasizes privacy and comfort. The office features private treatment rooms that allow honest conversations between doctor and patient without worry of being overheard. The modern facility incorporates the latest dental technology while maintaining a calming, spa-like environment.

"We are not a corporation," Dr. Allala said. Unlike larger corporate dental practices, Serenity Advanced Dentistry remains independent, allowing Dr. Allala to focus on building genuine relationships with patients. All assistants are bilingual, ensuring Spanish-speaking patients feel comfortable and fully understand their treatment options.

Dr. Allala lives in DeSoto, just 10 minutes away from her office, keeping her deeply connected to the community she serves. She gives back by supporting the Friends of Tri-City Animal Shelter through monthly contributions, a cause close to her heart as a devoted pet lover. For families seeking personalized dental care in a welcoming, professional environment, Serenity Advanced Dentistry offers an alternative to corporate dental chains.

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