

LOCAL & STATE

NEWS BRIEFS

TAMPA Man convicted of smuggling lizards in socks, electronics

A man pleaded guilty to his part in a trafficking scheme in which live water monitor lizards were stuffed into socks and concealed inside electronics to be smuggled from the Philippines to the United States.

Akbar Akram, 44, pleaded in Tampa federal court Wednesday to one count of wildlife trafficking in violation of the Lacey Act and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species Treaty, court records show.

Akram admitted to illegally importing more than 20 live water monitor lizards from the Philippines in 2016, a U.S. Justice Department statement said. He avoided customs authorities by placing the lizards in socks, which were sealed closed with tape and concealed inside electronic equipment and shipped under a false label.

ORLANDO Police officer disciplined for using Taser on bike rider

A police officer who used a Taser on a 19-year-old man fleeing on bicycle was discipline on a use of force violation.

Orlando police Officer Peter Meier violated the agency's policy on response to resistance, which prohibits officers from using a stun gun on someone riding a bicycle "except in cases of aggressive resistance," according to an internal affairs document obtained by the Orlando Sentinel. Meier was given a written censure.

The man fell and skidded on the ground when he was hit by the stun gun May 5, records show.

Meier told internal investigators he was driving when he saw the man pop a wheelie on the bike while riding through an intersection. The officer flashed his lights and called to the rider over his public address system, asking him to stop. He said the teen and two others who were with him "disregarded his lawful commands."

CLEARWATER Police: Drivers block man who hit school crossing guard

Quick-thinking motorists used their vehicles to trap a man who fled after hitting a 78-year-old school crossing guard who was helping middle school students cross a road Wednesday afternoon.

Gregory Olson, 68, is charged with leaving the scene of a crash involving injuries, driving with a suspended license and failure to obey a traffic control device, Clearwater police said on Twitter.

The incident happened about 4:30 p.m. as students from Oak Grove Middle School were heading home. No students were injured.

Olson got about a block away before several motorists used their cars to block him until authorities arrived.

Crossing guard Ernest Comeau suffered injuries not considered life-threatening, police said. He was taken to a hospital for treatment.

Olson remained in the Pinellas County Jail on Thursday.

PALM COAST Middle school teacher arrested in attack on student

A Flagler County teacher was arrested Wednesday after physically removing a 14-year-old student from class.

Jeffrey Paffumi, 47, removed the teen from his chair, carried him out into the hallway and pushed him, according to a statement released by the Flagler County Sheriff's Office.

See BRIEF, A4

DEP: Wood chip company needs new permit

Nearby Arlington Ridge residents have complained about pollution, noise since 2018

By Frank Stanfield
For the Daily Commercial

LEESBURG – The wood chip company that sometimes belches smoke over the Arlington Ridge retirement

community is operating without a permit, according to state regulators.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection issued a notice of violation to GI Shavings LLC on Nov. 27. The agency is demanding \$10,000 in fines and \$2,500 in administrative costs from the company.

The agency notified the company on County Road

33 in October that its permit expired nearly a year before on Nov. 30, 2018. It stated in a notice that it had until Nov. 4, 2019 to get a new permit. The company submitted an "incomplete" permit application on that date, according to the violation notice.

DEP is requiring more information and GI Shavings has until Feb. 19 to

comply, said Ashley Gardner, a spokeswoman for the agency.

A representative of the company, which is headquartered in Hallandale, could not be reached for comment.

Residents have been up in arms since 2018.

"The noise is relentless,

See PERMIT, A4

Hearing loud and clear

Two Lake women receive hearing aids in annual contest

By Roxanne Brown
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CLERMONT – "I can hear you. My ears ain't broke any more, baby," Altoona's Deborah Lee said through happy tears to her grandchildren during a visit to Clermont's Precision Hearing last month just days before Christmas.

"Grandma's ears ain't broke no more."

Lee was there getting fitted for brand new hearing aids after winning Dr. Kristen Weinbaum's third annual "All I Want for Christmas Hearing Aid Contest."

Weinbaum has been gifting one person with hearing aids annually since 2017. Applicants write letters about why they need them and Weinbaum, with some doctor friends, chooses the lucky recipients.

This year, and with help from a hearing aid company she works with, Weinbaum decided to choose two winners.

For Lee, it made a world of difference.

When Weinbaum turned Lee's hearing aids on at the lowest setting, it was her first time hearing her grandson Ethan Gray Thomas speak at a normal volume in nearly 13 years. Before, he had to literally scream at her.

See HEARING, A4



Deborah Lee of Altoona was one of two winners of an essay contest offering a pair of hearing aids as a prize by Dr. Kristen Weinbaum of Precision Hearing in Clermont. Weinbaum, right, receives thank you hug from Lee. [ROXANNE BROWN/DAILY COMMERCIAL]



Deborah Lee of Altoona was one of two winners of an essay contest offering a pair of hearing aids as a prize by Dr. Kristen Weinbaum of Precision Hearing in Clermont. Weinbaum, right, fits Lee, left, with the hearing aids. [ROXANNE BROWN/DAILY COMMERCIAL]

Citrus Tower owners want to bring back Christmas light show

They hope memberships will cover the costs to bring it back

By Roxanne Brown
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CLERMONT – It has been two years since the Citrus Tower announced the cancellation of its Christmas light show, which included miles of colorful lights atop the 226-foot structure synchronized to music and snow.

And ever since, people have been lamenting about how much they miss it.

However, after an announcement by owners Scott and Heather Homan Wednesday night, there is hope for its return in time for Christmas 2020. But they can't afford to do it alone.

"WE NEED YOUR HELP!" reads a post on the Florida Citrus Tower Facebook page appealing to the community. "If we can sell 400 annual Citrus

See TOWER, A4



The light show at the Citrus Tower in Clermont featured over 100,000 lights and required four miles of electrical wire annually. [DAILY COMMERCIAL FILE]

Man arrested in connection with Dec. 27 homicide

Lorenzo Jamar Green, 25, was arrested Wednesday

Staff Report

BUSHNELL – Lorenzo Jamar Green was arrested Wednesday in Broward County in connection with the death of Marquis Duggs, according to a Sumter County Sheriff's Office press release.



Green

Green, 25, was identified as the suspect in the Dec. 27 homicide and arrested after a "very thorough investigation," the release said. SCSO's criminal investigation division tracked Green to Broward County. And with the assistance of the Broward County Sheriff's Office, Green was arrested Wednesday.

No further information was available as of Thursday afternoon.

Anyone with information about this case is encouraged to call the Sheriff's Office at 352-793-2621. To remain anonymous, call Crimeline at 1-800-TIPS (8477).

Today's Services

McINTIRE - Rose Mary McIntire, A Graveside Service will be held today, 10:00AM at Lakeside Memory Gardens Cemetery, Eustis, FL.
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BRIEF

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The 9 a.m. Tuesday incident was captured on video by another student at Buddy Taylor Middle School in Palm Coast.

Paffumi is charged with simple battery, a misdemeanor.

According to a charging affidavit, the incident started over music being played by the student on his computer while in class. The teacher muted the music and then, according to the student's statement, the student unmuted the computer again.

They went back and forth twice more before the teacher grabbed the computer, documents state.

The student reacted by saying, "Put my (expletive) down cracka," the report states.

Paffumi responded, "I am not a cracka." And the student came back with, "You is a cracka."

The student then told deputies he was put in a choke hold by the teacher but his airway was never restricted. Then, the student told deputies, he was removed from class by the teacher, who the affidavit lists as 6-foot-2 and 243 pounds.

LAKELAND Motorcycle police officer dies in early morning crash

The Lakeland Police Department and Polk County Sheriff's Office are mourning the loss of LPD Officer Paul Dunn, 50, who was killed in an early morning single-vehicle crash Wednesday, which was also National Law Enforcement Appreciation Day.

Dunn was driving his LPD Harley Davidson Police Road King motorcycle to work around 5:45 a.m. when for unknown reasons the motorcycle struck and drove over a raised concrete median in an unincorporated part of the county, according to Sheriff Grady Judd.

Judd said that the wife of a Sheriff's Office deputy, Madeline Sinclair, was coming over the hill toward the crash scene and saw the motorcycle lights flashing but did not know until she was closer that an officer was down. She stopped to help and do CPR as did a nurse practitioner, Laura Lewis, Judd said.

Sinclair told detectives that beside her headed in the same direction, was another car that kept on driving past the downed bike.

The sheriff said the investigation was ongoing and the Traffic Homicide Unit would leave "no stone unturned."

There are traffic cameras nearby that may prove to be helpful, he added.

Staff and wire reports

HEARING

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"This moment makes it pretty worth it, doesn't it?" Weinbaum asked all in the room after witnessing the joy Lee showed after hearing Ethan's "inside voice."

Lee, a senior caregiver, said she couldn't afford the type of hearing aids she needed to correct the severe hearing loss that resulted from a fall and traumatic brain injury in 1992 and another in 2002 after a car accident.

She was in a coma after the car accident and when she awoke, Lee had to redevelop her speaking skills. Her hearing, however, never improved.

Still, she managed to go on and, to this day, volunteers at the Lake County Jail, leading bible studies for female inmates.

However, after Lee's grandson Ethan was born and started speaking, she was devastated to learn she could not hear him because of the low tones he uses when speaking, a result of his Autism.

It is slightly easier to hear her other grandson, 10-year-old Gavin, and her grown daughter Heather Thomas. But Lee has not been able to communicate with them, or anyone, normally since her accident.

Heather said at times, she's even felt intimidated and helpless.

"This is amazing," Heather said to her mom



Deborah Lee of Altoona was moved to tears when she heard her grandson "inside voice" for the first time after 13 years. Lee was the winner of a pair of hearing aids being given away by Dr. Kristen Weinbaum of Precision Hearing in Clermont recently.

[ROXANNE BROWN/DAILY COMMERCIAL]

at the fitting. "I've been screamed at, and I've been screaming at you for so long, and I can't wait to have a normal conversation with you on the phone or while we are cooking together. I can't wait to have that companionship back,"

"And you know how I tell you that clicking your nails together is annoying? Well just wait, because now you'll be able to hear what I mean," Heather said, joking.

Last year, Lee said Annie Libby, a friend from First Baptist Church of Umatilla helped her enter Weinbaum's contest but they never heard back.

When she got

Weinbaum's phone call last month, however, she realized Libby must have re-submitted her letter and it paid off because this year's judges were so deeply touched by her story that they picked her.

After being fitted, Lee said she could not wait to surprise everyone at church and at the jail by telling them they do not have to scream when talking to her. She said she also could not wait to actually hear her pastor's Sunday sermons.

"Oh my gosh, this is a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful thing that this lady (Weinbaum) does. Her compassion and her generosity... I thank you from the bottom of

my heart. I thank you so much. You have given me a wonderful gift of a lifetime," Lee told Weinbaum. "You have no idea what you've done for me and my grandbabies. God is good."

The second winner, Linda McKenna, an 81-year old widow from Leesburg, has been in the same boat in regards to her hearing.

McKenna lives on Social Security and has a part time job to supplement her living expenses. She is also paying off a \$9,500 government loan she had to take for home repairs caused by Hurricane Irma.

McKenna has an older pair of hearing aids, which took her years

to pay off, so when she was told new ones that could help her hear better would cost about \$8,000, she knew she could not afford them.

In her entry, McKenna said, "When I am with friends, I always hear the remark, 'She can't hear anyway.'"

"I have to keep asking people to repeat themselves, or I just pretend that I'm hearing. I am active in my church but always disappointed that I can't hear but very small portions of the sermons," McKenna went on to say. "I would like to enjoy my last years on earth being able to hear my friends and family when they speak to me, and it is sad to be deprived of that sense due to financial status."

Soon, however, McKenna's wish will come true since she has an appointment for her fitting with Weinbaum scheduled for Jan. 20.

Weinbaum, who has lived with partial hearing loss since the age of 5, said she understands what both ladies feel and is extremely happy to have been able to have made a difference in their lives.

It's why she became an audiologist, she said, and why every time she turns on a patient's hearing aids for the first time, she feels fulfilled.

"It's those moments I cherish and I can't help feel a deep satisfaction in what I do," Weinbaum said. "It's my honor. I'm very happy for them."

PERMIT

From Page A3

unnatural and at excessive decibel levels," the residents complained in a 2018 lawsuit filed in Lake Circuit Court. Retirees whose homes back up to the golf course near the plant told the Daily Commercial that the smoke is sometimes so thick they can't even sit on their screened-in porches.

They complained that the plant sometimes operates up to 16 hours a day. The plant burns wood in its furnaces to operate dryers used to manufacture bedding for horses.

It's not just a nuisance. One of the residents, a

retired steel mill engineer, who has a chronic lung disease, was fearful of becoming even more sick. He said he came to Florida for a reason: "I expected to get better."

A series of emails to DEP also reveal concerns about the possible creation of creosote pollution. The federal Environmental Protection Agency has stated that creosote is likely a carcinogen.

"I've spoken with our experts and we've determined that it is extremely unlikely that GI Shavings is creating creosote in their process," Nathan Hess, DEP director for the Central District, said in an email to residents.

"We are planning to require a variety of testing from the facility, which includes volatile organic



Rhonda Lugo has covered her once peaceful lanai with heavy drapes because of noise and smoke from a plant yards away. Residents of Arlington Ridge in Leesburg are complaining about smoke and soot from an adjacent plant that processes wood to make animal bedding.

[DAILY COMMERCIAL FILE]

compounds. If there are any creosote emissions, this testing will reveal that," Hess said.

Arlington Ridge, on U.S. Highway 27, is within Leesburg's city limits. The

plant, which manufactures bedding for livestock, is in the unincorporated part of the county in an industrial park.

The city toyed with the idea of creating a noise

ordinance but couldn't because the plant is in the county. Lake County commissioners noted that the industrial zoning and businesses were in place before the homes were built, but have urged DEP to issue a modified permit to accommodate residents.

The lawsuit says the noise is so severe normal conversation is sometimes impossible. It also lists such health hazards as "severe irritation of eyes, nose, throat and lungs, that results in burning, persistent coughing, nausea, watery eyes, headaches, difficulty breathing, increased phlegm, respiratory infections and inhaler use."

The suit is asking for a circuit court judgment forcing the company to fix the problems or stop operating.

TOWER

From Page A3

Tower Memberships by April 1st, we can afford to give Jayslights LLC the GREEN LIGHT to move forward. He will be taking the year rebuilding the systems needed to bring back the show for this wonderful community to enjoy."

Scott Homan said annual passes had been offered at the Tower for a while. But more recently, they created memberships with extra perks including unlimited access to the top during regular business hours, the ability for the pass holder to invite up to four guests to ride with them each day, a 10 percent discount with some of the tower's neighboring businesses, including Mountaineer Coffee, Uncle Kenny's BBQ, The



Thousands of people visited the Citrus Tower each holiday season to enjoy the light show, which was synchronized to holiday music. [DAILY COMMERCIAL FILE]

Tower Arcade and Happy Troll Games, first dibs on ticket purchases for special events, a membership card and an exclusive members-only vinyl car sticker.

Normally, membership dues go toward Tower maintenance and operation, but he and Heather thought if they used the proceeds through a date certain for the show, they would still be OK.

Scott Homan said they figured that 400 memberships, which totals \$40,000, would pay for new equipment, lights, barricades and the show's engineering.

But if 500 memberships are sold, snow machines could be purchased, and 600 or more memberships would pay for additional features yet to be determined.

"We have seen in the

last two years how the community really loved the show, so this is the best we can do to afford to bring it back," Scott Homan said. "And if we don't reach the necessary amount, at least people get a really good deal with the memberships."

If the Homans don't reach their goal to fund the light show, they will use the nonrefundable membership funds for upkeep.

Originally, the Citrus Tower Christmas light show was introduced in 2010 and ran for seven years.

In 2018, Greg Homan, Scott's father, decided to stop the light show and made a deal with Real Life, which included gifting them the lights, so that they could take it over.

At the time, Greg

Citrus Tower memberships

Memberships can be purchased on the Citrus Tower's Facebook Page at facebook.com/FloridaCitrusTower/ or on its website, citrustower.com, or in person in the Citrus Tower lobby, located at 141 U.S. Highway 27, Clermont.

Homan cited other challenges that affected his decision like lighting, space and safety concerns, since the show - which was attracting thousands - was basically viewable from the parking lot at the base of the Tower.

And if it was brought back, it would still take place in the same vicinity. Scott and Heather have been working with Duke Energy on enhancing the lighting and devising areas and ways of making the event safer for guests and more doable for them.

Susan Northcutt visited the Tower Thursday to purchase a membership after hearing about the the Homans' plight. She said believes the show was a big asset for the community. She said she'd love to see it brought back.

"It was nice driving down 27 and seeing the lights on the Tower, plus the show was something kids enjoyed, that adults enjoyed and just a great thing for the community to have here," Northcutt said. "It was something I think the community considered really special but it was hard to pull off so I understood when it went away, but if it can come back, yay."

Meanwhile, Jay Peterson, the owner of Jayslights LLC, is on standby. He was in charge of setting up and running the light show for the years it ran at the Tower. He'd be in charge should it come back.

Peterson would need to immediately start purchasing the equipment and get working on set-up since, in the past, it took him 6 to 8 months to get everything ready. He had to string the more than four-miles of wiring, hang more than 100,000 lights and program the show.

Should the show return to the Citrus Tower, Scott Homan said he hopes the Real Life show, also created by Peterson, will continue, as well.

"It would be nice for Clermont to be a place people come to for the awesome light shows at Christmas," Scott Homan said.

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