

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## Assessment notices to hit mailboxes soon after revaluation

### Many residents will see higher property values in 2021

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Now several years in the making, the countywide property revaluation process is nearly finished, with the company Union County Government hired to complete the task currently working to finalize data before turning it over to the Tax Assessor's Office.

When that happens – likely sometime this month – the Tax Assessor's Office will generate and mail tax assessment notices featuring revised values for all taxable residential and commercial real property in the county.

Revaluation is the

process of assessing property values using current market value to replace antiquated and inequitable assessment rolls, according to the county.

Counties that don't reassess property values as they become too low or too high face being penalized by the state and can even lose state and federal funding, as the Georgia Revenue Commissioner is required by state law to examine county digests to determine that property is assessed uniformly and equally.

And it's a process that is due to take place, with this year being the first comprehensive property revaluation since 2006, which will result in the total digest of real properties

increasing "significantly" following implementation of the revaluation, according to the county.

Exact numbers will be available after the Tax Assessor's Office receives finalized data from Georgia Mass Appraisal Solutions & Services, or GMASS, the company contracted to complete the job. GMASS is a third-party appraisal service specializing in such work.

In layman's terms, real property is defined as "all the sticks, bricks, and dirt as well as any interest or benefits that go along with it," according to GMASS CEO of Appraisal Services Stan King.

All told, more than

22,500 parcels are involved in the revaluation, including vacant property, homes, farms, commercial and industrial properties.

GMASS contracted with the county in April 2019 to conduct the revaluation for \$620,000, to be paid over two years. Field reviews of properties began in June 2019 and wrapped up in April 2021.

The company has completed all data collection on real properties in Union County and is working to collate the data into values for use by the Tax Assessor's Office for the mailing of assessment notices.

Aside from a handful of exceptions, due to the comprehensive nature of the

revaluation, all taxable real property values will change this year, though the number of values going up versus down will not be available until finalized figures are delivered later in June, per GMASS.

As a reassessment considers market values of all properties in the county, GMASS will be using values as of Jan. 1, 2021, for the purposes of revaluation. This will ensure the tax bills received by property owners include a current fair market value that is then taxed at 40% of the actual value.

Property owners who disagree with the assessed value of their proposed assessment may file an appeal with the Tax Assessor's Office, the process

See Revaluation, Page 2A



Lamar Paris  
Sole Commissioner

## Girl struck by church van in serious but stable condition

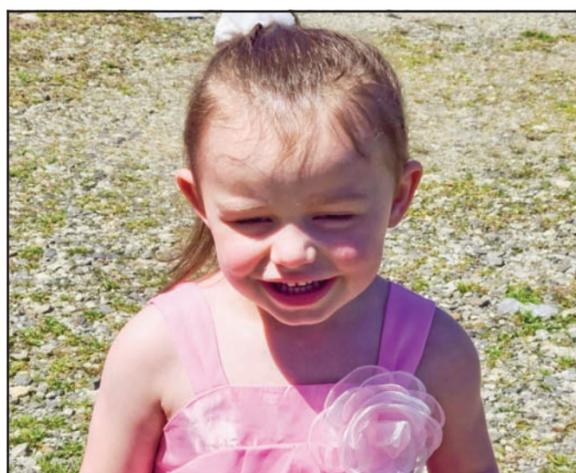
By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The 3-year-old girl who was struck by a church van on Sunday, May 23, is in serious but stable condition at Children's Egleston Hospital in Atlanta, according to her mother Kelly Thornton.

Resulting from the accident, young Kennedy Grace received several severe injuries for which she was being sedated and kept on a ventilator at press time, Thornton said, adding that, while her daughter has a long road ahead of her, "she's going to be OK."

The Thorntons are

See Kennedy Grace, Page 2A



Kennedy Grace Thornton

## Patriots gather for return of Memorial Day tradition

By Allison Youngblood  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

After being canceled in 2020 for COVID-19, the annual Memorial Day Ceremony made its patriotic return this past

Saturday with a large audience coming out to the Union County War Memorial Veterans' Park to observe the solemn occasion.

Despite the unseasonably cool winds and overcast skies, the ceremony was

neither disrupted nor delayed, beginning just before 10 a.m. May 29.

The Appalachian St. Andrew's Pipes and Drums kicked off the ceremony to

See Patriots Gather, Page 3A



The North Georgia Honor Guard retired the colors at the end of the May 29 Memorial Day Ceremony at War Memorial Veterans' Park. Photo by Allison Youngblood

## Twenty walk the stage for MECHS graduation ceremony

By Todd Forrester  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Twenty graduates accepted diplomas from Mountain Education Charter High School during the Union County Site Graduation on Thursday, May 27.

The Union County Schools Fine Arts Center hosted the event that featured graduates from Union and Towns counties, closing out MECHS' 29th year with the return of a traditional ceremony.

Due to COVID-19, last spring's exercises were limited to one student on stage at a time, with family briefly allowed to witness the graduate receiving their diploma before having to exit so the procedure could begin again for another graduate.

"This class has overcome

See MECHS Graduation, Page 6A



Having earned the highest GPA of her Union Site classmates, MECHS Class of 2021 Graduate Kyla Locklear delivered a High Honors address in the May 27 commencement exercises. Photo by Todd Forrester

## Farmers Market returning with lifted restrictions, some events

By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Union County Farmers Market makes its 2021 season opening debut with plenty of homegrown produce and handmade goods this Saturday, June 5.

Market Manager Mickey Cummings is excited for the opening and what looks to be an incredibly successful year complete with a full list of vendor reservations filling the stalls each week.

"We are looking forward to seeing everybody back again," Cummings said. "The COVID stuff, a lot of the restrictions have been lifted, so people can get out and about. Our (COVID) numbers are down, so I am looking forward

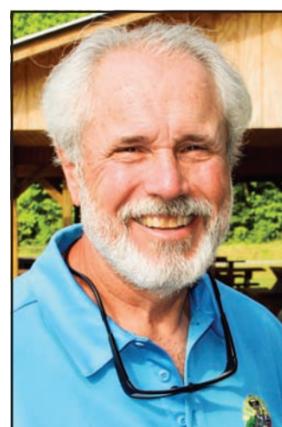
to a grand year.

"I think it's going to be good, and people can get out and enjoy themselves. Last year, we asked our vendors to wear masks, and we are going to encourage people to wear masks, but we are not going to require vendors to wear masks anymore."

Last year, because of COVID, the Farmers Market did not get to hold its usual suite of customer appreciation events throughout the season, such as Honeybee Jubilee and other tastings that brought crowds.

As restrictions are lifted, the Farmers Market will continue to evaluate the potential for adding events before giving them the greenlight.

"We are not planning a



Mickey Cummings  
Market Manager  
whole lot of events yet, but we will have some," Cummings said. See Farmers Market, Page 2A

## Local bikers celebrate birthday of domestic violence survivor

By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On Saturday, May 29, a courageous little girl named Abbigail Gordon celebrated her seventh birthday with a party at Galaxy Bowling.

She enjoyed her special day surrounded by family and friends and even a bunch of local motorcycle enthusiasts who surprised her with a visit.

Still, it was a bittersweet occasion, as Abbey is having to grow up way too fast for her tender young age, for she is a victim of domestic violence. Fortunately, she is overcoming her trauma and staying positive despite her hardships.

Her mother, Melissa Gordon, calls her daughter "my hero" and wants the public to know of the challenges Abbey has faced in her short life, as she sees her daughter being a

beacon of hope for others going through similar situations.

"I want people to know that she is a survivor, that she is an inspiration," Gordon said. "She is a domestic violence and child abuse victim, but we can't really go into detail on that. I just want her to feel loved and know she is supported."

For her party, Abbey was greeted by members of several motorcycle groups, including the United Warriors Riding Club, Old Souls Brotherhood, Remnant Sons and Heaven's Saints Motorcycle Ministry, which rode around the parking lot for her.

Abbey has loved motorcycles since she was younger and was thrilled to see so many for her birthday, noting that her favorite bike was that of her Uncle Dave "Spike" Murrin.

Murrin helped bring the



Abbigail Gordon turned 7 on Friday, May 28, and celebrated her birthday with family, friends and bikers Saturday. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

motorcycle groups together that day to surprise his niece, as he wanted to be there for the family and show others that bikers are caring and passionate

people.

"We all look out for family," Murrin said. "Family is very important in the biker community, especially children.

We want to let her know that she is protected and all she has to do is reach out.

"We also want to let people know that you don't have

to be scared of someone who is wearing a patch. Regardless of what the patch says, bikers have a horrible image. Granted, See Abbigail Birthday, Page 2A

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## Revaluation...from Page 1A

for which is detailed at the end of this article. The Tax Assessor's Office is fully prepared to handle any appeals stemming from the revaluation.

Commissioner Lamar Paris has spoken publicly on the revaluation several times in the last couple of years, and he wants the public to know that, while the process is necessary due to state law, people can and should appeal their values if they think an error has been made.

Not everyone's values will be going up, Paris said, noting that the Tax Assessor's Office regularly reassesses values each year, though the county simply doesn't have the staff or equipment to keep all property values as up to date as possible, especially given the rapid market changes over the past few years.

Paris hopes to be able to lower the property tax millage rate this year due to the revaluation, he said, adding that the county's budgetary needs could also potentially be offset some by all the new development being captured by revaluation.

Plus, sales and other tax collections are up year-to-date, and there's the upcoming funding the county is set to receive via the American Rescue Plan, though it's not yet clear what the county will be able to spend that money on or how much it will be able to use before the deadline.

He did point out that inflation is on the rise, and that even as revenues increase, so do expenses, but he maintains his hope of being able to lower the property tax rate after looking at projected budgetary needs later in the year.

The revaluation comes after last year's millage rate increase that proved unpopular with many members of the public. Still, Paris believes UnionCountians will understand that maintaining appropriate values is an important part of governing responsibly and keeping up public services.

"It is and has been an honor to serve the families of Union County over the past years as your county commissioner," Paris said in a message to the community. "It is a much higher honor to have had the opportunity to spend my life in Union County.

"Growing up in these mountains, I have watched our people work hard, sacrifice, endure hard times, send our loved ones off to war, sometimes never to return. We are a hard-working, patriotic people, always striving for a better future for our children and grandchildren.

"I get up every day thanking the Lord for this great place to live and ask for wisdom

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to serve you and work together to create a 'climate of success' that provides a community that is safe, healthy, educated, and growing at a reasonable rate for our families and businesses.

"Our public safety heroes do a great job protecting us. We have a rural hospital system that is one of the best in the state. Union County School System is doing an exceptional job preparing our young people for promising futures. Our business community is growing and providing good jobs.

"We have one of the best recreation programs of any county our size. People of all ages enjoy the beauty of our mountains, lake and Meeks Park. People from all over the country are visiting here and some moving here because of these factors.

"As elected leaders, it is incumbent on us to ensure that you, as taxpayers, receive a return on your tax investment that brings 'obvious greater value' to you and your family.

"As we go through this process, I want you to know that our folks in the Tax Assessor's Office are dedicated to providing a fair and transparent process that allows

for your input and adjustments, if necessary."

### Appeals Process for Assessments

Once assessment notices are received, property owners will have 45 days from the date of the notice to appeal if they do not agree with the value or did not get their homestead exemption.

The process to appeal can be done by calling the Union County Tax Assessor's Office at 706-439-6011, or by coming into the office located at 65 Courthouse Street, Suite 4, in Blairsville.

People may also fill out the online appeal form at <http://dor.georgia.gov/documents/property-tax-appeal-assessment-form>. This form must be printed and delivered to the Tax Assessor's Office. After the 45-day appeal process passes, the right to file an appeal for this year will be lost.

The assessment notice will show what the assessed value was last year, what the new value is, and the estimated tax will be calculated on the new 2021 value based on last year's county and school millage rates.

Before the tax bills go out later this year, the school

and county millage rates may be adjusted or may stay the same, depending on the budget requirements.

"This millage rate will be used to calculate property taxes based on the new assessed value, with the county goal being to always keep our property tax rate as low as possible while providing the best possible services and facilities to the public," Paris said.

Anyone who would like to see the breakdown of values for their land, house and accessory buildings can look online at <https://www.qpublic.net/ga/union/>. At the site, click the "Search Records" tab at the top. New assessed values are not yet available via qPublic.

"Some of the property values will not change much," Paris said. "However, there are a lot of properties in Union County that are valued at way less than their fair market value.

"Keep in mind, you don't pay property taxes based on the fair market value. The taxes are calculated based on the 40% assessed value.

"The Tax Assessor's Office can answer all your questions regarding this subject. That is their job, they do an excellent job, and it is what they are trained to do."

## Abbigail Birthday...from Page 1A

some of them deserve it. Ninety percent of us, though, will lay ourselves down for you."

Gordon hopes other families facing domestic violence or child abuse can find the courage to speak out and seek the help they need, because help is available.

"My biggest thing is the guilt aspect of it," Gordon said. "It is not the children's fault. They didn't cause it. I just want people to know that there are people like Abbigail, and there is a support system. It is scary. It is very scary.

"I guess I want people to speak out and have a voice about these things. Kids like her need groups of people that will be there and care and let them know that they are by their side."

As always, any victims of abuse or family members/friends of victims may reach out to the Union County Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066 to speak with an investigator.



Abbigail has been a fan of motorcycles since she was even younger than she is now, thanks largely to her Uncle Dave, who organized a surprise gathering of bikes at Galaxy Bowling May 29. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

## Farmers Market...from Page 1A

said. "We will have our Tractor Parade later on in September, and we will do some other things later on.

"We are going to pay real close attention to what the COVID number looks like, and we will plan according to that. Last year, we wouldn't allow any free samples of foods. This year, we are allowing our vendors to give free samples.

"They have to do it in a structured manner, meaning that they have to put it in a sealed container to be able to give it to people."

Added Cummings, "Our produce vendors will be here at the beginning of the season with cool-season crops. As we

get closer to July, we will start seeing some tomatoes and green beans and corn and that sort of thing."

Cummings is also excited to be bringing back Kid's Club this Saturday, which gets kids involved with agriculture and the Farmers Market.

"One of the first things we will be doing is, we have some sunflower seed leftover, and we are going to allow kids to plant those sunflowers," Cummings said. "Kid's Club is going to kick off the first Saturday, and Kristy Peney is giving leadership to that, and she has some good programs ready for it.

"We started Kid's Club

in 2019, and each time we had it, it kind of grew. We offered it once a month, and it was real popular. We got to where we were getting 15 to 20 kids every Saturday we had an event. This time, we are starting off early and wanting to advertise it."

Located at 290 Farmers Market Way in Blairsville, the Farmers Market runs June 5 through Oct. 30, every Saturday from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. and every Tuesday from 2-5 p.m.

More information about the Farmers Market and Kid's Club can be found at [UCFarmersMarket.com](http://UCFarmersMarket.com).

## Kennedy Grace...from Page 1A

grateful for the outpouring of community support and prayers that have come their way since their daughter's accident. People may continue showing support by visiting the fundraiser set up for the family at <https://www.gofundme.com/f/sweet-baby-kennedy>.

Kennedy's father and mother, Shannon and Kelly Thornton, are staying in a hotel in Atlanta to be near their injured daughter while their six other children are being cared for by their grandmother in Young Harris.

GoFundMe donations will go toward travel, food, gas, medical bills and other expenses related to Kennedy's recovery process.

"We appreciate everything and all the prayers that everybody's been praying for her," Kelly said.

According to the fundraiser page, Kennedy won't be able to walk for at least six weeks, has arm and foot fractures, a broken pelvic bone, a "horrible cut very deep all the way to her bone" on her lower stomach area, and lots of road rash "all over her body."

The accident occurred around 5 p.m. on May 23, after a 2018 Chevy Express G3500 van from Ebenezer Baptist Church pulled into the Thorntons' Fieldview Road driveway off Georgia 325.

"(The driver) stated she was pulling into the driveway to take minor children to church," according to the Georgia State Patrol. "A boy was in the yard playing with a dog and a small girl was on the porch."

But the children were not going to church that evening, so the van backed out of the drive and into the road before the driver "put the vehicle in drive to continue on," according to GSP.

"After beginning forward motion, the driver felt a bump and then heard the boy in the yard scream and saw him running away with the small girl in his arms toward the house," according to GSP.

The driver told the investigating trooper that she

"never saw the child from the driver's seat at all."

"The area of impact was (with the right front of the van) in the eastbound lane of Fieldview Road and was determined by driver statements and roadway evidence," according to GSP.

There were 10 minor occupants in the van at the time of the accident. No charges are expected to be filed in the incident, according to authorities.

## Jim Wood to perform at the Byron Herbert Reece Heritage Farm on Saturday, June 5th

### News Special North Georgia News

Reece Heritage Farm presents Solo Acoustic Singer-Songwriter Jim Wood live! Two hours of original & cover songs. Stories & jokes, too! He will be playing behind the welcome center on the deck next to Wolf Creek. June 5, 2021, from 1-3 p.m. Bring your lawn chairs and enjoy music while social distancing! Free! Donations welcome. Call 706-745-2034 for further information. The Reece Heritage Farm is located at 8552 Gainesville Hwy., Blairsville GA. FB: Reece Heritage Farm, [www.reecefarm.org](http://www.reecefarm.org)

Byron Herbert Reece was a farmer and a writer and his books are available in the gift shop. The farm is set up as a legacy to him & his family with exhibits, farm animals,



Jim Wood local books and crafts. There is also a hiking trail from the farm to Vogel State Park. Open Wednesday through Saturday 10 until 4 with free admission.

# Rotary Club Rabies Clinic takes place on Saturday

By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Rotary Club of Union County volunteers will partner with Dr. Patricia Kenney and her Union County Pet Hospital to host a low-cost rabies clinic for pets on Saturday, June 5.

Rabies vaccinations for dogs, cats and ferrets will be \$11, with other vaccination services available for additional costs. For more pricing information, visit the Union County Pet Hospital Facebook page.

This clinic will be held at the Union County Primary School from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Veterinarian Kenney recommends that pet owners attend to help protect both people and pets.

“The importance originally was set up more to help people than it was to help dogs,” Kenney said. “Most people in the U.S. used to die of the dog variant of rabies. That dog variant has been completely eliminated from the United States with the advent of rabies vaccines for dogs



**Dr. Patricia Kenney  
Veterinarian**

and cats.” While Kenney recommends that pet owners attend the event, she also wants to remind people it is a law in many states to get pets vaccinated against rabies.

“In the state of Georgia,” Kenney said, “it is mandatory for every dog, cat or ferret over the age of 12 weeks to have it.”

Added Kenney, “The clinic is an in-the-car event. We should have a walk-through section as well, though most people at this particular site drive up. We do have everything in computers, so we will be putting all the information in that way.”

“The Rotary Club is assisting us with traffic control and workers. It is not sponsored by anybody, so we are doing the work. It will be less expensive than it would be elsewhere.”

According to Kenney, if a pet gets its first rabies vaccination, it is considered vaccinated 28 days after the injection. If it is not the pet’s first vaccine, it is considered vaccinated immediately upon receiving the injection.

“In Georgia, we do not have the option of not having a rabies vaccine,” Kenney said. “If they are from out of state, like around Florida, where a vet can write a one-year waiver to not get the vaccine, as soon as they cross the border into Georgia, they have to abide by Georgia rules.”

“That is something that people need to be aware of. We do have a lot of people that come from Florida and other areas that I have gotten a lot of flak back for, but it is a legal requirement. The Union County Government also backs

that up and has that in their records as well.”

The rabies vaccine is one that a professional must do within a clinic-type environment and cannot be given by the owners themselves.

“Most of that is just

the accountability in case somebody gets bitten,” Kenney said. “We don’t want somebody just saying that they gave the vaccine to the dog themselves and not have that proof. It has to be backed up.”

## Patriots Gather ...from Page 1A



A longtime supporter of Union County and many veterans’ initiatives, Bobbie Davenport, right, earned a round of applause in Saturday’s Memorial Day Ceremony. Photo by Allison Youngblood

delight of the audience, which quieted as things began.

Army Veteran Janice Walters-Taylor organized the event for the American Legion Auxiliary Ira Weaver Post 121, and she served as keynote speaker. She formally opened the ceremony with a recitation of George L. Skypeck’s “Soldier,” the poem featured on the park’s dedicatory monument.

Walters-Taylor delivered a powerful keynote message asking the crowd to consider the everyday privileges that Americans take for granted, often without considering that these privileges are paid for with the lives of American soldiers.

Along with acknowledging and being thankful for the ultimate sacrifices of service men and women, she challenged attendees to get involved in veterans’ service organizations locally, either by donating monetarily or offering their time and gratitude.

She also addressed the crisis of veterans suffering from PTSD after their service, and how insufficiently prepared those returning home are to deal with the years of civilian life ahead of them with little mental health support.

“I believe that one of the ways we can honor those who died,” Walters-Taylor said, “is to serve those who lived the horrors of war and made it back home to us.

“Encourage them to seek help. Encourage them to become mentors to others who share their grief. Encourage them to find support. Encourage them to seek out a program that helps them find the root of the pain and find a way to make peace with it; not forget it, not change it, but to make peace with it in a way that lets them

move forward.”

Retired U.S. Army Veteran Chuck Honaker, a decorated Iraq War Veteran and Purple Heart recipient, introduced the local commanders of veterans’ service organizations and several community leaders who were present.

He also introduced retired Army Command Sgt. Maj. Roy Hamby, who was integral to the establishment of the memorial park in Blairsville and served for 23 years with the local Georgia Department of Veterans Service.

Barbara “Bobbie” Davenport attended with her daughter Cayce Friedly. The Davenports have been pillars of the community for decades, including Bobbie’s husband, Army Maj. Leon Davenport, who passed away in 2017.

In true Memorial Day fashion, Honaker honored the veterans of each American war beginning with the Revolutionary War, and he asked those who served in more recent wars to stand for recognition.

White and Gold Star families were also recognized, and a moment of silence was held for the fallen.

The High Country Harmonizers performed an acapella version of “America the Beautiful,” “God Bless America” and “Let There be Peace on Earth,” and the North Georgia Honor Guard posted the colors for the ceremony.

Local patriot Keith Bragg’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” set the patriotic mood that day. He was accompanied by his wife Olivia, who brought a framed photo of her uncle, Army Pfc. Harold Roberts, to honor his memory. Roberts died at 19 in

the Battle of the Bulge.

Rev. Richard Hoibraten, a plank member of the local Navy Seabee Veterans of America Island X-3, offered an invocation to bless the ceremony and those in attendance, while asking God to ensure everyone took a moment to reflect on the sacrifices made in the name of freedom.

U.S. Air Force Veteran Rob Taylor – husband to Walters-Taylor – led the Missing Man Ceremony, in which he explained each component of the symbolically set table present for the event to honor those Missing in Action as well as Prisoners of War and their families.

Boy Scouts of America Troop 101 of Blairsville raised the U.S. flag while the Union County High School Band played “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The Boy Scouts also raised the Georgia State flag to “Georgia on My Mind,” and the military branch flags to the “Armed Forces Medley.”

When the flags settled at half-mast, the band halted and the ceremony continued, with ALA Post 121 President Melanie Reid awarding second-grader Eve Micancin a blue ribbon for winning the First Annual Poppy Poster Contest.

The Boy Scouts presented the vibrant red, white and blue flowered memorial wreath, with musical accompaniment by the Appalachian St. Andrew’s Pipes and Drums.

Members of the North Georgia Honor Guard concluded the ceremony with the traditional rifle volley, followed by the benediction given by Rev. Hoibraten, a returning of the colors by the Honor Guard, and a closing musical piece by St. Andrew’s Pipes and Drums.

## The Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 selling U.S. Flags



With the remembrance of our fallen comrades, Memorial Day, just completed and many Union County summer residents returning, now is the time to decide if your U.S. Flag is still waving proudly or needs to be retired and replaced.

As part of its promoting patriotism program, Blairsville American Legion Post 121 sells 3’ by 5’, American-made, all weather U.S. flags for \$25. Additionally, if local residents

contact the post and purchase a flag, members can physically replace the old flag with the new one, if needed.

Also, for the residents of Union County, the post has five locations to dispose of worn U.S. Flags: inside the Historic County Courthouse on the square, the Main Courthouse, Nottely Marina, the Major Leon Davenport Veteran’s Center, and Owltown Grocery. If a flag, in good condition, is retired with the post, the post will provide the retired flag to a local funeral home to be cremated with a veteran’s remains to honor the veteran for their service to this country.

For more information check out our website le-

gionpost121.org or email AL-Post121@gmail.com.

Most military veterans are eligible to join the American Legion. Veterans and members are invited to attend the monthly meeting on the third Tuesday of each month starting at 6:30 pm in the Major Leon Davenport Veteran’s Center at 78 Blue Ridge Street.

The American Legion is the largest and one of the oldest and most inclusive of all veterans’ organizations worldwide and devotes itself to mutual helpfulness, mentoring youth, advocating patriotic honor, promoting strong national security, and continued devotion to fellow service members and veterans. NJ0m2Z14CA

# Akins, Hamby carry out flag ceremony for Memorial Day



Every year, veterans Roy Hamby and Bud Akins perform a special Memorial Day flag ceremony at their home church of First United Methodist. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

In honor of Memorial Day, First United Methodist Church of Union County held a special flag ceremony at the beginning of its Sunday, May 30, service honoring veterans and deceased members of the U.S. Armed Forces.

The ceremony featured a prominent placement of both the U.S. and Christian flags. Leading the program were veterans Bud Akins and Roy Hamby, with both having served in the military and in different local veterans' organizations in the community.

"Off and on, me and Roy have done this ever since this church has been here," Akins said. "It is just a tradition, and we want to do that. We both belong to the American Legion Post 121. He retired from the military, and we are both natives of this county."

"His dad was the old commissioner of Union County at one time. Of course, I have been around forever, too. I have problems with cancer, and

I don't know how much longer I'm going to be around, but we are happy to do this, and we do it when we can to remember our veterans."

During the ceremony, Akins and Hamby posted the colors while an invocation was given by Lead Pastor Don Landen. Then, Taps was played from the balcony in remembrance of those who have fallen while protecting America's freedoms.

Hamby feels it is important to remember why the country is free and to honor those who have sacrificed themselves for that freedom.

"I was in for 23 years before I retired as Command Sergeant Major," Hamby said. "I did two and a half tours in Vietnam, two tours in Europe, and all over the United States. I think it is important for us to do this."

"We need to remind people of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their country. We have done (the flag ceremony) many years, and we are thankful for those that help us with it."

The forefront of the church was decorated with flowers in honor of fallen service men and women that day, and the message delivered left attendees to go home and reflect on the country they live in and the people who are still giving their lives to safeguard their freedoms today.

For Pastor Landen, having the annual ceremony in the church works to unite the people of the community and country in remembering what the United States stands for and how the word of God can be preserved in those values.

"We have got lots of veterans and lots of folks whose families have served in the military," Landen said. "Lots of folks have lost friends and family and all those people close to them, and we just want to honor that today."

"It is a way for us to come together as a people. The nation is so divided in so many ways, but it allows us the ways to remember what it is that unites us."

## MECHS Graduation...from Page 1A



Union Site Administrator Casey Jones led graduates in the traditional "turning of the tassels" to close out the May 27 ceremony. Photo by Todd Forrest

so much adversity over the last year, and I couldn't be more proud of them," Union Site Administrator Casey Jones said after the ceremony.

It wasn't entirely business as usual, however, as this year's graduation exercises were divided among each of MECHS' 18 locations.

Traditionally, MECHS holds shared commencement exercises for multiple sites, like Union, Fannin and Towns hosting a combined ceremony, but to prevent large crowds, each site hosted its own farewell in 2021.

With no individual restrictions on graduates or attendees, graduation went off without a hitch for the 20 seniors and their families.

Zachary Adams, Lindsey Canterbury, Austin Phillips and Miranda White each picked up Honor Graduate recognition, while Kyla Locklear received High Honors for recording the class' highest grade-point average.

"Being a part of MECHS has been a truly awesome experience, and I'm also excited to be recognized as the Union Site's 2021 High Honors graduate," Locklear said. "As someone who started at traditional day school, I soon began to doubt my abilities as a student."

"I also wanted to seek an atmosphere where I felt supported. Up to that point, I had heard nothing but great comments about MECHS, and I immediately began to think, this option is possible for me. "MECHS allowed me

to work at my own pace while making time for work and my schedule, and I found that supportive environment that I was seeking as well."

"Even during the pandemic, when we worked online, I felt there was a caring group of teachers and staff that wanted to help me succeed in a difficult time."

Before Locklear took center stage to deliver her High Honors address, fellow Class of 2021 graduates Ethan Nolte led the Pledge of Allegiance and Bailey Denton stepped to the podium to offer the welcome address.

"We all know that achieving a high school education is challenging, but learning during a pandemic placed both students and staff in uncharted territory," Denton said. "Our overwhelming dedication, perseverance and desire to succeed has brought us to where we are today."

"I would take this opportunity to say 'thank you' to all the families, friends and supporters who have helped us in achieving our goals. I would also like to take time to thank the teachers and staff of MECHS."

"All the staff have been there to support us with everything since we walked through the doors. I would like to give a huge thank you to Ms. (Angie) Burns and Ms. (Gina) Young for pushing not only me, but every graduate sitting on this stage today to ensure that we made it here."

Following the awards presentation by Site

Administrator Dr. Teena Atkins, class recognition by Young and scholarship presentation by Lesia Johnson, diplomas were granted to the 20 graduates by Akins, Burns and Jones. The ceremony closed with Jones leading the turning of the tassels.

Afterward, the North Georgia News caught up with Locklear, who was surrounded by friends and family, to discuss her High Honors acceptance. Her plans are to attend Gwinnett Technical College to study stenography.

"I didn't find out until a (week before graduation that I had the highest G.P.A.), so I was a bit surprised, but then I realized that I was going to have to write a speech," Locklear said, resulting in a laugh from those gathered. "It's an honor, and I have to thank my family, friends and (close friend Ivy Garrett) for all their support."

Union County graduates are Zachary Nathan Adams, Garrett Austin Becker, Lindsey Lee Canterbury, Jayden Rose Harkins-Durfee, Katelyn Ruth Ensley, Luke James Fitzpatrick, Emily Beth Gibbs, Brianna Lashea Hawkins, Kyla Nicole Locklear, Talon Michael McAtee, Luther Ethan Nolte, Tara Alicea Nolte, Wilson Antonio Pineda, Teresa Haisan Warren and Miranda Marie White.

Graduates from Towns County are Chloe McKenna Bateman, Kambrie Bailey Denton, Allison Lynn Kitchens and Austin Daniel Phillips.