

North Georgia News

2 Sections 20 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, January 3, 2024

Former Gov. Perdue tours Shooting Range

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union County Government recently rolled out the proverbial red carpet for former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, who came to town for a tour of the under-construction Union County Shooting Range on Tuesday, Dec. 19.

Years in the making, the public range is tentatively scheduled to open in March off Georgia 180, between mile markers 18 and 19, and people are eagerly awaiting their chance to use the facility – including Perdue.

Now serving as the chancellor for the University System of Georgia, Perdue was

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture when the Shooting Range received the green light to proceed on U.S. Forest Service land here in Union County.

Local officials give Perdue major credit for the Shooting Range, in terms of both helping to secure most of the funding for the project – 90% of facility construction is being paid for with federal grant dollars – and for getting the project approved in the first place.

And Perdue has taken a particular interest in the local range – just one of three such public range projects approved in Georgia in recent years – which is why he made the trip

See *Perdue Tour*, Page 4A



Local leaders met with University System of Georgia Chancellor Dr. Sonny Perdue for a tour of the under-construction Union County Shooting Range last month, pictured here at one of the shooting sheds on the property. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Fire leaves residents homeless at Christmastime



A home on Spring Hills Lane, off Gumlog Road, burned to the ground Dec. 23. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured or killed. Photo/Facebook

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Members of the community rallied last week for a Union County family that lost their home in a devastating fire two days before Christmas.

The home off Spring Hills Lane in the north end of the county caught fire the afternoon of Saturday, Dec. 23, according to the Union County Fire Department.

Fire Chief David Dyer said firefighters arrived quickly

after the call was dispatched at 4:51 p.m., with multiple reports having come in that people were still inside the home.

Most of the two-story structure was already ablaze when the Fire Department

See *Spring Hills Fire*, Page 3A

Owner of historic home seeking support after blaze

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Following the Dec. 3 fire that destroyed five out of 10 rooms inside the historic 1853 Reid-Sampson House on Rogers Street in Downtown Blairsville, owner Peggy Davis says she just wants to focus on restoring what she can.

Above all, Davis is grateful for the containment of the damage by the Union County Fire Department, which was able to extinguish the blaze in time to leave the main structure intact.

She refers to the ordeal as a “nightmare,” recalling when she received a call from Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Shawn Dyer that a plume of smoke was rising from the 170-year-old home that was vacant at the time of the fire.

By the time she finished her three-hour drive north to Blairsville, the worst of the fire was over, but now, a month later, there’s still plenty of work to be done.

The story of the Reid-Sampson House begins before



While the street-facing structure was largely spared, the backside of the historic Reid-Sampson House on Rogers Street incurred substantial fire damage.

most others in Union County today, prior to the onset of the Civil War. It was built in 1853 by “Dr. Crump,” whose full name has been lost to time. Records indicate that sometime later the house belonged to “Mr. Reid.” Davis discovered that

Reid was a lawyer whose official death certificate claims suicide while his family argued otherwise; interestingly, Reid had upset some folks after instituting that an unmarried man and woman were considered married by common

See *Reid-Sampson House*, Page 5A

Ayden Burnett, School Board receive honors in meeting



UCHS Senior Ayden Burnett earned an award for his outstanding musical accomplishments in the Dec. 11 School Board meeting, pictured here with UCHS Principal Carol Knight and Band Director Will Stafford. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In their last regular meet-up of 2023, the members of the Union County Board of Education hosted a particularly jolly meeting, and not just

because of the holidays. As it so happened, there was plenty of recognition to go around.

The Union County Elementary School students of Gina Young and Alicia Franklin’s class stole the hearts of attendees by leading

the Pledge of Allegiance and performing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” in sign language.

High School Senior Ayden Burnett was honored in the Dec. 11 meeting for

See *School Board*, Page 9A

Adopt-a-Grandparent brings Christmas cheer to elderly

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

“Our seniors have always been my heart and compassion all my life.” So said resident Roberta Ford recently regarding an important motivation behind co-founding the annual Adopt-a-Grandparent for Christmas Community Outreach 10 years ago.

Co-founded by Kristy Wallace, who was unable to participate in the delivery this year, the outreach consists of cheerful visits to local assisted living residents during Christmastime, complete with festive attire, merry greetings and gifts for the elderly.

And the beloved tradition continued Thursday, Dec. 21, with Commissioner Lamar Paris and Gary Harmon serving as “helper elves” to hand out some 150 gift packages to the entirety of the Union County Nursing Home and the two biggest buildings of Stonehenge Senior Living.

Each gift package included one hand sanitizer, one fragrance-free hand cream, a bookmark with ribbon featuring a Bible scripture, and a notepad with pencil. The bags



Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris had a terrific time visiting with assisted living facility residents for Adopt-a-Grandparent last month, including World War II Veteran Florence “Flo” Gerrard.

holding the gifts were tied with ribbons containing Christmas ornaments for the residents’ collections.

Adopt-a-Grandparent has been going strong since 2013, even during the

See *Adopt-a-Grandparent*, Page 9A



Vol. 115 No. 02

Arrests - 2B Legals - 8B
Church - 3B Obits - 4B
Classifieds - 8B Sports - 8A
Opinion - 6A

BASKETBALL

1/2 6 PM vs. Providence
1/5 6 PM vs. Athens Acad.

Ferst Readers Contest Result

See page 3A

Voter Registration Relocation

See page 9A

2024 County Meeting Schedule

See page 2B



Need a Mortgage? Call Kitty in Blairsville!

Kitty Mauzy | 706-439-2185 | NMLS# 512515



© 2023 United Community Bank
NMLS# 421841 | ucbi.com/mortgage



United
Community
Mortgage

Spring Hills Fire...from Page 1A

arrived, and upon learning that all occupants had safely exited the house, Dyer said firefighters established a defensive perimeter to keep the woods and a large outbuilding on the property from burning. "The residents barely got out of the house - that's how quickly the fire built and grew," Chief Dyer said. Unfortunately, the home and all the family's belongings were completely destroyed.

One of the residents, an elderly woman, experienced some smoke inhalation and required oxygen and a trip to the hospital, but ultimately, the three people inside got out OK with the assistance of neighbors.

"We are thankful that nobody was severely injured or killed," Dyer said.

Investigators believe the fire started on the front porch before rapidly spreading throughout the home. The

cause of the fire has yet to be determined, but no foul play is suspected at this time, Dyer said.

The fire chief commended the work of his firefighters for preventing the fast-burning fire from traveling beyond the property, which included putting out a brush fire that sparked up near the home.

"We had an excellent response," Dyer said. "Career Stations 1 and 13 responded alongside (Volunteer) Stations 2, 3 and 4. We utilized the hydrants in the area, and we also had a tanker shuttle, so everybody played a part."

Added Dyer, "We always respond to every call; we try to do the best we absolutely can, but sometimes, those fires are beyond anything that we can save, and it's already burned up by the time we get there."

The American Red Cross assisted the family with finding shelter and short-term supplies

late that Saturday and early Sunday, but the medium and long-term challenges for the displaced family are extensive.

Homeowner Danielle Piña took to Facebook after the fire to detail the nightmare her family had experienced, having gotten clear of the blaze with nothing but the clothes they were wearing.

"We made it out OK, but we lost two cats and our big dog Zoey - hopefully she just ran off in the woods," Piña said. "The house, the car, everything is gone. We are holed up at the hospital but have to get out early to a hotel and a rental car."

Among the items lost in the fire were the ashes of Piña's late husband Michael, who passed away in 2019 after a long illness, according to a GoFundMe page set up by an out-of-town friend to help get Piña, her 80-year-old mother and a friend "on their way to

recovery." "They're in a hotel for now, trying to decompress and process their trauma," the GoFundMe page reads. "They have a lot of work ahead of them to replace IDs, deal with the aftermath of the fire, find a permanent place to live and get a car to handle all this."

People can assist the fundraising effort by visiting <https://gofund.me/cdd9584c>.

Assisting with their more immediate needs, the Halfway Cafe on Ivy Log Road established a supply drive for the family to run Christmas Eve through Dec. 28, accepting monetary donations, "clothing, medical supplies, toiletries, pet items, and personal necessity item donations."

"People from our community are truly amazing!" Halfway Cafe wrote on Facebook. "While taking donations at the Cafe, we met people from all walks of life. Many shared a story of loss in their lives:

"Widows/widowers who lost their spouses, people who have lost their homes/pets in fires in the past, people who had hardly anything yet still donated what they could, children donating their piggy bank savings, local churches,

Safe Pet Project Thrift Store, the Pickers Barn and so many more people who stopped (by the) cafe and generously donated to this family. God Bless you all!"

Blairsville Mountain Outlet off Murphy Highway also collected supplies for the family, and Piña has expressed gratitude for all the community support.

...and The Favorite Reindeer is...



Cathy Kirby presents trophy to Margie Perry Owner of L&M Furniture (Rudolph)

The Ferst Readers Favorite Reindeer Fundraiser has come to an end and the winner is... Rudolph-Margie Perry of L&M Furniture! Second place goes to Vixen-Sara Olver of Cabin Coffee with Dancer-MaryRuth Cook from the City Council coming in third! A special "Thank you" to all who voted and to those who participated: Cupid/Daniel Liberatore-Chick-fil-A; Prancer / David Murphy-Union County Schools; Blitzen/Dustin Rogers-Union County Recreation Dept.; Donner/Sharon Davis-Bookbound Bookstore; Dasher/David Dyer-UC Fire Chief; Comet/Shawn Kight-Sawmill Place Restaurant.

Please congratulate all these participants and thank them for serving their community. The money raised will help the Ferst Community Action Team provide quality, age appropriate, books to children in Union County from birth until they turn 5. Simply register a child aged 0 - 4 at ferstreaders.org and, in a few weeks, he or she will begin receiving a free book each month!

For only \$42 yearly you can provide one child a book each month for free. Please consider being a supporter of this organization

LOCAL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

MONTGOMERY CONCRETE
 ~ FOR ALL YOUR CONCRETE NEEDS ~
 Forming through Finishing, House Slabs, Driveways, Sidewalks, Stamped Colored Concrete. Top Quality Work! Big Jobs and Small Jobs! • Insured
 See photos on Facebook under Lee Montgomery
Call 706-781-1806

SHAWN'S HOME FURNISHINGS
Mattresses, Porch Rockers & More!
"From the Front Porch to the Back Door We've Got You Covered!"
 568 Blue Ridge St. • Blairsville, GA
706-835-1209
 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm • Sat 9am-4pm • Closed Sun

Southeast Geothermal & Spray Foam
706-745-8685
 1442 Blue Ridge Hwy.
www.segeothermal.com
www.sesprayfoam.com

Specializing In:
 Alignment • Computer Balancing
 Brakes • Auto Repair
 Industrial Foam Fill
 Oil Changes

Thomas Tire, Inc.
 Auto & Big Truck Service
 Oscar Thomas - Owner
 76 Shoe Factory Road
 Blairsville, Georgia 30512
 (706) 745-0264

Randolph Jones Grading
 Licensed Septic Tank Repair & Install, Driveway Scrape and Repair, Bobcat, Excavator.
 Lot Clearing and Basement, House Site. Haul Dirt or Gravel. Any & All Small Jobs Welcome!
706-897-4909

VISIT DOWNTOWN BLAIRSVILLE
 www.visitdowntownblairsville.com/shop

TOTAL RECOVERY PAINT & BODY SHOP, INC.
706-745-9703
ALL INSURANCE ACCEPTED

SAFE PET PROJECT
THRIFT STORE
MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY 10 AM - 4 PM
 307 Cleveland St. Unit O - Blairsville, GA
 (706) 400-7076

Turpin's Wrecker Service
24 Hr Towing
 877-388-7746 • 177 Butternut Grove

LICENSED INSURED
GIBSON LAND SERVICE
706-897-8564

WHITENER'S ADVANCE CONSTRUCTION, LLC
 GRADING PROPERTY MAINTENANCE
 LOT CLEARING Retaining WALLS
 Basements Drainage
 Driveways STUMP GRINDING
 SEPTIC SYSTEMS LANDSCAPING
 CALL **706-400-2043**
Matt LICENSED & INSURED

HOME REPAIRS
 Room Remodels
 Interior, Exterior, Baths, Decks, Doors. Painting, Trim, Popcorn Ceiling Removal Floors & Installation
 Professional & Insured
706-970-7641

PLACE YOUR AD HERE!
 Advertise with other Local Business here in the Blairsville area!
 Contact Derek
 706-994-8973
 or 706-745-6343

Wiley & Sons
 Licensed Grading Insured
 Lot Clearing, Gravel Driveways, House Sites, Long Arm Mowing, Retaining Walls, Underbrushing, Erosion Control, Water Management
706-897-4065

Let's Talk Trash
TONY'S GARBAGE
 706.897.6066
Weekly Pickup
 tonysgarbage.com
 706-897-6066
 Check us out on Instagram Facebook

ALTITUDES REALTY GROUP
Ann Irons
 Broker
 850-625-7447
 ann@annirons.com
 www.annirons.com
 Blairsville, GA
 Certified Luxury Home Specialist • Resort and Second Home Specialist
 Real Estate Negotiation Expert

JACKY JONES AUTOMOTIVE GROUP
 We Make Buying Easy!
JACKYJONES.NET
 Ford — Hayesville, NC, 828.389.6325
 Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep, Ram — Hayesville, NC, 888.384.3145

Perdue Tour ...from Page 1A



DNR Assistant Chief Walter Lane explained elements of the backstop on the pistol range to former Gov. Perdue and others Dec. 19.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

last month.

A pilot, Perdue flew his personal plane up from Bonaire to the Blairsville Municipal Airport that Tuesday for a visit to the area on a variety of business, to include the Shooting Range tour as well as a few stops in the region as part of his official chancellor duties.

“There’s much more interest in firearms and the Second Amendment these days than there has been,” Perdue said. “This is a place where people can learn to use those weapons safely and securely and get training.”

“That’s really what we want people to do; if they’re going to have a firearm, we want people to have experience with them, know how to handle them, and they’re going to have trainings out here that help people do that safely.”

Meeting with Perdue at the range were Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Sheriff Mack Mason, County Construction Manager Mike Thomason, County Manager Larry Garrett, Fire Chief David Dyer, Curtis Colwell of Colwell Construction, and other local attendees.

“This wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for Gov. Perdue,” Sheriff Mason said before echoing Perdue’s sentiments that he hopes people “come out here and shoot safely, enjoy themselves, and get instruction on how and when to use a firearm,” including women and young folks.

Also attending the tour were District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch; Assistant Chief Walter Lane of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources; Ray Lambert Jr. of the DNR Board of Natural Resources; Project Manager Travis Smith of Milestone Construction; and Joyce White, who served as Georgia State Director for USDA Rural Development during Perdue’s federal tenure.

“This project is a great cooperation between local, state and federal

government,” Perdue said. “It’s a good example of that. It’s embarrassing when they’ve taken so long, though.”

“That’s the one problem, the government doesn’t move that quickly with the checks and balances that you have to have, which are needed, but I felt like we could have done it a lot faster.”

Regardless of how long it has taken to see the range through to completion, everyone agreed that day that the final product – a first-class, multimillion dollar pistol and rifle range with amenities, supervision and instruction – was well worth the wait.

And while local officials give Perdue credit for making the range a reality, he in turn credits the persistence of the people here, from the county government and the Sheriff’s Office to the folks in the Union County Gun Club who have stuck by their gun range vision for six and a half years.

“They had to be persistent because there were a lot of barriers,” Perdue said. “Bureaucracy puts a lot of barnacles in the way, and sometimes you just have to be tough enough and persistent enough to keep scraping off the barnacles, and that’s really the situation here.”

“But also, there were considerations of the neighborhood and people who may live close by to make sure their voices were heard. This needed to be done in a very democratic, respectful way to make sure it was in the right place and being done in the right way, and I think it is.”

Construction on the state-of-the-art facility started around February 2023 and is set to wrap around the beginning of February 2024, weather pending, according to Project Manager Travis Smith.

To date, shooting sheds have been erected for both the 25-yard pistol range and the 150-yard rifle range, with interior work remaining to be completed. The pistol range features 10 shooting stations

and a 20-foot berm, while the rifle range will be able to accommodate 14 shooters.

Both ranges will have safety officers “running the show,” operating a red light/green light system to announce when the ranges are hot and cold.

The 2,000-square-foot conference building has been erected also, likewise with interior work remaining. This building will be used to facilitate on-site firearm training and other activities.

Overall, the project has required a massive amount of grading, taking the backside of the property down 30 feet, with still more dirt to move in the month before construction concludes.

The facility will feature a chief range master in Craig Davenport, who oversaw training at the Sheriff’s Office before retiring there at the end of December. Davenport looks forward to managing the facility, advising range safety officers and showing people a good time Tuesday through Sunday.

Shooters will be able to acquire an annual pass via membership with the Union County Gun Club, and the general public will also be able to practice shooting by purchasing single-use day passes.

Importantly, local law enforcement will finally have a nice facility for state-mandated annual firearms training.

Many partners have contributed to the development of the range, including the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, which has established the rules to be enforced when the range is operational.

It has been a long time coming, as the effort to build a range began in July 2017 when residents banded together to form the Union County Gun Club, with Sheriff Mason serving as the long-time liaison to government officials to find the right piece of land and secure plans and funding.



Sonny Perdue looking out onto the new 25-yard pistol range at the Union County Shooting Range, expected to be open for business in March.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Annual “Top of Georgia” Speaking Contest 2024



A good speech could earn a student more than just bragging rights in the Top of Georgia annual public speaking competition this spring! \$3000 in prize money will be awarded.

The speech contest is open to 6th - 12th grade public, private, or home-schooled students living in Towns, Union, and Clay counties. Students will compete in the middle- or high-school division depending on their grade level: high school grades 9-12 and middle school grades 6-8.

Beginning January 18, 2024, students will attend six-weekly training sessions held on Thursdays from 5:30 to 7

PM at the Senior Center in Hiawassee, Georgia. Students will learn to construct a speech and how to deliver it with conviction, poise, and expertise. Students will be expected to perform with an inspiring 4-7 minute speech on the final contest day in March. (exact time and date to be announced later).

The 2023 first-place finishers were: Abby Pate in the high school division, speaking on “Body Farms and Forensic Anthropology”; and Sophia Gobin in the middle school division speaking on “Supreme Court decision: Ernesto Miranda vs AZ.”

To apply as a student speaker, students should scan the qr code in this article, fill in the information, and submit.

The sponsors for this year include: Towns County, Union County, The City of Hiawassee, The City of Young Harris and numerous businesses and individuals.

Jeff Langley, Gerry

Chotiner, Marsha Hyer, Madison Urquiola, Steven Harper, LTC Kathy Merritt, LTC Mike Merritt, Betsy Young, Helen Seymore, Jeff Pierot, and Roy Perren will be serving as instructors and mentors.

Donations are being accepted for additional student prize monies. Checks may be made out to Top of Georgia Student Development and mailed to P.O. Box 36, Hiawassee, GA 30546. Any amount will be accepted and all donors’ names will be listed in the contest program.

To inquire about being a mentor, email name and contact information to togspeakingcontest@gmail.com, or call Gerry Chotiner at 910-697-6938.



Reid-Sampson House...from Page 1A

law after living together for seven years.

The home then came into the hands of schoolteacher Addie Kate Reid, a relative of Mr. Reid. Edgar Sampson owned the house after her death and used its garage to display his antiques collection. When Sampson's wife passed away, he moved to Florida.

In 1998, Davis purchased the house from Kathy Briley and had a secondary building constructed on the property in 1999. Davis would go on to gradually make renovations through the years and convert the property into a bed and breakfast.

She followed in Sampson's footsteps, livening the place up with her own collection of antiques in the historic house.

The fire started in the attic and blazed through the bedroom on the upper floor before spreading to the bathroom due to its proximity to a gas line.

To snuff out the flames, firefighters needed to enter the attic through the roof, and while Davis is thankful for the water's role in halting the burn, it trickled down to the lower floor, soaking the kitchen, dining room and downstairs bathroom.

Visiting the property and walking around the building, one wouldn't be able to notice much amiss aside from the tarps spread across great swaths of the roof out back and some boards knocked ajar.

But to the knowledgeable, it's easy to spot the soot on the back porch, gathered beneath the screen door.

Inside, where the smell of smoke lingers acridly, it's a different story. Many of the antiques that Davis collected and used to decorate the house are gone, having either been crushed by chunks of collapsed roof or consumed by the flames.

The walls left standing are stained with "a black powder coat" of permanent soot. In some places, all that's visible are planks of the house's old, wooden skeleton.

In particular, when faced with the possibility that her mother's antique doll collection was unsalvageable, Davis becomes emotional.

But it's important, too, to focus on what has been salvaged. On the weekend after the fire, Davis recruited some friends to help with the initial cleanup and salvage efforts. For four days, they carried precious antiques and boxes of photos downstairs and moved them to the "New House," the structure directly beside the original building.

Some antique quilts that



Cleaning up after the Dec. 3 fire has been a major – and costly – task that will take more time to complete.

had been stored in the building were miraculously saved and cleaned up after Davis took them to a laundromat among 19 loads of laundry, and the structure of the building is still fairly sound.

Most of all, Davis is comforted at the end of the day in knowing that nobody was injured, sickened or killed as a result of the fire.

"You kind of have to look at the big picture when something like this happens," she said. "You know, the only issue is that my insurance company had canceled me, and I didn't have insurance, so I need some help. That's the bottom line."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Davis replaced the roof over the front porch and filed a claim with her insurance company for \$15,000. When she sought help after the accidental fire, the company disallowed that claim.

"This is why you have insurance – in case of a catastrophic loss," Davis said, venting her frustrations. "And they didn't pay the claim. They disallowed it, then they canceled me."

What's more, it's difficult to find other insurance companies that will cover historic buildings. Davis said her experience was no different, and it's been hard to find a company willing to work with her due to the perceived risk with such an old structure.

David Leopard, owner of PuroClean of Enotah Valley,

is helping remediate some of the damage, and repairs are expected to last well beyond the beginning of the new year. Unfortunately, this is where Davis hits a snag.

She anticipates materials costs going down with falling gas prices but says she has "no idea" what the total material and labor costs will add up to. The \$30,000 posted on the GoFundMe she has established is a rough estimate provided by a close friend who has experience in remodeling.

"I'm thinking \$30,000 is going to be way low, and that's heartbreaking for me," admitted Davis.

Taking things into her own hands, Davis has been seeking help through other local means. She believes it "takes a village" to get back on one's feet after disaster strikes, so she is reaching out to various local organizations for assistance.

In the meantime, Davis will take all the help she can get to restore the home. People who feel passionate about the preservation of historical property can donate via the GoFundMe for the Reid-Sampson House at www.gofundme.com/f/save-blairsville-historic-home.

"I am hopeful if we can rally community support, we can get this accomplished," Davis said. "There are times in life where you just can't handle things by yourself and you need some help. And this is that time for me."



Peggy Davis is appealing to the community to help her restore her historic home in Downtown Blairsville after a fire caused significant damage last month. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

School Board...from Page 1A



L-R: School Superintendent John Hill with Board Members Tony Hunter, Julia Barnett, Jana Akins, Patrick White and Jason McCarter.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

achieving his dream of playing with the Macy's Great American Marching Band at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City on Nov. 23.

In fact, the 2023 parade performance by the flute-playing member of the UCHS Band was his second appearance for the famous American tradition in the Big Apple.

To honor his accomplishment, the Board Office bestowed an "Extra Mile Award" upon Burnett for displaying outstanding talent in the realm of music while maintaining a 3.4 GPA throughout his endeavors.

Burnett has been especially successful at Georgia Music Educators Association events, such as District 9 Honor Band, which he has participated in four times now, and All-State Band, which he made in 2021.

"A lot of the kids that make the All-State Band, they take private lessons," Band Director Will Stafford said. "So, in addition to taking band classes and learning in band class, they take lessons with a person whose only job is to teach (for example) flute, and they do that weekly."

"Ayden has been able to do that without that kind of access to those lessons that some of these kids in the

metro-Atlanta area have, so that makes the accomplishment, to me, all the more remarkable."

Burnett has been the flute section leader for UCHS for four years, starting as a freshman when he stepped in for the previous lead about halfway through the year.

Through his hard work and dedication to his craft, Burnett has earned a full-ride scholarship to Kennesaw State University and was "waiting to hear back from Reinhardt University" at the time of the meeting.

Next up, the School Board itself was recognized for having been honored with the "Leading Edge Award" at the Georgia School Board Association's State Board of Education Annual Conference.

According to the organization's website, the GSBA ensures "excellence in the governance of local school systems by providing leadership, advocacy and services, and by representing the collective resolve of Georgia's elected boards of education."

When the conference rolls around every fall, "they provide training, they provide local school board orientation," and "they give out a few awards to very highly successful school districts in different realms," according to School Superintendent John Hill.

"In the area of communication, our Board of Education was presented this 'Leading Edge Award' two weeks ago at their Fall Conference," Hill said. "They have provided an example for other school boards to be able to receive this for their exemplary work in the area of communication and just innovation."

Hill noted that he couldn't recall another time when the local Board of Education had received any similar honors.

"It's a big accomplishment for you guys, and I appreciate you tremendously," Hill said. "On behalf of all the students and the staff, congratulations, and thank you for your service very much."

It was then revealed that the new Union County Elementary School was "on schedule and progressing well." In fact, the footings for Area A on the left side of the building had already been completed by that night.

The Woody Gap tennis courts are "ready to use," marking the official end of the project. The guaranteed maximum price was \$418,840, but final construction costs came in at \$375,709, putting the project \$43,131 under budget, with the leftover money to be credited back to the system.

In another facilities update, it was announced

that the UCHS track was also complete outside of requiring some surrounding signage and the delivery of the discus and shot-put cage.

And that project came in a whopping \$338,240 under budget. For reference, the guaranteed maximum price was set at \$960,520, but construction finished up at \$622,280. And just like the extra funds for the tennis courts, the remaining \$338,240 will go back to the schools.

The Union County Board of Education meets on the third Tuesday of every month starting at 6 p.m. inside the Board Office located at 124 Hughes Street. The public is invited and encouraged to attend.

Adopt-a-Grandparent...from Page 1A

COVID-19 pandemic when Ford and her "helper elves" visited elders from the safety of the other sides of windows, all to bring joy to the lives of people who often go forgotten in their community.

"There's so many of them that just never see a family member," Ford said, with a catch in her voice as she added, "That's so sad."

Of course, assisted living staff do their best to keep their charges company, but they can only do so much, which is why the annual program is so important for the county's senior citizens in assisted living facilities.

Funded in part by Ford and Wallace's Mary Kay sales, the first gifts for Adopt-a-Grandparent were inexpensive. But as word spread, individuals and businesses began donating funds to buy presents, and what started as humble door-to-door visits grew into a multi-facility tradition.

Ford notes that their sponsors are "loyal to the cause every year," and many of those benefactors take the initiative and reach out to Adopt-a-Grandparent themselves "right on time." Although many prefer to remain anonymous, there are a few select donors Ford wants to credit.

"We give thanks to Mountain Crossing – they were our largest supporter this year," said Ford, also mentioning Budget Blinds, particularly company founders Rick and DeeDee Siefken.

Don't be fooled, however; Adopt-a-Grandparent does plenty of grassroots fundraising as well, namely, arts and crafts sales at most functions promoting local commerce, and Ford can recall standing on a corner in town with signs.

Also assisting in 2023 was New Hope Fellowship Baptist Church, whose members contributed to the wrapping of gifts.

Ford clarified that the effort actually takes place year-round: "It's not just close to Christmas; this is something that starts from the very time we deliver – we start pumping for next year."

In the meantime, some contractors have started dropping off fence post tops and other spare materials useful for fundraising crafts, and Ford



Volunteers for Adopt-a-Grandparent went door to door at the Union County Nursing Home and Stonehenge Senior Living to deliver Christmas gifts to residents on Thursday, Dec. 21.

urges others to do the same, adding that the time spent creating art is also used for "fellowship," which lines up with the second goal of Adopt-a-Grandparent as not just a charity, but a ministry.

Over the years, people have requested and accepted moments of prayer or brief, candid talks about faith, and the gifts themselves include the bookmarks with Bible verses attached.

"Every single time, no matter where we go, when we do it, there's always (somebody saying), 'Would y'all pray with us? Would y'all take a moment and pray with us?'" Ford said.

These prayer circles include the program's "helper elves," people from the community who volunteer to hand out gifts and make the holidays merry and bright. As he does every year, Commissioner Paris joined the effort in 2023, and Gary Harmon took up that role as well.

Adopt-a-Grandparent's 10th Anniversary was special for Ford because of "the loving hearts and the open-armed welcome each facility gave us."

"(Manager) Crystal at Stonehenge and her team – I was in awe. I don't know how else to word that; it was amazing to see their love for their residents," Ford said.

Union County Nursing Home also gave the team a warm welcome, courtesy

of Dawn Baker, though the moment that made the biggest impact on Ford was seeing Paris interact with Florence "Flo" Gerrard, a resident of Stonehenge.

A veteran of World War II, Gerrard and her first husband's uniforms hang in the Union County Historic Courthouse Museum.

Her service to her country was the reason Paris was in awe of her, being "so touched" by Gerrard that he proclaimed she should receive more visitors due to her earned status as a hero.

She wasn't the only one to bring Paris to tears, and Paris wasn't the only one to get emotional, either on the team or among the patients. With so much passion involved, the program certainly has an even brighter future ahead.

"Everyone was so warm and welcome and loving – it was different this year," Ford said. "I can't see not doing this every year."

Thanks to the continual growth of Adopt-a-Grandparent, Ford hopes that, by next year, there will be enough gifts to hand out to everyone in both the Nursing Home and Stonehenge.

People wishing to help the cause can remember to save spare crafting materials, and, if they are able, donate funds to the outreach. Ford may be contacted at 706-897-0245 or ilovemkfaces@gmail.com.