

COMING *of* AGE

LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE FOR SENIORS

SPRING 2023

Gardening into
Your Golden
Years

Something
to Squawk
About

Tiny Home,
Big Housing
Possibilities

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH
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[FROM THE EDITOR]



Emily Echevarria

Marketing
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Happy Spring! This season is a favorite of mine, with warming weather and more hours of daylight to enjoy breezy evenings and blossoming azalea bushes. For many of us, this time of year makes us feel more active and energized, more able to get outdoors and enjoy nature. And there are several suggestions for that in this issue of *Coming of Age*.

If you're looking to get in touch with nature of the exotic variety, read up on Uncle Sandy's Macaw Bird Park on page 16. This piece inspired me to bring my five-year-old daughter to this haven for colorful feathered fauna, and I can attest that it is a fun and unique excursion for bird lovers of all ages.

For more outdoor inspiration, our article about different varieties of garden styles (page 12) will help you find the option that best suits your space, mobility and gardening goals. Spring gardening always felt overwhelming to this horticulture-impaired editor, until I realized I could put all my plants in individual containers to better control the many variables that cause a plant to either flourish or fizzle. I'll definitely be adding some of the suggestions in this article to my growing container garden this year.

Speaking of pot gardens, you might come in with some rash assumptions about this edition's cover celeb Cheech Marin. His work spans decades and goes way beyond the marijuana-heavy stylings of his act with comedy partner (and past *Coming of Age* cover star), Tommy Chong. I hope you'll keep an open mind as

you read Kelly Oden's wonderful interview with this comedic and cultural icon on page 22.

Spring is often a time of new growth and renewed energy. Our outlooks tend to get a bit sunnier right along with the weather, which is, of course, a good thing. But while those of us who can embrace the spirit of spring, I can't help but think of the many older adults in this community who can't shed the proverbial winter blues.

Maybe it's because their health or mobility is declining, and they don't have the resources to address their needs. Or perhaps the warming weather reminds them that energy bills might soon consume more of their limited monthly income. Maybe their housing costs already leave them strapped and without other basic needs. It's these struggles that we see firsthand at Council on Aging, whether in the efforts of our amazing team of case managers, or in my own work navigating the challenges of housing for an ongoing AARP Community Challenge Grant project (detailed on page 19). The complicated bureaucracy behind the scenes of providing services can feel like pushing a boulder up a hill, but with collaboration and an ongoing effort, we reach our goals. So while I'll absolutely be getting outdoors and tackling spring cleaning this season, I'll also be using the burst of energy that comes with spring to continue to serve, support and advocate for the seniors in our community and state. If you're looking for ways to join these efforts, reach out to me at 850.266.2507.

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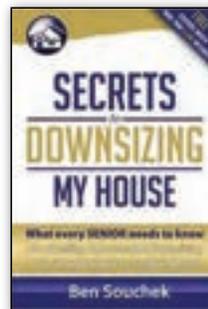
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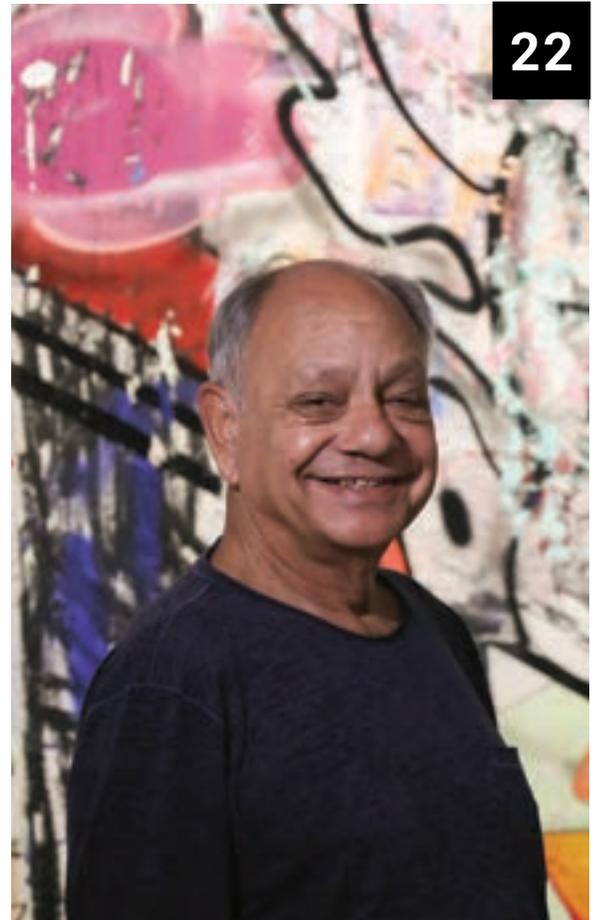
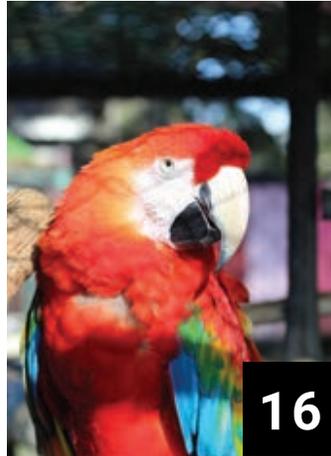


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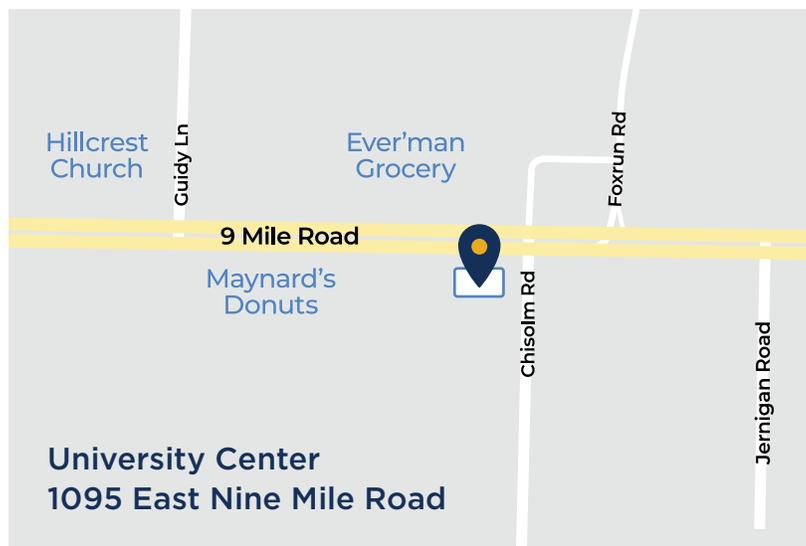
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The Unseen Need

by Josh Newby

Every year, we, along with WEAR Channel 3 and Lowe's, host a Senior Chill Out where we solicit hundreds of air conditioners and tens of thousands of dollars from the community in order to distribute them to elder adults without AC. Last summer, I was distributing one such air conditioner to a trailer on my way home one night. From the outside, it looked like your average mobile home dwelling—not great, not terrible. After retrieving the AC unit from my trunk and knocking on the door, I was greeted by rancid smells, a mold-infested interior, and the frail frame of a woman who was excited to see me.

She and I chatted for a few minutes about her needs, as the lack of AC seemed like the least of her problems. Slowly, the truth came out: she didn't think anyone cared, and if anyone did care, she didn't know how to navigate the process. She hadn't bathed in weeks, she couldn't toilet herself, the food she could buy was reserved for her dog, the list went on and on. This was a home I drove by every day. The happy ending is that we were able to help, but it shouldn't have taken some serendipitous interaction and an air conditioning unit to supply her with that help.

I share that story to tell you that there are over 70,000 people living in Florida in that exact same position. They live in the trailers and the houses and the fields you drive by every day. We don't truly know a community until we look inside the homes of its most vulnerable.

One of the funding sources that pays for the services those vulnerable people need is called Community Care for the Elderly (CCE). This year, Gov. DeSantis unveiled his budget blueprint which raises CCE funding by \$2 million statewide. I applaud his attentiveness to the elderly and his desire to help the needy. I gently suggest,

“ Slowly, the truth came out: she didn't think anyone cared, and if anyone did care, she didn't know how to navigate the process.”

however, that it is not enough. Last year's CCE budget was around \$92 million, and \$2 million would thus be about a 2 percent increase. Inflation right now sits at 6.4 percent. Delivery of these critical services literally costs more than it ever has. You can do the math for yourself.

There is an underreported fact about all this that complicates the matter further. Council on Aging of West Florida and other similar agencies across the state help with Adult Protective Services (APS) referrals. These are cases of extreme neglect, abuse and exploitation. By law, these cases jump to the front of the line and absorb CCE monies. Thus, it is very likely that the \$2 million increase will be absorbed by APS emergency cases and will not even touch the huge waiting list.

Initial meetings with our local legislative delegation have gone well, and they seem to understand the challenge before us. As he has in the past, I am confident that Gov. DeSantis will support increased funding as he understands the outsized need. The equivalent of the population of Orlando moves to Florida every year. How many of them are living in conditions similar to the previously described? How many will need our help? How many will be kept waiting?

Council on Aging

Volunteer Spotlight

by Farrah Hale

Here at the Council on Aging of West Florida, we love our volunteers. Their dedication and commitment are invaluable. Volunteers often serve as the unsung heroes of an organization, and we want to shine the spotlight on a couple of our own.

Name: Kelly Robinson

Volunteer Position: Meals on Wheels Driver

Kelly Robinson wears many hats in her service-driven life. She is a mother, exquisitely talented dancer, dog mom and Meals on Wheels driver. She has been volunteering her time as a Meals on Wheels driver with Council on Aging of West Florida for more than three years, filling in wherever she could during the height of the pandemic. Kelly contributes more than her time to the clients; she also offers her friendship. She is an important asset to the agency, and we are so lucky to have her.

What made you decide to volunteer for Council on Aging of West Florida?

Our family all does service work in some form. It was instilled in us at a very young age. It's just important to give back and help in whatever way is possible for you. After my husband retired from hockey, we settled in Pensacola, and I was looking to slow down my actual work and be more of a domestic spouse. I was looking to fill my time and I saw a national appeal for the meals program on TV. I called the next day. I came in, took a tour, and the coordinator was so warm and welcoming, I said, "sign me up!" I've been there ever since.

Tell me about the volunteer activities you have been involved with.

I used to do work with the Boys and Girls Club of Emerald Coast. I spent a lot of time in Fort Walton and Crestview doing dance and art. I just really loved it. I enjoy doing anything with children and the elderly. I'm also very passionate about food in general, especially when it comes to everyone having access to food. It breaks my heart that some people don't have that. I'm also a regular donor to Manna. COA was just a natural fit.

What brings you joy as a volunteer for the Council on Aging of West Florida?

The people. Taking the food—knowing I'm bringing food, is a big part of it that hooked me at first. As I got to know my clients, I enjoyed those friendships that developed and being able to nourish them, and that whole aspect is so important. Humans are not isolated people by nature. We all

need a tribe. The elderly tend to slip through the cracks. Ten or 20 minutes—that little bit—can brighten their lives.

From your perspective, what is the greatest impact that COA has in your community?

Well, the Meals on Wheels program, I think. But then also, I really like the community centers. Those are very important. To have the companion meals—especially where some of the locations are centered is awesome. I really like the day program at the building itself. The backyard garden area is really nice. I've read so much about the organization and all the things that are available, I can actually give people the phone number to get the help they need. A lot of people don't know about these options. Being able to help support and let them know, whether they act on it or not, is so important. We are more than just food over at the Council on Aging.

What would you share with others considering volunteering for the agency?

I think everyone should do it for at least a month. If anything, to see what's going on in their communities. I'm just a firm believer in volunteer work in any form. I think it's something everyone should do at least once in their life. I also think it's important to keep the elderly in their own homes, if possible. Council on Aging makes it easier for families and caregivers to do that.



Name: Franklin Bryan

Volunteer Position: Retreat Adult Day Center Volunteer

Retreat volunteer Franklin Bryan is more than a talented banana dolphin creator, and he does more than make heart shaped sandwiches. He has volunteered in Ukraine since the war began—going with a group of friends from Washington, D.C. where he was previously a patent and engineering lawyer. He is a true humanitarian, reaching beyond his community with food as the common ground. Franklin brings a beautiful passion for serving into Council on Aging, and the Retreat would be a little dimmer without him.

What made you decide to volunteer for Council on Aging of West Florida?

My mother, Pati, has been volunteering with The Retreat for around 25 years trying to make the clients happy and healthy with tasty, nutritious, and fun meals and snacks. I saw the impact she had on clients, their families, and employees with fun activities like cooking club, and wanted to give her a day or two off each week.

Tell me about the volunteer activities you have been involved with.

We have been primarily involved in managing the kitchen at The Retreat adult day care, preparing meals and snacks and delivering meals with Meals on Wheels.

What brings you joy as a volunteer for the Council on Aging of West Florida?

It makes me happy when the clients chuckle about the guy making banana dolphins and sharks for them in the kitchen. I'm hopeful that when they see a bright red, delicious, plump strawberry heart, they know that someone cares and not just cafeteria food made as cheaply as humanly possible by someone who doesn't care.



Banana sharks made by Franklin for his clients.

From your perspective, what is the greatest impact that COA has in your community?

I think it's the social interaction and stimulation the adult day care center director, staff, companions, and volunteers provide to the clients—the love, the laughs, the ponies, the Blue Anchor Belles, the laughing lady and the dancing lady. Our seniors take those experiences home with them and that bit of extra resonates back into the community. Caring for an elder loved one can be taxing, especially when balancing life, work, kids and a social life. I think it's huge that we give caretakers a bit of time off and balance.

What would you share with others considering volunteering for the agency?

Please wash your hands religiously before coming into the kitchen or going into the refrigerator. If you are sick, don't come—stay home. Remember why we are here and try to keep our seniors happy and healthy.





GARDENING into your GOLDEN YEARS

Spring Container Gardens for Seniors

by Morgan Cole

GARDENING HAS THE ABILITY TO ENGAGE ALL OF OUR SENSES AND PROVIDES A WEALTH OF BENEFITS, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO SENIORS. Preparing for spring gardening as a senior doesn't have to be intimidating. It not only provides exercise, but it can also improve your health and mood, all around. In a study published by the University of Florida, scientists found that gardening activities can lower a person's stress, anxiety and depression. Studies have also shown that having flowers and greenery around also helps to reduce blood pressure — not to mention all those plants give off a ton of fresh, clean oxygen.

For many seniors, the thought of having a garden is appealing, but the bending, stooping, squatting, kneeling and fear of falling often deters them from being able to enjoy its many health benefits. However, regardless of one's ability or space restrictions, container gardening is a great way to enjoy the joys of gardening both indoors and outdoors. We've rounded up some of our favorite easy-to-maintain container gardens perfect for older adults who might not have the space or mobility to care for a traditional outdoor garden. Make the most out of your green space this season with one or more of these convenient container gardens.

Raised Beds

Raised garden beds come in all sorts of sizes and are a great option for gardeners of all ages and skill levels. These raised beds have become an increasingly popular way of designing a garden. They look great and are easier to maintain than other ground-level gardening options. This type of raised planter box has also become particularly appealing for senior gardeners because they require less physical effort than normal garden beds. This is especially true for those suffering from arthritis and other conditions that cause stress on the

joints. Raised gardens can be built to a height of each gardener's choice, making them a great option for those with limited mobility. Raised garden beds also have many benefits when it comes to both health and practicality. Seasoned gardeners might appreciate the fact that they harbor fewer weeds and have better water retention. The bed does double duty as a decorative element in your yard, and it works to keep critters away. Groundhogs, gophers and the like cannot get to your plants.



How-to Tips for Vertical Gardens:

- Use a good quality soil that's appropriate for the particular plants you've selected.
- Have "matching" plants in a bin, meaning they all require the same light, watering and fertilizing schedule to thrive.
- Fill each bin halfway with the soil, add the plants, then more soil, tamping it down as you go.
- Make sure that each plant has adequate space.

Countertop Hydroponic Systems

Hydroponics, the name given to a method of gardening without soil, utilizes only water and nutrients and requires little maintenance, with systems placed on countertops for easier accessibility. When outdoor gardening just isn't an option, and seniors are limited to balconies or indoor locations, what's called "plug and play" hydroponic systems can be purchased. The hobby can get pretty technical, with a variety of systems including water culture (roots hang down submerged in a nutrient solution, aeroponic (roots are exposed and misted), wicking (a wick pulls moisture toward plants when needed) and more. Hydroponic indoor gardens come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Herbs like basil, rosemary, thyme and cilantro, and vegetables like cabbage and spinach can grow especially well in window sills. Amazon carries many different indoor hydroponic growing systems at various prices.

Vertical Gardens

In a vertical garden, the plants grow on poles or trellises, making them much easier to tend and harvest. Consider purchasing some hanging pots or larger containers that you can put a trellis inside, which will allow your plants to grow up instead of out. Cucumbers, beans, squash and tomatoes are all great types of plants for a vertical garden. Not only are vertical gardens more accessible and less strenuous for seniors, but they also tend to be more aesthetically pleasing because everything grows at eye level. Rather than being hunched over as you plant, water or debug, you can walk along your garden with your precious plants within reach.



Terrariums

When people think of gardening, they most likely envision the traditional plot of land filled with vegetable plants, flowers and shrubs. It's possible, however, to have a tiny garden inside the home. Terrariums are miniature gardens housed within small, sealed containers like bottles or jars. The best part about terrarium gardens is that they can be grown any time of the year. They are small and easy to maintain, making them ideal for those who may have certain mobility issues. You can grow all kinds of moisture-loving plants in a terrarium. With proper care, a terrarium creates a humid atmosphere that protects tender, tropical plants that are otherwise difficult to grow in specific climates. Just be sure to select plants that thrive in low-to-medium light and avoid fast-growing plant species that develop large leaves that can block light. Once you get better at making your own plant terrarium, you can even add small animals, such as turtles or fish, to your miniature ecosystem. You can either purchase the materials for your terrarium separately or purchase a DIY kit online.

Recommended plants:

- Ferns – maidenhair, birds nest and button ferns
- Carnivorous plants – venus fly traps, pitcher plants and sundew plants
- Air plants – tillandsia
- Succulent or cacti – hawthornia, echeveria, crassula, etc.
- Peperomia



Window Sill Herb Gardens

Growing a windowsill herb garden is an easy way to warm up to gardening during the cold winter months. Herbs do especially well inside if they get enough sunlight. You can also move the herb garden outdoors once the weather warms. You can grow a variety of plants in your windowsill garden, providing you access to fresh herbs and leafy greens for all of your favorite recipes in the kitchen. Some of the best options to grow are basil,

parsley, thyme, rosemary, oregano and cilantro. You can also give your window sill herb garden a more specialized focus by planting a pizza herb garden or tea herb garden. A small container will allow you to grow herbs, but, if you're more interested in growing vegetables, consider getting slightly larger containers to grow things like carrots, onions, hot peppers and even lettuce.

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Photo by Patton Markland

Something to Squawk About

Uncle Sandy's Macaw Park is for the Birds

By Patton Markland

NESTED IN NORTH PENSACOLA, Uncle Sandy's Macaw Bird Park is a place unlike any other. Volunteers enthusiastically welcome newly arrived guests through the park's gate and into the sanctuary. Sunlight streams through the palms, illuminating an emerald and indigo peacock presiding over the scene. As far as one can see, there are enclosures with magnificently colored birds: scarlet macaws, African gray parrots, ornamental roosters, cockatoos and even emus! Visitors are allowed to feed many of the park residents by hand; peanuts and bread are provided by the staff. The Indian Peacocks roam the grounds freely, so you never know when you'll come around a corner and be greeted by a dazzling display of tail feathers.



Photo by Guy Stevens

Reed Rawlson with Sweetie and a friend



Photo by Guy Stevens

Founded in 1998, Uncle Sandy's is a nonprofit organization dedicated to caring for exotic birds. The park's twofold mission is also focused on educating folks through hands-on encounters and experiences with our feathered friends.

Uncle Sandy's is staffed by volunteers who pride themselves on their knowledge of the park's residents. Any questions you might have regarding the birds, they'll be able to answer. Reed Raulston leads the flock as the park's director. He has been helping run the show at Uncle Sandy's for more than 14 years, and there isn't a bird that he doesn't know on a scientific-name basis. Pressed to pick a favorite, Reed remarked that he "doesn't have just one," because "each of the 28 macaws has their own special personality." Under pressure, however, Raulston did direct attention to an oft-overlooked resident of the park, an African gray parrot with only one leg, Consuela. A permanent resident of the park, Consuela is sweet as can be, easily held and always eager to make new friends, young or old.

If you are looking to take home one of these majestic creatures, you'll need to know that the majority of the birds are permanently housed in the park. However, under special circumstances, Uncle Sandy's Macaw Bird Park will allow the adoption of a bird by someone with the capacity to take excellent care of it.

Admission is \$5 cash only, and is per person for those over the age of 13, \$2 for children ages 6 to 13 and free for children under 6 years of age. Groups of 10 or more, should call ahead to arrange for special accommodations and to receive a group discount rate.

The park is open to the public year-round, however, the days of operation do change based on the season; be sure to check the park's hours ahead of your visit on their website or Facebook page, both of which are updated regularly.



Photo by Patton Markland



Photo by Patton Markland

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Tiny Home, Big Housing Possibilities

by Emily Echevarria

IN FEBRUARY 2022, NORTHWEST FLORIDA WAS ALREADY EXPERIENCING THE WOES OF A HOUSING SHORTAGE. For Council on Aging of West Florida, that translated to calls and emails from seniors or caregivers of elderly relatives that were seeking resources or information regarding affordable housing for seniors. Housing is not directly under the purview of the agency, and staff could only direct callers to the local housing authority or other informational entities, knowing that public housing options for seniors are slim and have a continual and lengthy waitlist.

While providing housing or housing resources is not included in the mission of the agency – dedicating each day to serve, support, and advocate for seniors in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties – advocacy is. Like many nonprofits, Council on Aging participates in grant proposals to achieve financial awards for projects that align with its mission and expand its reach into the community. In looking for an impactful project for a 2022 AARP Community Challenge Grant, housing jumped out as a pressing need. As rent and housing prices increase along with the cost of groceries and other consumer goods with rising inflation, many older adults live on an unchanged fixed income like Social Security benefits, usually averaging around \$900 to \$1,000 per month for a single person. The population of homeless seniors is growing, and there are projected to be 95,000 elders living in America without stable housing by 2050, according to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

After submitting our proposal, Council on Aging was awarded an AARP Community Challenge grant for \$50,000 to fund a tiny home development project. The project was one of 260 awards out of

3,200 applications for quick action livability projects that align with community age-friendly efforts.

The collaborative project plan was to develop two 128-square-foot tiny home units with one to be given to a Council on Aging client and the second to serve as a demonstration home that could be toured by community leaders and residents interested in pioneering affordable housing options. The project's aim was to foster conversations about solutions to the challenges of housing instability and homelessness among elders in the Pensacola community.

The tiny homes are the customizable Incred-I-Box model, manufactured by Tennessee-based company Incredible Tiny Homes. At 8-feet wide and 16-feet long, the units definitely fit the descriptor of tiny, while also containing the basic needs of any home: bathroom with shower, an aesthetically pleasing woodblock kitchen counter and sink, and space for small appliances and a futon or daybed that would serve as both a bed and sitting area.

"We hope this investment spurs interest in tiny homes as a viable option for affordable housing



for vulnerable seniors and others in our community,” says Josh Newby, president/CEO of Council on Aging. “This could also be a great option for a tiny home park or village, or for caregivers who may be interested in units like these as an accessory dwelling unit where an elderly loved one can live with independence and support nearby.”

Coming in at \$20,000 each, the units are a blank slate and are on trailers. Because of the way they’re manufactured and the fact that they are on a trailer and can be moved, the Incred-I-Box units are categorized as RVs, which prohibits their use as an ADU by some local ordinances. With \$10,000 remaining, we set out to transport and furnish the two homes, as well as identify local seniors to live in them.

Finding appropriate candidates to live in the tiny homes proved to be a challenge—the first of many—with most case-managed clients being a poor fit due to having pets or mobility issues that would make the small space unsafe or limiting. Several senior volunteers visited the homes and while they loved the idea, they found the space just too small. When a congregate dining site participant mentioned to the site manager that she was living in her vehicle, the site manager took her information and passed it on. This participant was overjoyed at the prospect of a home of her own.

Pensacola Habitat offered to be a partner and house the units in their gated lot and assist with some of the many tasks that needed to be completed to get the homes ready. The Pensacola State College carpentry program instructor agreed to have students build stairs for each unit as a class project. Press coverage for the

project brought journalists to Habitat to tour the empty homes and see the progress as a volunteer painted the interior. Each article was an opportunity to discuss the challenges faced by seniors on fixed incomes in our community and throughout the state, and the need for changes to county land use codes that would mirror the more flexible ordinances in the city.

Behind the scenes, agency spokespeople participated in the newly-elected Mayor’s transition team for attainable housing focus area meetings and spoke at the City’s ad hoc affordable housing committee, making recommendations to the County’s planning and zoning board. Rick Dye, a partner on the project, towed an Incred-I-Box to City Hall after a last-minute invitation to a town hall with the City’s housing department, and attendees were able to see the home and ask questions about the project following the meeting.



We hope this investment spurs interest in tiny homes as a viable option for affordable housing for vulnerable seniors and others in our community.”

In mid-December, a case manager at Council on Aging was working with a client, Beverly Monroe, living in terrible conditions in a trailer that was open to the elements and infested with roaches and rats. She was being evicted and had nowhere to go. The plan for the grant project was altered and staff moved quickly to get the second unit ready and acquire appropriate appliances and furniture as a lot was identified in a mobile home and RV park just six miles from Pensacola Habitat.

After surmounting the challenges of hooking up water and sewage lines, installing appliances, assembling furniture, putting up shelves, and outfitting the space with small necessities like dish towels and a shower rod and curtain, Beverly received the title to her new home and moved into the unit. On a brisk Friday morning local news visited the home and later that day shared her story with the Gulf Coast community.

The next step was securing a lot for the other unit, which initially was planned to be in the same park as Beverly's, but the second lot was no longer available. Luckily, after several weeks of searching, a lot in a park

just down the street was identified and the process to complete and move the second unit is currently in motion.

The immense effort required to prepare two new tiny home units and navigate the red tape of placing them to house these two seniors is but a microcosm of the wider struggle to provide adequate and affordable housing for a growing elder population. Council on Aging continues to advocate for a county land use ordinance that mirrors the more flexible City codes, which would allow for a greater variety of housing solutions in the county. Another ideal outcome would be an organization that deals directly with housing efforts taking this project idea to the next level, creating a village or park with Incred-I-Box units specifically for seniors at an affordable rental rate. While the housing of two seniors in need has been undoubtedly a success, the wider goal of the project is to produce a meaningful change to both local ordinances and to the mindset of civic leaders that will have an ongoing impact on the state of housing in this community.



Image of decorated Incred-I Box model from incredibletinyhomes.com



Cheech Marin

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

BY KELLY ODEN

CHEECH MARIN is a multi-talented entertainer known for his acting, writing, directing, music and humanitarian work. Best known as one-half of the satirical comedy duo Cheech and Chong, Marin has been entertaining audiences for more than six decades.

Born Richard Marin in South Central Los Angeles, his career took off when he met Tommy Chong in Canada. The duo's eight films, including the highest-grossing comedy of 1978, *Up In Smoke*, made them a cultural phenomenon. After a split with Chong, Marin wrote, directed and starred in the comedy *Born in East L.A.* He has since appeared in more than 20 films, including roles in eight of Robert Rodriguez's movies, and guest appearances on several TV sitcoms, including *Lost* and *Jane the Virgin*.

Marin's passion for Chicano art has earned him recognition as a leading advocate in the field. His private collection of Chicano art is regarded as one of the finest in the world, and his inaugural exhibition, *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*, broke attendance records during its 15-city tour across the United States from 2001 to 2007. The collection is now the core of The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture of

the Riverside Art Museum, which opened in June 2022. Marin's long-term goal is to supplement and expand the collection with Chicano artists, media and subject matter not currently included, through acquisitions and donations from artists and their estates, art collectors, dealers and institutions.

In addition to his entertainment career, Marin has also developed his own brand of specially-curated cannabis, Cheech's Stash. Along with his daughter and son, Marin has personally selected strains and worked with master growers to produce a natural selection of quality cannabis products, representing more than four decades of legendary experience.

In 2017, Marin published his memoir titled, *Cheech is Not My Real Name... But Don't Call Me Chong!* He is also the author of children's books, including *Cheech the School Bus Driver*.

Today, Marin spends his time between Pacific Palisades and Joshua Tree, California, where he resides with his wife Natasha Marin.

Coming of Age had the pleasure of speaking with Marin about his impressive career, his dedication to Chicano art and his nearly lifelong appreciation of cannabis.



COA: Hi Cheech. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I understand that you grew up in South Central Los Angeles. What were you like as a young boy? Were you shy or outgoing?

CM: I was fairly outgoing because I was funny. I was a singer, a musician and an entertainer. I knew very early in my life that I wanted to be in show business. That's what I was aiming for. But I was very studious, too. I was a good kid. I was an altar boy. I was a member of the choir. I got the religion award. I went to Catholic school and I was on my way to the seminary until I discovered girls, and that put a screeching halt to that.

COA: As it has for so many young men, I'm sure.

CM: There's still an argument that priests should be allowed to marry. It would solve a lot of problems.

COA: Indeed. It might surprise many that you were so studious because of the characters that you play—particularly in the Cheech and Chong movies. It wasn't until you were in college that you first tried marijuana, correct?

CM: Yeah. It was the first time I was off the leash and on my own. I realized that I could resist anything except temptation.

COA: What was that initial experience like?

CM: At first it was a hush-hush thing. It was highly illegal, but the knowledge of it was spreading as the first baby boomers started hitting college. Once they were off the leash, they started experiencing a lot of different things—me among them. I came home to a party in my apartment one night. My roommates were having a little get together and it was really smoky in there. One of my roommates hands me this joint. I said, 'What is it?' He said, 'It's marijuana, try it.' I took a hit and by the time that joint came around again, I was high. The only thought that came to my mind right then was, 'What else have they been lying about? This isn't the devil drug that everybody painted it out to be.' I was really relaxed, happy and listening to music. So began my lifelong partnership with marijuana. I still smoke to this day. Not as much, but just enough to get me high.

COA: Has the experience changed over the years?

CM: As time goes on, these strains do get more refined, stronger and more specifically directed to what you need them to do. You know, we used to say, "What if marijuana really is good for you and has medical benefits?" They all laughed then, but they're not laughing now. Now, all the baby boomers use it for a sleep aid or

pain relief. They like the edibles. I had my second knee replacement operation a while ago. For the first surgery, I was prescribed opioids and it was just the worst. They took forever to work and then they stopped working. I kept getting depressed at the end when I had to wean off of them. I put off doing the next operation for ten years because I didn't want to go through that detox. For the second surgery, I use dabs instead of opioids. Dabs are a marijuana concentrate that you smoke through a special instrument, which is like a bong. That cleared my pain and the recovery was two months instead of six. Plus, I didn't have to detox off dabs like you do with opioids.

COA: You studied English literature in college. How did you become interested in literature?

CM: I was always interested in reading. I had a very intense group of cousins. They all really wanted to do extra things besides those things being taught in school. We all went to Catholic school and had a liberal arts education. We all read and we always encouraged each other to read new things. We turned each other on to new books or things that would interest us. When I went to college, I thought maybe I'd be a lawyer. That's what my dad wanted me to be. I took one semester of political science and I said, 'That's not for me.' I enjoyed reading, so I became an English major.

COA: At the end of your college years, the Vietnam War was raging and you were adamantly opposed to it. Is it true that you moved to Canada to avoid the draft?

CM: Partially. It was a two-fer. In my last semester of college, I took a pottery class and I freaked out. I gave up everything to make pottery. I thought I'd found my calling—that my destiny was to be a potter. My pottery teacher in college knew my position on the draft and he turned me on to an ex-student who had moved to Canada to start a pottery shop. My professor said, 'Well, maybe he needs an assistant.' That's all I needed. I got on the next Greyhound and took it up to Canada. That also coincided with me being a part of the draft resistance movement. We were involved in a lot of anti-war activities. We turned in our draft cards and protested at the draft center. They were after us. General Hershey was in charge of the draft and he said that anybody who did any of those things would be reclassified, drafted and sent to the frontlines in Vietnam. Everybody said this was a First Amendment issue and was obviously going to be dissolved, but that we would spend a number of years in prison for dodging and protesting. I said, 'Well, not me. I'm a potter.' I was in Canada for three years. That's when I met Chong. At the end of the day, when I came back to the U.S., the case went to the sixth circuit appellate court and got thrown out, as everybody thought it would. They tried to redraft me, but I had broken my leg skiing in Canada, so I got 4-F'd out of the draft. Lucky break, I guess.

COA: Lucky break, for sure! It was in Canada that you met Tommy Chong. How did you meet?

CM: I ran into one of my old schoolmates from high school. He had started a magazine with a friend in Canada. He was the editor and his friend was the publisher. It was a rock and roll magazine and he offered me a job as a writer doing record reviews and interviews and stuff. During my time there, the publisher said, 'Hey, I've got this guy you've got to meet. You guys would really get along. He's a musician, but he's doing this improvisational theater in a topless bar in Vancouver.' Right away, I'm

interested. That's how I met Tommy and found out about the nefarious activities he was up to.

COA: Do you remember a moment when you realized that you two had something special as a comedic duo?

CM: After the improvisation troupe we were doing broke up, we needed to figure out what we were going to do next. We decided to stay together as a duo and form a band because we were both musicians. I was a singer and he was a guitar player. We were a band that would also do little comedy bits. We thought we'd play lounges or maybe we'd get a gig in Vegas or something. That was our goal. Our first gig was at a battle of the bands in Vancouver. We thought we'd warm up with a couple of these comedy bits and then go into the music. We came out and the crowd stopped what they were doing and they came to the front of the stage. We did the bits and we never got to play

music—and we won the battle of the bands! That's when we knew there was something special about what we were doing.

COA: I love that. You worked with Tommy Chong for decades, and then you guys went off and did your own things and had a little cooling off period. You started working together again in the late 2000s. What is your relationship like now and how has it evolved over time?

CM: It's pretty good right now. We came back together because we knew that the only thing we didn't argue about is what we did on stage. You tell a joke and if they laugh, it's funny. If they don't laugh, it's not funny. There was nothing subjective about it. We decided to do that and it was a big hit. We've been touring ever since, but now quit the stage because it was becoming too hard physically on the both of us. We were getting injuries and stuff. But right now we're fine. We're looking at making a movie together and we'll see what happens.



Work from Cheech Marin's collection at The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture of the Riverside Art Museum.

COA: I read that there may be a new Cheech and Chong feature film in the works.

CM: That's what we're working on right now.

COA: Can you tell me anything about it?

CM: Not really. I'll just say it picks us up later in life and kind of recaps a little bit of what we've been doing.

COA: People are going to love it. Let's talk about art. You've been an art lover since childhood. I read that your cousins would assign each other things to study. You got assigned art and from there, you sort of fell in love with it.

CM: I did. That's exactly how it happened. I didn't know how you study art. I went to the library and took out all the art books or looked through them. And in that way, I acquainted myself with Western and Eastern art. That study fascinated me because when you're raised Catholic, you know basically religious art was art. We didn't have any art outside of that.

COA: You became particularly interested in Chicano art and you became a major collector of the genre. Why is this art important to you and what do you hope people take away from seeing your collection?

CM: I'd like them to gain an appreciation of what Chicano culture is, how widespread it is, how long it's been going on and what a wonderful, beautiful school of art it is. Chicano art is obviously about Chicano culture. It started in the late 60s as the visual face of a political movement and a civil rights movement. So it was very political at first. Then, very quickly, all the artists went out into their own private artistic concerns—whether it was family or religion or gender or history—whatever they were interested in. It kept growing and growing. Now we're into maybe our fourth generation of Chicano artists. It's art history and an aesthetic more than anything. It pulls from various viewpoints, so when you put all pieces of the pie together, you get a 360 of what the culture kind of looks like, feels like, smells like and tastes like. These are great artists and they are representing Chicano culture in 1,000 shades of brown—with different emotions and different histories that have been going on for a long time. And, so, circumstances finally happened that allowed us to have our own museum in Riverside, California. That's where the collection resides right now and in perpetuity.

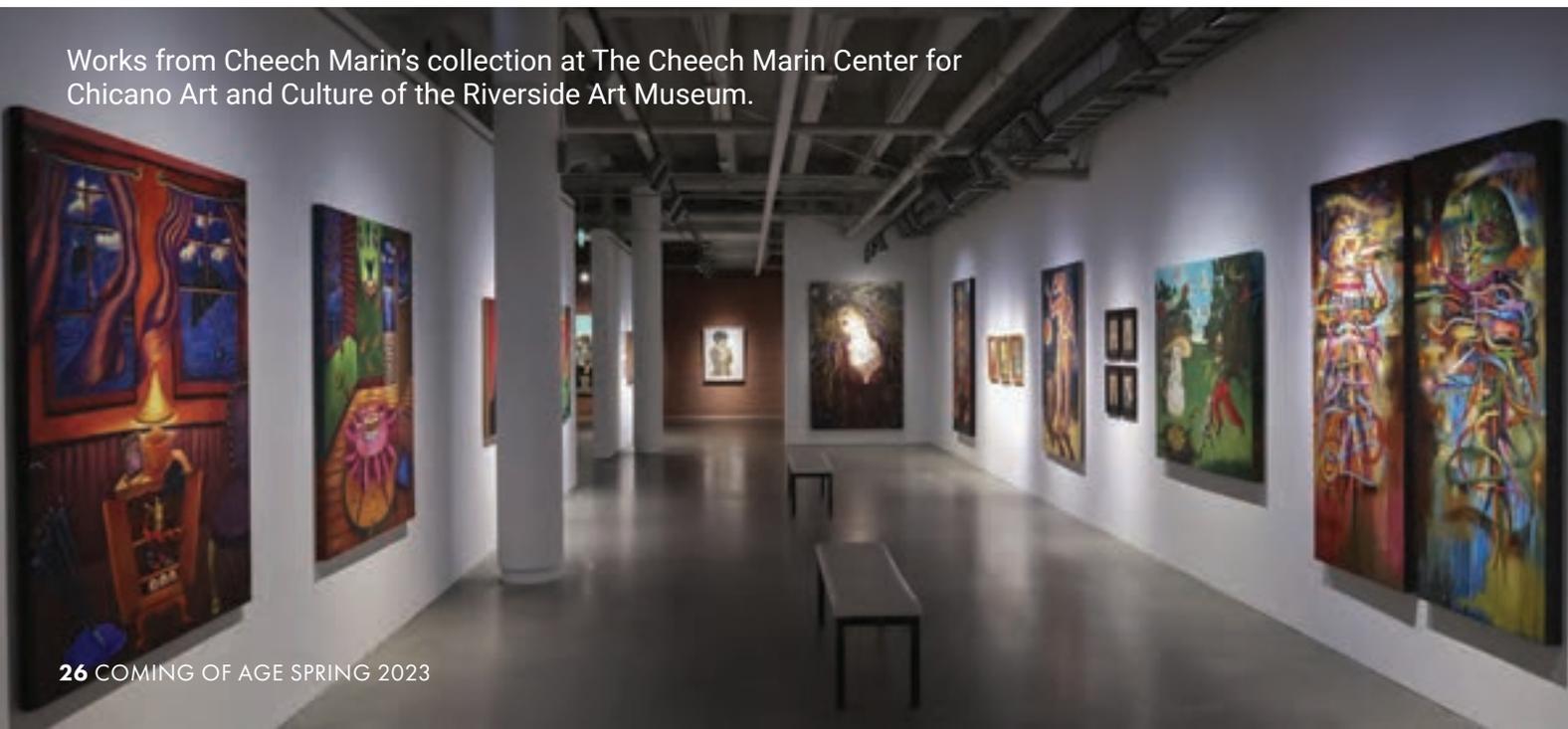
COA: As you mentioned, you recently opened The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture of the Riverside Museum in Riverside, California. It's affectionately called the Cheech. Tell me about the facility and how the idea emerged and eventually became reality.

CM: The building itself is a beautiful mid-century building. It's just beautiful. I had been touring the collection for around 40 years in different countries and in different iterations. I was doing a works on paper show from the collection at the Riverside Museum. It was a huge hit. It was the biggest show they'd ever had attendance-wise. The town manager, Tom Russo, came up with the idea. I didn't understand what they were saying at first. I said, 'Do you want me to buy a museum? Well, I'm doing pretty good, but I don't know if I'm museum rich.' He goes, 'No, we want to give you the museum to house the collection.' I thought that sounded like a good idea. They can take care of it and I'll oversee it and everybody will be able to come in anytime they want to see the collection. That's what we've done. We opened in June of 2022 and we were recognized as one of the top 15 shows in the world last year.

COA: How do you see the Cheech evolving over the years?

CM: To open the museum, we installed the painting collection. It is going to take more than five years to go through my entire collection—one time. Everybody's excited about that. But, it's also a cultural center and we want to represent different aspects of the culture. The next thing we're going to tackle is a film project at the museum. Robert Rodriguez and I are in discussions about him heading that department and establishing his program of how to make

Works from Cheech Marin's collection at The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture of the Riverside Art Museum.





a film with \$7,000. We're going to teach that and turn it into a contest every year. So, it's a bunch of different things. We'd like to have a print atelier at some point, so we can start doing our own prints, posters and printed objects.

COA: How many works from your collection are housed in the museum?

CM: I think the initial gift was 570 paintings. It's a big collection. It was probably the biggest collection and it was certainly the most valuable because I've been collecting for a long time.

COA: Do you see the Cheech as your legacy more so than the acting and comedy career or is it a mixture?

CM: I think it's getting to be that people recognize that more than anything else right now—especially the younger people. The younger audience doesn't even know that there were records. Right?

COA: You really are a renaissance man. You've done comedic work, dramatic work and voiceovers. You've written books. You're a musician, a businessman and an art collector. How did those different pursuits inform each other? Do you see them all as connected in a way and is there one that you enjoy the most?

CM: They're all connected because you learn very quickly that as a Chicano you have to have three jobs at all times. I taught

my children that and now they have three jobs at all times. They say, 'Hey dad, I just got my third job.' Okay, good. You're officially a Chicano. It's from doing that and being interested in a lot of different things. I was just a curious kid. What was really fostered in those early days between my cousins and me was that we acquired the love of learning. Once you acquire the love of learning, everything is interesting. It's the love of learning. It serves you all of your life.

COA: As I mentioned, we're a publication for seniors and you are 76 years old. Do you have any secrets for maintaining your health as you age?

CM: Exercise every day. Do something. It doesn't have to be strenuous, but do some exercise every day. Do some kind of spiritual activity that centers you, as well. It doesn't have to be religious, but do something that centers you because it sharpens your instinct. Instinct is the sharpest tool that we have to navigate life. When our instinct is clear, we can make really good decisions.

COA: I like that advice. Are there any other projects on the horizon that you'd like for our readers to know about?

CM: You know, the Cheech is taking up so much of my time, but I just had this movie called *Shotgun Wedding* come out with Jennifer Lopez and a great cast and crew. In March, I have a movie called *Champions* coming out. That's with me

and Woody Allen. I just saw it and it's really good. It's a remake of a Spanish film called *Campeones*. It is really heartwarming, funny and interesting. I won't say anymore about it, but it's going to be amazing. I have another movie coming out called *The Long Game*. It's a golf movie and it takes place in the mid-50s. Some Chicanos in Del Rio, Texas win the state championship, while not able to play on their own home course with their caddies.

COA: I can't wait to see them all. What was it like to work with Jennifer Lopez?

CM: It was fun. She was a producer and she was very on top of every aspect of it. She showed up on time, knew all her lines, didn't mess around and she was very cool. She takes on a lot of responsibility and has a zillion different projects going on. It was nice to kind of be in that whirlwind for a little while.

COA: What's your idea of a perfect day?

CM: The perfect day starts off with getting up whenever I want to. There's no alarm clock. I don't have to get up and meet a deadline on a project or anything. I would just sit around and maybe have a nice breakfast with my wife and talk over things. I'd do a little writing. In the middle of the afternoon, I'd smoke a big bowl and play music for the rest of the day. Then, I'd cook dinner.

What's The News?



Granny Get-Down Raises More Than \$6,000 for Senior Volunteer Programs

The Granny Get-Down Cooked Food Competition took place March 4 at Bayview Senior Center, raising more than \$6,000 from sponsorships and ticket sales. The competition is among AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers from COA's Foster Grandparents and Senior Companion programs. Contestants cooked up their specialties and guests purchased tasting boxes to judge the savory and sweet selections during the event. Both senior volunteer programs are for eligible, active seniors 55 and up who want to stay engaged and offer their skills in service to the community. Foster Grandparents serve in child development centers and schools to mentor children and assist in a classroom. Senior Companions are paired with another older adult who needs assistance with daily activities to continue living independently at home.





March for Meals 2023

Each March, Meals on Wheels celebrates the historic day in 1972 when a national nutrition program for seniors was added to the Older Americans Act. This legislation supported the rapid growth of the Meals on Wheels network that now collectively serves 2.8 million seniors each year. In the last year, Council on Aging and our volunteers have delivered 93,950 meals to more than 400 clients in our community. To mark this occasion, Council on Aging participated in the March for Meals initiative where we work with prominent locals to take part in a meal delivery to promote the program. Pensacola Mayor D.C. Reeves participated for his second year in a row with a visit to a client and her adorable new puppy, Shiloh.



National Social Work Month

March is National Social Work Month and we're celebrating our hardworking Social Services team here at Council on Aging. These caring, professional individuals are the first line of defense for the clients we serve and are often the unsung heroes of the work we

do at this agency. They see some of the most challenging situations and put in massive effort to carry out assessments, complete extensive documentation, connect clients with the appropriate resources, and often simply give a listening ear to those who are struggling.

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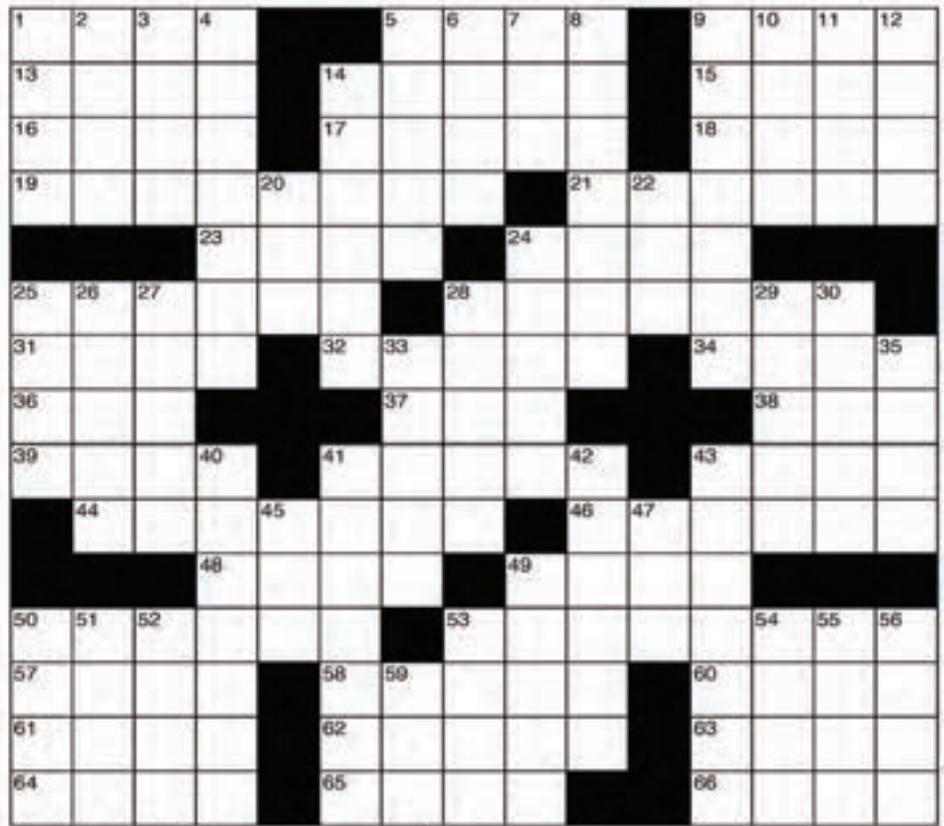
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Spring Crossword

Across

- 1..... Reduce (abbr.)
 5..... Support
 9..... Grows under ground
 13..... Fit
 14..... Vice ____
 15..... Land mass
 16..... Black
 17..... Iranian's neighbor
 18..... Campers dwelling
 19 Small coconut almond cookie
 21..... Sounds
 23..... Chase from solid to liquid state
 24..... The alphabet
 25..... Painter Georgia ____
 28..... Covered with "out"
 31..... Movement of air over the surface of the earth
 32..... Formed a pot
 34..... Outlet
 36..... Terminal abbr.
 37..... Sky
 38..... Thai
 39..... Factor of ten
 41..... Quests
 43..... Femur
 44..... Boiling
 46..... Followed
 48..... Sleep
 49..... Neither warm nor very cold
 50..... Word in U.S.S.R.
 53..... Barrow (2 wds.)
 57..... Belief
 58..... Oval
 60..... Listen
 61..... Carol
 62..... Rhone
 63..... Canal
 64..... Goofs
 65..... 365 days
 66..... Terminated



By Jimmy and Evelyn Johnson - www.qets.com

Down

- 1..... Excuse me!
 2..... Baby's "ball"
 3..... Coalition
 4..... Given a new title
 5..... Ross ____, philanthropist
 6..... Asian country
 7..... Lawyer's title
 8..... Colored arch in sky
 9..... Thin cloth
 10..... Avails
 11..... Straight mark
 12..... Flying mammals
 14..... Purple
 20..... Arbiter
 22..... Halloween mo.
 24..... Notify
 25..... Outstanding
 26..... Flying toys
 27..... Represent

- 28..... Take with you
 29..... Glorify
 30..... Waitress on "Cheers"
 33..... What a ghost does
 35..... Same score
 40..... Lofty (pl.)
 41..... Past
 42..... Brief fall of rain
 43..... Burped
 45..... Bitsy
 47..... Billion years
 49..... Supply food
 50..... Cosine's partner
 51..... Smell
 52..... Swerve
 53..... Rock
 54..... Air (prefix)
 55..... Water that falls from the sky
 56..... Birch
 59..... Rival

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Council on Aging of West Florida is a local independent 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization that has served seniors and their families since 1972. Council on Aging of West Florida helps seniors in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties live healthy, safe and independent lives in their own familiar surroundings by providing community-based, in-home programs and services such as Meals on Wheels and Alzheimer's respite care. For more information, call 850-432-1475 or visit www.coawfla.org.

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