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North Georgia News

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Speed limit to be reduced on GA 515 thru town

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Sometime after the first of the new year, the speed limit along the busy 1-mile stretch of Georgia 515 that runs through the City of Blairsville will be lowered from 45 mph to 40 mph, according to the Georgia Department of Transportation.

The change comes after tireless work by Union County Sheriff Mack Mason to make the area safer for motorists navigating the four traffic lights and 14 entrances/exits on each side of the road between the Murphy Highway and Glenn Gooch Bypass intersections.

"I'm just trying to save

lives," Sheriff Mason said last week after hearing back from GDOT District 1 Assistant Traffic Engineer Jason Dykes that the state would be recommending the reduction based on initial findings of its Engineering and Traffic Investigation there.

"Once we complete the study, which we'll be wrapping up any day now, we'll have to modify the Speed Detection Device Permit, and that relies on another office," Dykes said. "Once we get back the Speed Detection Device Permit from the Department of Public Safety, then we can modify the (speed limit) signs.

"I would say it probably

won't be until after the first of the year, because we are relying on another office to get that information back to us."

Fortunately, Mason was able to get some major help in his quest to lower the speed limit. Having come up empty handed after multiple attempts to get GDOT interested in the issue, he decided to appeal to Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and the City Council for assistance.

He attended the city's March 14 regular meeting to ask Blairsville officials to submit a letter to GDOT requesting a speed reduction on the highway.

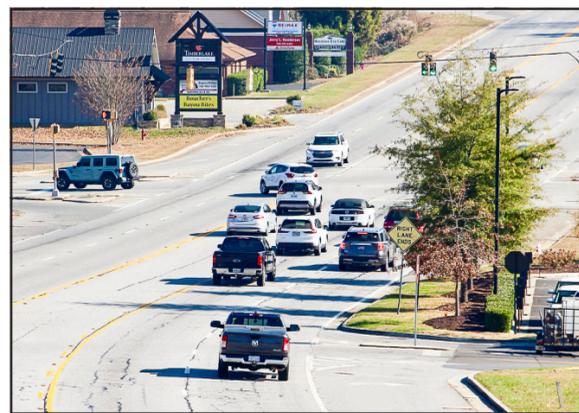
The council agreed

with the need to do this, as did Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter, and the mayor sent a letter to Dykes in June.

"It is the opinion of the City Council and me that many of the traffic accidents that occur on this stretch of highway could have been avoided had the speed limit been 35 rather than 45," Conley wrote. "It is our hope that you will seriously consider this request in hopes to make this section of highway safe for motorists traveling through the city."

And it looks like that letter got the ball rolling as the sheriff had hoped.

See *Speed Limit Change*, Page 2A



The only time traffic isn't congested on Georgia 515 through Blairsville is later in the evening or on a Sunday, as pictured above.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Schools, Rotarians to host patriotic Veterans Day events

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Veterans Day is coming up this weekend, and as usual, Union Countyans will be doing their part to honor the brave men and women who put their lives on the line for the good of their country.

One of the most popular local annual events is the student-led Veterans Day Ceremony courtesy of Union County Schools.

The 2023 ceremony will take place the day before Veterans Day, on Friday, Nov. 10, serving as an important event that brings into patriotic focus for the younger generations all that the nation's military heroes have done to keep this country free.

A full, complimentary

breakfast will be served to veterans and their spouses from 8:15-9:30 a.m. on Friday, with a shuttle to and from the cafeteria available for veterans who choose to park at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

People can look forward to the ceremony beginning at 10 a.m. in the stadium, or, in the event of inclement weather, inside the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

"The students and staff of Union County School District work hard every year to provide a quality performance," according to ceremony information. "This year's ceremony will include the High School Chorus led by Alicia Covington, the Middle School Chorus led by Melissa Pilote, and the High School

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Local Civil Air Patrol students and American Legion members rehearsed Friday for the Union County Schools Veterans Day Ceremony. (L-R) Brooks Payne, Caleb Kamber, Kendyl McBride, Caleb Sheffield, Corby McClure, Ken Stanger, Dan Wickersham, Frank Burdo, Linda Cacchioli, Derek Kunz and Calvin Triplet.

Joe White, 86, remembered for larger-than-life persona

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Above all, longtime Blairsville resident Joe White lived a life without regrets, which provided the comfort of bittersweet reminiscing for friends and loved ones upon his passing on Oct. 16.

After he went Home to be with the Lord following a battle with Parkinson's Disease, Joe's family held a Celebration of Life on Friday, Nov. 3, in the second-floor ballroom of the Union County Community Center.

It was there that friends, family, acquaintances and even some strangers gathered to cheerfully memorialize Joe's colorful legacy.

Blairsville largely knew Joe for his role as a speech pathologist in the Union County School System, where he worked for nearly 30 years. He was also active with Union County High School sports, helping to coach football, keeping basketball books, and coaching the golf team.

And Joe did much else in his community over the years, serving as a volunteer



For years, Blairsville resident Joe White served as the Official Santa Claus of the Atlanta Falcons, pictured here on the sidelines of an NFL game in the 1990s.

firefighter, working summers at the Fish Hatchery, singing in the Methodist Church choir downtown, re-enacting as a Sons of Confederate Veterans member, and of course, donning a red coat to thrill area children as Santa Claus.

Joseph F. White Jr. was born on Dec. 30, 1936, to Joseph Sr. and Rosalyn

Henderson White in Griffin, Georgia. He would eventually attend the University of Southern Mississippi, where he played football on the 1958 championship team.

It was at Southern Miss that he met Jackie Dodson, and in 1962, they were married. The couple moved their family to

See *Joe White*, Page 12A

Families enjoy safe options for Halloween in Blairsville



Hundreds of families and costumed kiddos made their way through the long line around the Sorghum Field in Meeks Park to grab candy from dozens of local businesses and organizations on Halloween.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Between trick-or-treating at the Nottely Marina and the Boo Bash in Meeks Park, Blairsville had a thriller Halloween.

Both events have become staples of holiday celebration in Union County, and this year produced a couple of successful spooky shindigs.

Halloween at the Nottely Marina is relatively new to the community with a four-year

history, but the get-together is already beloved not just by those who live and work around Lake Nottely, but for those who travel to check out the three-day affair.

Mary Dell brought her 5-year-old son Zachariah from Murphy, North Carolina, on the hunt for candy; the Marina was just one stop on the multi-day list of events they planned on attending.

Zachariah's favorite part of Halloween is definitely the candy, especially Skittles,

though he's recently conceded that jellybeans are pretty tasty, too.

"As a mom, I'm glad I can take him out here to do this," Mary said. "I'm glad that they have these things here that we can do ... This is safe, family fun."

Spanning the 29th, 30th and 31st days of October, the event offered several chances for families to take their little ghouls and goblins out for a night of fangtastic fun. And
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Speed Limit Change...from Page 1A

Originally, Mason had asked that the speed limit be dropped to 35 mph over that length of four-lane, as many people regularly drive 10 mph over the speed limit, meaning that motorists often travel 55 mph or faster through town.

This makes a huge difference in collisions, as "speed kills," according to Mason.

But Dykes informed him that the state's traffic study had determined that a 5-mph reduction was warranted instead of the 10 mph he was seeking.

Still, Mason and Dykes contend that any reduction is movement in the right direction, though they believe the speed limit may need to be lowered further as the area - and by extension, traffic congestion - continues to grow, especially since the number of wrecks in town has been increasing.

"We'll continue to evaluate the corridor, and as traffic does increase, then we can look at all the different factors as development comes, and we can go back out and revisit it," Dykes said. "If it needs to be lowered again, we'll do that as well."

For people concerned that the change will delay them in their travels, Mason has said that lowering the speed limit should not create an undue burden on commuters, with the reduced speed amounting to less than a half-minute delay in driving time.

"But the moral of the story is, the faster you are going, the harder it is to stop that vehicle," he said in March, reiterating the need to slow down vehicles in the busy area.

Mason also wants people to know that the reduction is not about creating more opportunities to write speeding

tickets. "Saving lives is what's concerning to me," he said previously. "During work time, you're just taking your life into your own hands going down this (highway)," especially with so many drivers attempting to cross multiple oncoming lanes of traffic.

"All of the years I have worked traffic and investigated accidents reinforces the need for this speed limit reduction," added Mason, who worked for Georgia State Patrol for nearly three decades.

Additionally, the sheriff has been working with GDOT, as well as State Rep. Stan Gunter and State Sen. Steve Gooch, to increase safety on the Richard Russell Scenic Highway, aka Georgia 348, by prohibiting semitractor-trailers from accessing that road, with more details to come in an upcoming edition of the newspaper.

Veterans Day Events...from Page 1A

Band led by Will Stafford.

"Elementary and Primary School students along with students from Woody Gap School will present Veterans with letters of appreciation for their service to our country.

"Our keynote speaker is Noel Taylor, and assisting in the ceremony is Hope Patton.

"Lara Turner will orchestrate the Quilt of Valor ceremony along with Woody Gap Seniors Jennifer Marsh and Dixie Lee. We will award deserving Veterans the Quilt of Valor sewn by the ladies of the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild.

"The American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121 will be a part of our ceremony this year along with students representing the 152nd Civil Air Patrol.

"Our Veterans deserve the recognition, and our School District takes pride in presenting this great event."

Gene Windham of the Rotary Club of Union County said that often, he and the schools co-plan on Veterans

Day affairs. This year will be no different, as the Third Annual Rotary Club Veterans Day Luncheon will start around 11:30 a.m. Friday, shortly after the ceremony on the field wraps up.

From there, veterans can head up to the Union County Community Center, where a free lunch will be served in the second-floor ballroom.

"Thank the Lord for the generous community that we have," Windham said. "This is funded by sponsors, and it is a very nice program and meal. It's a buffet-style meal, but it's first class."

The keynote speaker for the Rotary luncheon will be retired U.S. Army Gen. Doug Brown.

Before he retired following 40 years of service, Gen. Bryan "Doug" Brown served as the Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

Brown entered the Army in 1967 and went on to become the first member of

the Army's Aviation Branch to earn the honors of serving as a Combatant Commander and a Four-Star General.

Today, he is a member of the Army Aviation Hall of Fame and has a compound belonging to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, named in his honor.

In the event of inclement weather, veterans will be met with umbrellas at the door to the Community Center. Anyone with mobility issues will receive help from the Rotary Club getting upstairs via volunteers to lead them to elevators and carry canes or walkers.

Tickets for the luncheon can be picked up at the Union County Pet Hospital located at 373 Blue Ridge Highway in Blairsville. Interested parties can also call Windham directly or send a text to 706-781-8176. All tickets are free.

To all veterans, the North Georgia News would like to say thank you for your service.

Daughters of the American Revolution gave 'Care Baskets' in honor of National First Responders Day



October 28th was National First Responders Recognition Day and Old Unicoi Trail Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, Blairsville, gratefully carried 'care baskets' to Towns and Union County paramedics, firefighters, 911 technicians, and law enforcement. "First responders bravely step up to the front line, saving lives and protecting our communities," said Chapter Regent Pam Greene. "There are many others we could not overtly recognize but we consider all our volunteer firefighters, nurses, and doctors, among these 'heroes' and we will continue to acknowledge our thankfulness."

Each basket contained healthy snacks and beverage mixes for our local 'heroes' to enjoy during 'down' time. Recipients include 911 dispatch staff and sheriff staff in both Towns and Union Counties; Union General Ambulance Staff; Blairsville Police; Towns EMS and Union Fire-



Pam Greene presents to Curtis Walls, Towns EMS

fighter headquarters.

Nationally, daughters have donated over 2.8 million hours in 2023 to their communities. Doing this has perpetuated the desire of Founder Eugenia Washington who proclaimed, "We want a society founded on service."

The DAR represents over one million Daughters. A woman 18 years or older, regardless of race, religion, or ethnic background, who can prove lineal descent from a

patriot of the American Revolution is eligible to join. Email oldunicoitrail@gmail.com to attend a meeting or learn about joining.

To further perpetuate the memory of patriot ancestors, the Chapter will hold an Introduction to Genealogy Workshop January 20, 2024, 10:30 AM - 1:30 PM at the Union County Library Community Room. To register for the workshop email the address above.



UNION COUNTY CHRISTMAS PARADE
DECEMBER 2, 2023 6 PM
 Sponsored by the Union County Historical Society
 Theme: "Santa's Toy Land"
 Parade Application

Name of Entry: _____
 Contact Person: _____
 Phone: _____

Type of Entry: Float Automobile Walkers
 Animals Motorcycle

Entry forms must be received in the Historical Society office by noon on December 1st. Send completed form by email to history1@windstream.net or drop off at the office in the old courthouse on the square. For more information call the office at 706-745-5493.

All entries must have lights. Line up at the old middle school field begins at 4pm on December 2.

Joe White...from Page 1A

Blairsville in 1973 to make a better life, and in June of this year, the Whites celebrated their 61st wedding anniversary.

Their family grew to include two daughters, Carole and Christina, then two granddaughters, Mallory and Kelsey, and finally, four great-grandchildren, Baylee, Emerson, Max and Ollie-Jane.

The family was close, going on hiking trips and picnics frequently, as well as vacations and simply out for drives to see "all sorts of places with or without a reason or a real plan," and Joe took visiting family members and friends on various excursions exposing many to new experiences.

Joe was the kind of person to act on flights of fancy, and once drove all the way to Texas for a vehicle part. Jackie went with him on an exploratory trip down to a Mexican border town to pick up vanilla for a cheaper price than it was offered in the States.

Sleeping in his vehicle while out on adventures was such a common occurrence that Joe kept a twin mattress in the back of his covered truck bed. One such occasion was how he came to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South

Dakota and met the Lakota Sioux people.

What started as falling asleep on Reservation land ended with his friendship to Chief Oliver Red Cloud and eventual adoption into the tribe. Joe even participated in the sacred Sun Dance, and later received a hand-crafted death bonnet made exclusively for him.

The bonnet was just one of many items displayed in the Celebration of Life, where various pieces served as tangible proof of Joe's storied life. Stacks of photographs from various points along his journey spanned multiple tables, offering snapshots into precious memories.

Many of those memories involved spreading cheer, and Joe was known by many as their local Santa Claus. His jolly career began in an Atlanta flea market, and he quickly worked his way up to malls, corporate parties, banks and schools as one of the first Santas to sport his own beard.

In the '90s, Joe was dubbed the official Santa of the Atlanta Falcons, showcased by two big scrapbooks of Saint Joe posing with football players. A magnificent coat, red and

slightly faded with age and love, hung on the wall above Santa photos highlighting multiple generations of visitors.

He actually had two Santa suits, both sewn by Blairsville native Joann Hamby from red-dyed deerskin and trimmed with Arctic fox fur: "They were a huge step up from what most Santas were/are wearing," Joe's daughter Carole Lee said.

At the end of his career with the Falcons, Joe maintained the Santa Claus lifestyle, presenting as the Jolly Old Elf anytime he was in public, regardless of time of year. He frequently dressed in red, welcomed curious children and adults alike, and even kept a stash of peppermints handy.

And every year for decades, he and his wife decorated their house extravagantly for Christmas, inviting everyone who wanted their pictures taken and wish lists recorded.

It should be clear by now that Joe took his role as Santa very seriously, as further illustrated in the following story.

Joe didn't drink, but he once drove a friend to a package store to pick up some alcohol. When his friend asked why he'd parked at the very back of the building, Joe responded, "What sort of example would it set to see Santa out front of a liquor store?"

Although his daughters had never heard the story, it wasn't out-of-character. "That was just the kind of person he was," said Christina White, with sister Carole agreeing that it was easy to see Joe as a "year-round Santa" with his patient disposition and gentle temperament.

"Joe made friends pretty much everywhere he went," said Carole, recalling a story of her parents attending an outdoor event in the Southwest when, out of nowhere, Joe was recognized in a large crowd. "The guy on stage spotted him and hollered out, 'Is that Joe White?'"

"I don't remember who it was," Jackie admitted regarding the stage performer, still laughing at the encounter years later.

That night, the Whites saw a myriad of old friends and family, with some lingering long after dark to remember "Grandfather," as the family called him, in the best times. Eventually, the event music

died down and the displays were reverently packed up to return to a quieter home.

Joe White never wanted a traditional funerary experience. He wasn't the kind to mope, and while he wasn't a religious person, he was very spiritual.

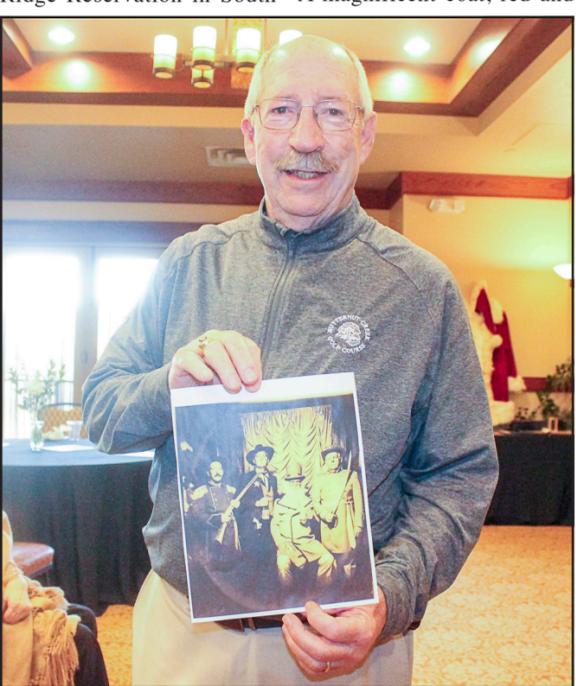
Jackie and the girls believe that despite his eclectic tastes and open mind, Joe ultimately followed in the footsteps of Jesus, practicing acceptance and giving help wherever he could.

Now that he's gone, Joe is remembered by all for a life well lived, having set an incredible example of what a person can accomplish if they remove inhibition and follow their guiding principles.

People who feel led to honor Joe's memory may donate to St. Jude Children's Hospital or the Salvation Army.



Joe White received this hand-crafted death bonnet made exclusively for him by the Lakota Sioux people after his adoption into the tribe. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris paid his respects to Joe White's family at his Celebration of Life event Friday. Here, Paris holds a photo from when he joined Joe and other friends for a Civil War photoshoot in Orlando, Florida.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Halloween...from Page 1A

running from 5:30-8:30 p.m., the Marina allowed for daylight trick-or-treating and nighttime light shows.

After the sun set, the "Alien Tent" by Brian and Stephanie Preston turned out to be an exceptional extraterrestrial experience with a colorful blacklight display and smoke machines creating an otherworldly atmosphere to add to the illusion of a new, unexplored planet.

"We do it for the kids," said Brian, who sent a remote-controlled dump truck out with candy in the bucket to deliver to children across a table. "We don't have kids of our own, (and we do it) just to be able to give back to the community."

Out in Meeks Park, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce hosted the Blairsville Boo Bash, which moved to the park in recent years to offer a safer alternative than the Downtown Square and its associated traffic.

There was fun for all ages, as proven by several adults coming out in costume to enjoy the dozens of tables set up in Sorghum Field. Fall leaves swirled around a spooky scene of costumed crowds consisting of everything from clowns on stilts to unicorn mermaids.

David and Vicky Goyette were out that evening in a truly stunning display. David was the previously mentioned clown on stilts, and beside him, making sure he didn't fall, strode Vicky dressed in magnificent black lace, complete with an intricate bat-shaped masquerade mask.

"It's a little chilly, but it's wonderful," laughed Vicky. "Thank you for everybody sharing with the kids and coming out and doing what they do."

Elijah Hymes goes trick-or-treating every year, and while



Elijah Hymes dressed as the King of Pop this Halloween, enjoying both the spectacle and the candy on offer at the 2023 Blairsville Boo Bash. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

his favorite part of the holiday is dressing up, he enjoys the candy. Decked out as Michael Jackson, complete with a glittering white glove, Hymes said his second Halloween spent in Meeks Park was "cool."

As part of 60 local businesses and organizations like the Chamber and Blue Ridge Mountain Jeepers, restaurants, churches and even county administrative offices set up booths at the park among the likes of Southern Sips Lemonade and Jim's Smokin' Que, which provided a filling meal where candy couldn't.

Owner of Mike's Seafood Market & Grill Ashley Holland and Assistant Holly McCollum were out representing their business with some fun nautical-themed inflatables, but that had nothing on the goldfish they were handing out to the little ones.

"I think it's a bigger turnout this year than it was

last year," noted Holland, while McCollum added that they had run out of candy twice.

Their favorite part of the night was being pleasantly surprised by the outstanding manners of the youth, with Holland calling them "the most well-mannered, well-behaved children."

"We compliment their manners because they are sweet," McCollum agreed.

Between both events, most of the county's youngest sweet-tooth sufferers were satisfied, and all sorts of creative energy was put on display in the form of unique costumes.

Mark those calendars to attend Halloween at the Nottely Marina and the Blairsville Boo Bash next fall, and keep an eye out for the multiple Fall Festivals made available by area churches to offer families even more opportunities to take part in family-friendly community events.



Nottely Marina has quickly grown to become a regional Halloween favorite stop each year. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks