



Seminole hold off St. John's for 57-53 win

SPORTS, 1C

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Rodney Braden and Ken Creel volunteer to remove a fallen tree after Hurricane Michael in Aktha. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Mission 850 delivers hurricane relief help

Tallahassee couple assist their suffering area-code counterparts

Nada Hassamallah Tallahassee Democrat
USA TODAY NETWORK • FLORIDA

The Monday after Hurricane Michael's deadly landfall, Dot Wagner had dinner in a Tallahassee pizza shop with her husband and two of their kids. Wagner looked around her. Her city mostly had regained power, and normally was in reach.

She began to cry.

The Tallahassee couple had spent that whole day in ravaged Panama City, helping a family whose home was severely damaged — one side completely gone. Shops were closed, electricity would be out for weeks. Their friends were eating granola bars for dinner.

The two realities were jarring.

It was then Wagner and her husband decided to start Mission 850. The couple heard about people in need from their friends in Panama City, and knew pastors in impacted areas like Mexico Beach.

Through Mission 850, about 50 groups — some families and their neighbors, others church groups and classes — have signed up to volunteer their hands and resources. Through it, Wagner's created a database of helpers and residents in need and coor-



Dot and Nick Wagner. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

So far, the homegrown relief network of volunteers have touched about 60 families.

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Education posturing begins at the Capitol

Policy battles next year seem to be very likely

James Call Tallahassee Democrat
USA TODAY NETWORK • FLORIDA

Public school advocates don't like what they see and hear coming out of Tallahassee.

Gov-elect Ron DeSantis's selection of Richard Corcoran as his choice to be the next Education Commissioner and the appointment of two pro-charter school lawmakers — with questionable credentials, according to their critics — have fed public education allies on the left and right to sound the alarm.

DeSantis picked Corcoran as a no-nonsense reformer who will bring experience and passion as leader of the Department of Education. Florida budgets more than \$20 billion to educate 2 million children every year. Corcoran championed alternatives to traditional public schools as a lawmaker and Speaker of the Florida House.

His record aligns with DeSantis's campaign talking points.

"Gov-elect DeSantis is committed to protecting parents' right to make decisions about their child's education," said spokesman David Vazquez. "To achieve these outcomes, he will welcome innovation and flexibility."

Corcoran's innovations were the foundations of two large contentious education bills he pushed through the Legislature in 2017 and 2018. The measures diverted tax dollars to the charter school industry, expanded a voucher program for private schools and exempted charter schools from regulations imposed on school districts.

Critics complained the charter-school industry's gains came at the expense of public schools.

"That is a trend we've seen the last couple of years; whether it continues is ultimately up to the Legislature," said Linda Kneanschmer, president of the Florida FTA.

House Speaker Jose Oliva signaled he intends to continue to move education policy in the direction Corcoran steered it. He named Rep. Jennifer Sullivan, R-Mount Dora, to chair the House Education Committee.

Sullivan was homeschooled and

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Four questions loom large as Denise Williams murder trial begins

Jennifer Portman Tallahassee Democrat
USA TODAY NETWORK • FLORIDA

Jury selection begins Monday in the trial of Denise Williams, accused of orchestrating and trying to conceal the truth surrounding the mysterious disappearance of her first husband Mike Williams nearly 10 years ago.

What many people long suspected was proven true last fall — the 35-year-old real estate appraiser didn't accidentally drown in a boating accident on Lake Seminole only to be eaten by all-

igators and vanish without a trace.

Mike Williams was murdered that morning.

His best friend, Brian Winchester, admitted last fall he did the killing, but prosecutors will argue Denise Williams was the mastermind behind it.

Her attorney will tell jurors that is categorically untrue — that she did nothing, knew nothing and is completely innocent.

Seating a jury is expected to take two days, followed by roughly four days total of testimony from both sides.

With the highly anticipated trial set to begin questions are swirling:

Will Denise Williams take the stand?

It's anyone's guess whether she will testify in her own defense.

She cannot be compelled by the state to do so and her lawyers aren't telling. It's a rare and risky move to put the person on trial on the stand.

Her direct testimony could be compelling to the jury but taking the stand



Denise Williams' mug shot. Jury selection for her trial is scheduled to begin today.

opens her up for cross examination by prosecutors. Her defense team doesn't need to prove she's innocent. It's the state's job to prove her guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

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