



The ballet will feature performers from across the Heartland.

Holiday Classic Returns To SFSC

Special To The Herald-Advocate

The Columbia City Ballet returns to South Florida State College (SFSC) with the holiday classic *The Nutcracker* on Sunday, Dec. 4, at 3 p.m. in the 1,460-seat Alan Jay Wildstein Center for the Performing Arts on the Highlands Campus in Avon Park, Fla.

The *Nutcracker* Ballet tells the story of young Clara who receives a magical nutcracker at a Christmas Eve party from her Uncle Drosselmeyer. In a scuffle with her brother, the Nutcracker is broken. Uncle Drosselmeyer repairs the nutcracker, the party guests depart, and Clara sleeps under the Christmas tree to protect her Nutcracker.

As she sleeps, mice and their Rat Queen invade the parlor. The Nutcracker magically comes to life and battles the mice. As she is about to be defeated, Clara strikes the Rat Queen with her shoe, saving her Nutcracker, who then becomes a handsome prince.

The prince takes Clara on a fantastic journey to the Land of Snow where they meet the Snow Queen. She then travels to the Land of the Sweets where she meets Mother Ginger, Spanish Hot Chocolate, Bon Bons, Candy Cane Twists, and the Sugar Plum Fairy.

"This is a gorgeous production with a magic Christmas tree, toys that come to life, and a joyous woodland snow scene," said Cindy Garren, director of SFSC Cultural Programs.

Columbia City Ballet Executive Director William Starrett auditioned local children in October to perform a variety of roles with the professional company. Nancy McDuffee, a Sebring resident, is the local ballet mistress who has been rehearsing the young dancers since October.

The local cast includes:

Mice: Sophia Schlosberg, Ariana Bhandare, Finley Grace Pleger, Addison Philmon, Emmy Bury, Alice Penfield, Gabriella Alvarez, Haygan Hazeltine, Olivia

Kelsey, Audrey LeClair, Ariella Arceo, Shelby Seymour, Adeline LeClair, and Helena Muhammad

Cherubs: Sophia Schlosberg, Ariana Bhandare, Finley Grace Pleger, Addison Philmon, Emmy Bury, Adeline LeClair, Helena Babbitt, Ariella Arceo, Shelby Seymour, and Helena Muhammad.

Gingerbread Girls: Aubrey Dumbleton, Olivia Kelsey, Haygan Hazeltine, Gabriella Alvarez, Alice Penfield, Marleigh Miller, Noelia Barajas, and Makenna Smith.

Bon Bons: Bailey Toney (lead), Mila Meredith, Lincoln O'Donovan, Raelin Corcoran, Tenley Cole, Maci Duncan, Finley Ryan, Charlee Veale, Caroline Gillman, Adelyn Sheffield, Allison Wall, Carlee Shelton, and Piper Smith.

Lead Angels: Taylor Leidel, Paige Jahna, Sofiya Balikowsky, and Sophia Shaffer

Archangels: Bailey Toney, Shayla Farrow, Camille Schwartz, McKenzie Pletcher, Annandra Ramkisson, Zoe Pletcher, and Isabella Conklin

Angels: Goldie Gedeon and Sarah Smith.

Gift Givers: Goldie Gedeon, Audrey LeClair, Everli Himrod, Cypress Albritton, and Savannah Somarriba.

Cinnamon Twists: Bailey Toney, Taylor Leidel, Shayla Farrow, Sofiya Balikowsky, Sophia Shaffer, and Paige Jahna.

Sugar Plum Fairy Attendants: Charlie Veale, Raelin Corcoran, Allison Wall, Lincoln O'Donovan, Maci Duncan, and Tenley Cole.

Tickets can be purchased online at sfscarts.org or by visiting the Wildstein Box Office on the Highlands Campus of SFSC, at 600 West College Drive in Avon Park. Tickets are \$30, \$35, and \$40.



COURTESY PHOTOS

The Nutcracker will take the stage Dec. 4 at South Florida State College in Avon Park.

Darlene Love's only Florida show at SFSC

By **JIM ERVIN**

CORRESPONDENT

AVON PARK — Darlene Love, the voice of the Christmas classic, “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home),” performs at South Florida State College Dec. 13 at 7 p.m. It is her only Florida performance of the tour.

The Grammy winning artist also has performed and recorded the No. 1 hit “He’s a Rebel,” “He’s a Fine, Fine Boy,” “Wait Til My Bobby Gets Home,” and “All Alone on Christmas” which was featured in the “Home Alone 2: Lost in New York” film.

Love was born Darlene Wright on July 26, 1941, in Los Angeles to Ellen Maddox and Reverend Joe Wright. Her younger sister Edna Wright grew up to be the lead singer of the group Honey Cone. Love has been singing and performing most of her life. At the age of 10 years old she began singing in her father’s church.

“My father was a pastor,” Love stated. “I had three brothers and a sister. And we were always involved in singing mainly because of our church. Because

when your father is the pastor, you’re in every part of the service from Sunday school all the way up to evening service on Sundays.”

At the age of 16, Love began working as a professional singer. This would lead to a very fortuitous meeting with world-renowned producer known for his “wall-of-sound” production style, Phil Spector.

“Back in 1957 is when I really started doing background singing,” Love recalled. “Phil Spector’s partner was a gentleman named Lester Sill. We had been doing a lot of work for him in recording sessions. When Phil was looking for somebody to record ‘He’s A Rebel,’ Lester told him, ‘I know somebody that you can probably use. And that’s actually how we started; how I met Phil.’”

Love has worked with many legends of the 1960s, including Sam Cooke, Dionne Warwick, Bill Medley, the Beach Boys, Elvis Presley, Tom Jones and Sonny and Cher. As an actress, Love performed in several Broadway productions. She had a recurring role as Roger Murtaugh’s



GREG ALLEN/INVISION/AP FILE PHOTO

Singer Darlene Love performs at the “Right To Rock Benefit” at Cipriani Wall Street, on Thursday, Oct. 17, 2013 in New York.

(played by Danny Glover) wife in the “Lethal Weapon” film series.

One would wonder, having worked with so many legends, was there a favorite?

“I got to meet and work with Dionne Warwick for 10 years. So to say as a favorite, it would be her because I had more in common with her. But one of my favorites that I actually worked with was Sam Cooke. The other one would be Elvis Presley because knowing his life and everything that he was doing at that time.”

Rolling Stone has ranked Love among the 100 greatest singers of all-time. She was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2011. Among her many accomplishments, Love is featured in the Oscar-winning documentary film “20 Feet From Stardom” (2013), for which she won a Grammy Award.

Fans can expect a night full of fond musical memories with a warm Christmas theme at the performance.

“I do a medley of all my old songs. We call it the



EVAN AGOSTINI/INVISION/AP FILE PHOTO

Alton Allison, left, and Darlene Love arrive at the 74th annual Tony Awards at Winter Garden Theatre on Sunday, Sept. 26, 2021, in New York.

‘60s Medley.’ I tell people the reason why I can do all of them is because they don’t realize that when these songs were recorded they were only like a minute-and-a-half long,” Love said with a laugh. “We just do the whole song. I have some songs in the show that I really love and then you have ‘Christmas (Baby Please Come Home).’

“I do a lot of talking in

my show. I found out over the years that people really do want to know what you’ve been doing. So it makes it a little easier on me too. I don’t have to work as hard when I can tell stories,” Love laughs in closing.

Tickets are available online at sfscARTS.org, by phone at 863-784-7178, or by visiting the SFSC Box Office at 600 West College Drive in Avon Park.

Leitzel, SFSC president, to retire in June

Special to the Highlands News-Sun

Dec 10, 2022

AVON PARK — Dr. Thomas Leitzel, who has served as president at South Florida State College (SFSC) since July 1, 2013, announced his plans to retire from the College on June 30, 2023. At the time of his retirement, Leitzel will have served the higher education profession for 45 years, with service at seven institutions in six states. He quickly credits his experience in the state of Florida and with the Florida College System (FCS) as the pinnacle of his service. He was the fourth president of SFSC, succeeding presidents Norman L. Stephens, Catherine P. Cornelius, and William Stallard.

During his years at SFSC, he promoted the growth of the College and community partnerships, both private and public. Several new programs were developed including the Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, mechatronics and advanced manufacturing, construction technologies, and a complete restructure of the College's commercial vehicle training and welding programs. SFSC's newest degree program, surgical services technology, began in the fall of 2022.

Leitzel gave leadership to developing the College's new Vision Statement during the College's 50th Anniversary celebration in 2015. During that same year, the facility housing the College's visual and performing arts center was named the Alan Jay Wildstein Center for the Performing Arts following the College's largest donation.

The SFSC Foundation endowment doubled in size during his 10 years of service. Two new construction projects are underway, including a new student housing project and an athletic field house that will anchor Fuschetti Park and the Saxon Field House, both privately supported property and facility enhancements planned for the Highlands Campus in Avon Park. Additionally, intercollegiate athletics expanded by adding an NJCAA Division II women's cross-country team to volleyball, softball, and baseball.

Several student success initiatives began under his leadership, including enhanced student success tracking software systems, a food bank to assist students with food insecurity, and mental health and wellness partnerships. In addition, the College has received numerous grants in recent years to assist with special initiatives and support growth opportunities amounting to over \$16 million. As the culmination of one of Leitzel's goals when he started at SFSC, the College advanced its efforts in providing faculty-directed applied research initiatives where students and faculty collaborate on research projects aimed at solving major issues impacting our region and our society. Numerous students and their faculty sponsors have published in prestigious academic journals as well as shared their research findings at regional and national academic conferences. Leadership in the College's Division of Arts and Sciences ensures the success of this program.

During 2022, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) reaffirmed the College's institutional accreditation for 10 years following an intensive three-year process of documenting compliance with established criteria for accreditation. SACSCOC also approved SFSC's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) which focuses on improving the attainment rates through advisement in the College's service region by way of an initiative called Panther Pathways. Also in 2022, the Aspen Institute recognized SFSC as one of the Top 25 colleges in the nation, a prestigious recognition that places SFSC in the top 2% of all colleges in its sector. In addition, SFSC has consistently been a top performer in the Florida College System (FCS), placing it as a leading college in two critical success measures — student completion and retention. Enrollment in credit programs throughout Leitzel's tenure has been strong. In fact, during and following the pandemic, credit enrollment remained stable. He is credited as leading institutional positioning initiatives and marketing efforts with various successful enrollment campaigns to keep the institution growing and providing support to the community in critical

workforce programs needed in the tri-county region of DeSoto, Hardee, and Highlands counties.

Locally, Leitzel serves on several boards, including the SFSC Foundation Board, Inc., AdventHealth Sebring and Wauchula, CareerSource Heartland, and Highlands County Industrial Development Authority and Economic Development Council. He served on the Sebring Chamber of Commerce board for two terms. He is an active member of the Florida College System Council of Presidents, serving as a co-chair of the marketing and communications committee. On the national level, Leitzel served as a member of the Higher Education Research and Development Institute and as a member of the president's advisory council for the Association of Community College Trustees. He has been a regular evaluator for SACSCOC.

Leitzel began his career by serving as a faculty member in business administration prior to entering the administrative ranks. He has taught numerous classes at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

He earned his Ph.D. in higher education from Virginia Tech. He earned a master's degree from Temple University and a bachelor's degree from Lycoming College. He participated in advanced graduate studies at the Pennsylvania State University and at the University of Maryland College Park.

Upon retirement and after several planned trips, Leitzel plans to remain in Florida and likely stay active in the higher education community by researching, writing and publishing.

Jeffrey Roth, First Inductee into the SFSC Panther Alumni Society Hall of Fame

Special to Highlands News-Sun from South Florida State College

AVON PARK — With the thousands of alumni and exceptional graduates that South Florida State College (SFSC) has nurtured since 1965, selecting an outstanding alumnus to the SFSC Panther Alumni Society Hall of Fame was a difficult task. In its inaugural year, SFSC's most prestigious alumni honor was awarded on Thursday, Dec. 8, during the SFSC Foundation's annual Christmas Luncheon at the Hotel Jacaranda in Avon Park. The award was presented to someone who has committed an entire career to serving his community — Jeffrey L. Roth.

"The SFSC Alumni Association is excited to present its first Panther Alumni Society Hall of Fame Award," said Anastasia Fuchser, coordinator, SFSC institutional advancement and alumni development. "The Foundation's advisory council felt compelled to recognize our alumni that are making a difference in and around their communities and career fields. We are proud of our Panther alumni and want to honor them with this award. We look forward to showcasing many more of our esteemed alumni in the coming years."

Roth currently serves as a financial advisor with Edward Jones from his office at the Hotel Jacaranda in Avon Park. He earned his associate in arts from SFSC in 1990 and went on to Webber International University where he graduated in 1994 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Management and a minor in finance. In 2012, he was awarded a Master of Arts in Management and Leadership from Webster University's George Herbert Walker School of Business & Technology. Roth returned to SFSC as an adjunct professor to teach project management from 2012 to 2014.

Much of Roth's renown in the community comes from his involvement with the Children's Advocacy Center in Sebring and The Rotary Club of Sebring. In nominating his father to the SFSC Panther Alumni Society Hall of Fame, Noah Roth illustrated his father's dedication to protecting children in our community when he said, "During his 15 years as a director, he coordinated a team of nine elements involved in child abuse investigation and treatment. [Those elements included a 54-person team from several local and state agencies.] The sole purpose for him waking

up each morning was to minimize the trauma of child abuse victims and provide prevention support to families needing assistance. This was a private, public partnership between the Highlands County Board of Commissioners and the Champion for Children Foundation of Highlands County."

Through Roth's application for grants and various private donations, the Children's Advocacy Center was awarded \$160,000 annually. Before leaving to join the Edward Jones Financial Firm, Roth oversaw a \$1.5 million construction project that allowed the Children's Advocacy Center to routinely facilitate 400-450 families annually.

"Through the leadership skills he had accumulated over the years, he was able to manage all facility, operational, promotional, educational, and budgetary matters concerned with the Children's Advocacy Center," Noah Roth said.

As a member of the Rotary Club of Sebring, Jeff Roth has invested countless hours of personal time to help raise funds to eradicate polio around the world, clean trash from roadsides during the club's "adopt a highway" program, as well as other club projects. Roth has been



COURTESY/SOUTH FLORIDA STATE COLLEGE

Jamie Bateman (left), SFSC vice president of institutional advancement and external affairs (who oversees the SFSC Foundation); Anastasia Fuchser, coordinator, SFSC institutional advancement and alumni development; Jeff Roth; and Kelly Dressel, chair, SFSC Alumni Association Council.

a member of The Rotary Club of Sebring for 28 years and served on its board for 16 years. "He did not join the organization for its stature or its look on an application, but because he is obsessed with enriching the lives of those around him," Noah Roth said. "The Rotary Club is one of the dozens of civic action organizations and professional boards he has sat on for the sole purpose of taking action in our community for a better tomorrow."

If Jeff Roth sounds like a real Boy Scout, he is. In fact, before graduating from high school, Roth

had earned a minimum of 21 merit badges, served a minimum of six months in a leadership position, completed an Eagle Scout Project, and passed a board of review to become an Eagle Scout, the highest rank attainable in the Boy Scouts of America. After graduating from SFSC in 1990, he took a job with the Gulf Ridge Council as senior district executive/camp director. In 2004, Roth was recognized for creating a culture where young men could learn leadership skills and was awarded the Citizen of the Year award

by the Calusa District Boy Scouts. The award is presented to community leaders who provide outstanding civic service to the adults and/or youth in the community.

"Jeffrey Roth is a man who inspires with his actions alone," Noah Roth said. "He serves not in hope of recognition, but for change to make the world a little better than he found it."

For more information about the Panther Alumni Society Hall of Fame, call the SFSC Alumni Association at 863-453-3133 or email alumni@southflorida.edu.

SFSC Fall Commencement celebrates academic accomplishment

Special to the Highlands News-Sun

PROVIDED BY SFSC

AVON PARK — South Florida State College (SFSC) celebrated the academic accomplishments of its graduates with a fall Commencement ceremony held on Thursday, Dec. 15 in the SFSC Alan Jay Wildstein Center for the Performing Arts on the Highlands Campus in Avon Park.

Opening the ceremony, Terry Atchley, chair of the SFSC District Board of Trustees addressed the graduates: "Education is about growth, not just about grades. You have adapted and grown during these times, which has enriched you and added to your academic success. All the triumphs you and your fellow classmates shared together have created a remarkable bond and made your path unique. Graduates, as you embark on the next chapter in your lives, remember that SFSC is forever your home."

In his presentation to the graduates, Albert "A.J." Gall, who earns his Associate in Science Degree in Nursing (ADN) to become a registered nurse, said, "Sometimes, life can feel overwhelming. Sometimes you may fail upon trying to accomplish what you were destined for."

But Gall's journey brought him to SFSC after years of hesitation to take the first step toward a college education. His mother had been a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and wanted to become a nurse but it never worked out. Gall became infected with

his mother's enthusiasm for the profession and approached the College, and a student advisor encouraged him to apply and make his dream of becoming a nurse come true. Although he experienced a few hiccups in his first class at the College, he stayed the course and became an eager and successful student. Gall aspires to one day become a travel nurse. He also plans to further his nursing career and obtain a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) at SFSC.

"So, graduates, if you ever failed at something you felt driven to do, try again," Gall said. "You only fail when you give up. I did this for myself, a better life, my two boys, and my family. Look, Momma, I made it! Look, Graduates, we made it! Go Class of 2022!"

Dr. Thomas C. Leitzel, SFSC president, in his final fall Commencement before retiring in June 2023, told the graduates that he is a fan of a website called, "Six Word Stories." With a six-word story in mind, he said, "After we confer your degrees, I could say, 'You're now alumni; make a difference.' Then I thought, 'What if you had to write a one-word story, what would that one word be?'"

"My one word to summarize tonight is 'Proud.' You can be proud to be graduating from this institution, just like we are proud of you. I'll offer one final 'one word' to you ... Congratulations!"

Approximately 344 students will have met the SFSC requirements by fall Commencement.



COURTESY/SFSC

South Florida State College graduates look to the stage while Dr. Thomas Leitzel, college president, addresses the students.

Of these, 23 received their Bachelor of Science in Supervision and Management (BAS-SM), four received their Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), 103 received their Associate in Arts, 54 received their Associate in Science, 31 received their State of Florida High School Diploma, 13 received their College Credit Certificate (CCC), and 145 received Career Technical Certificates. In all, 125 graduates crossed the stage wearing academic regalia adorned with variously colored cords and sashes signifying their individual achievements.

Mace bearer and chief marshal for Commencement was Michelle Macbeth, and marshals were Joan Briand, Tom Bush, Rob Hampton, Mlisa Manning, Ricardo Pantoja, Dr. Mintoo Patel, Lena Phelps, Andy Polk, and Tina Stetson.



COURTESY/SFSC

South Florida State College graduate A.J. Gall (right) receives a plaque of recognition as the Commencement speaker from Dr. Mark Bukowski, dean of student services.

In addition to Atchley, other members of the SFSC District Board of

Trustees in attendance were Vice Chair Timothy D. Backer, Derren J.

Bryan, Tami Cullens, Kris Y. Rider, and Patrick "Joe" Wright.

Thursday, December 22, 2022

Manhattan Transfer 50th Anniversary and Final Tour at SFSC

Special to Highlands Sun

AVON PARK — Hailed as one of the world's greatest and most innovative vocal bands, 10-time Grammy Award winners, The Manhattan Transfer, will perform at the 1,460-seat Alan Jay Wildstein Center for the Performing Arts on the South Florida State College (SFSC) Highlands Campus in Avon Park on Tuesday, Jan. 10 at 7 p.m. The performance is sponsored by First Southern Bank and Dr. Catherine P. Cornelius.

Beginning with their first performances in the early 1970s, the members of the Vocal Group Hall of Fame have become cornerstones of contemporary music, known for their amazing versatility, incorporating pop, jazz, R&B, rock 'n' roll, swing, symphonic, and a cappella music. The original group consisted of founders Tim Hauser, Janis Siegel, Alan Paul, and Laurel Massé. Cheryl Bentyne (soprano) replaced Massé in 1979 and Trist Curless (bass) replaced Tim Hauser following his passing in 2014.

"It took a while to get a deal," Paul remembers. "We were selling out clubs in New York City, but no one would sign us. The labels thought we were not commercial and didn't want to take a risk. Bette Midler was a friend of Tim's and through her manager,



Aaron Russo, invited Ahmet (Ertegun) to our show in Philly and the rest is history."

The vocal group starred in their own 1975 CBS-TV variety series as a summer replacement for "The Cher Show." They gained international popularity when "Chanson D'Amour" became a surprise No. 1 hit in Europe in 1976. In 1981, The Manhattan Transfer became the first vocal group to win Grammy Awards in the pop and jazz categories in one year. In 1985, The Manhattan Transfer's "Vocalese" album made history as the single greatest Jazz Grammy-nominated album in history in one year with 12 nominations. The group's newest album, "Fifty," has been nominated for a 2023 Grammy Award for Best Jazz Vocal Album.

The group has also

recorded with an impressive roster of artists including Tony Bennett, Bette Midler, Smokey Robinson, Laura Nyro, Phil Collins, B.B. King, Chaka Khan, James Taylor, and Frankie Valli, and their music has been featured in numerous television shows and films.

"Expect an extraordinary live performance," said Cindy Garren, director of cultural programs at SFSC. "This isn't another tribute band. These are the artists that have made musical history and they are performing in our community."

Tickets start at \$55 and can be purchased online at sfscARTS.org. The Alan Jay Wildstein Center for the Performing Arts is located on the Highlands Campus of South Florida State College at 600 West College Avenue in Avon Park. The SFSC Box Office can be reached by



F SCOTT SCHAFER PHOTO

10-time Grammy Award winners, The Manhattan Transfer, will perform at the Alan Jay Wildstein Center for the Performing Arts on the South Florida State College (SFSC) Highlands Campus in Avon Park at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 10.