

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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COVID-19 continues to spread in new winter surge

By Shawn Jarrard
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North Georgia is experiencing a new COVID-19 winter surge, potentially driven by the omicron variant that has been sweeping the U.S. and much of the globe.

No cases of the latest viral strain had been reported here by press time, and hospitalizations, while increasing, had yet to reach the same volume as the recent delta wave from August and September that saw record levels of inpatients admitted to Union General Hospital.

In addition to other seasonal respiratory viruses making the rounds alongside COVID, utilization of the state's free drive-thru coronavirus testing site at Union General

has gone up dramatically in the last two weeks, resulting in a more than 100% increase in people being tested of late.

At the state level, Georgia is reporting new record numbers of COVID cases compared to the previous record set during the last winter surge in January 2021, and nationally, the number of daily new cases shot past 300,000 for the first time ever last Thursday.

But glimmers of hope can be seen as cases seem to be outpacing hospitalizations and deaths in many places, potentially pointing to less severe illness overall after a year-long vaccination campaign and almost two years of people developing immunity through infection.

The Georgia Department

of Public Health released data last week showing vaccination rates among the elderly to be above 80% in each county, with lower rates among younger members of the population who are less likely to develop severe illness from COVID-19.

At the local level, the Union General Health System, which serves many of the surrounding counties, including Union and Towns, started seeing an increase in COVID inpatients about a month ago after hospitalizations dropped precipitously following the delta surge.

Compared with the August/September wave, which set new records for local hospitalizations that put the Health System above its 45-bed capacity for COVID inpatients alone, beginning in December,

the level of hospitalizations has hovered between 10 and 15 through last week.

Union General Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said that the severity of sickness does not appear to be any worse than before, and while health care workers have been seeing some vaccinated patients admitted for COVID-19, most inpatients remain among the unvaccinated.

"I think we would call (the current situation) a surge just because there is an increase in positives," Barnett said, "but not resulting so far in the number of hospitalizations and severe illness that we have seen before."

"As far as the patients that actually end up in the hospital, (severity of illness) looks similar to what we were

seeing back in the fall, but there are certainly less patients requiring hospitalization, it seems, compared to what there was with the last surge."

With state and national case rates continuing to climb, Barnett said it is too early to tell how things will look locally in the end, but again, she reiterated that, "so far, there are lots of positives, lots of people with mild symptoms, but much less resulting in hospitalizations and severe illness."

Of course, that does not mean COVID hospitalizations will remain at the especially low current levels, respectively since the winter surge of 2021 did not really get going until January.

During the last winter surge, the high for regional COVID inpatients at Union



Julia Barnett
UGH Chief Nursing Officer

General Hospital was 31 in mid-January. For delta just a few months ago, that number reached 56, and everyone is hopeful that the current surge will remain lower before
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RCUT intersection raises safety concerns at 515/325

By Shawn Jarrard
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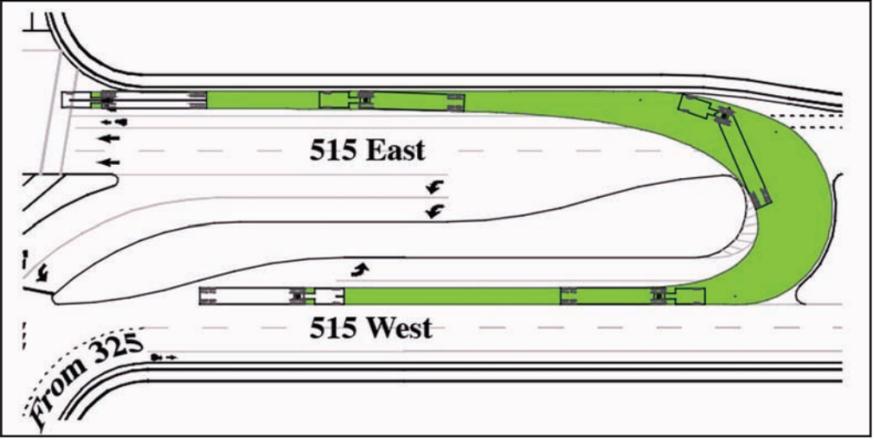
Starting this month, motorists will no longer be able to cross over State Route 515 from either direction of SR 325/Nottely Dam Road,

as the Georgia Department of Transportation works to install a Restricted Crossing U-Turn by Jan. 31.

GDOT believes the project will improve safety at the intersection by eliminating cross traffic that has resulted in crashes there in recent years.

"The new RCUT will require all side-street traffic to turn right and then complete a U-turn to continue through the intersection," GDOT said, noting that vehicles traveling on 515 will still be able to make U-turns at the intersection and

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A sample illustration showing how motorists heading toward Blairsville from 325 South will need to turn onto 515 West to access the newly constructed U-turn about 1,800 feet past the intersection.

More wintry precipitation could be heading to town

By Shawn Jarrard
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Most Union County residents woke up to a not-quite Winter Wonderland on Monday, as the season's first snowstorm dropped a little more than half an inch of the fluffy white stuff by sunup.

Sub-freezing temperatures to start the week were certainly a change from what has been an unseasonably warm start to winter, with New Year's Day reaching 72 degrees less than 48 hours earlier.

But warm winter weather is on its way out – for this week, at least – with forecasted highs dipping into the 40s, and lows consistently below freezing and even into the teens, plus chances for more wintry precipitation late



The school spirit rock at Union County High blended in perfectly with the wintry weather Monday.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Wednesday night, Thursday City, Georgia, which is the weather forecast office for

and early Friday. The National Weather Service out of Peachtree

North Georgia, issued a
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Missing teenager returned home safely after 8 days

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union County teen Jadyn Edna Maurer has been found safe and returned home after going missing for more than a week during the Christmas holiday.

According to the Union County Sheriff's Office, she ran away from home around Dec. 19 and was discovered with a friend the evening of Dec. 27 in Murphy, North Carolina. The Murphy Police Department located Jadyn and delivered her to Union County authorities at the state line.

It was not the first time the 16-year-old had run away from home, the Sheriff's Office said, and she has been charged as a juvenile in connection with

this most recent incident.

Many posts and comments were shared on social media about Jadyn and her potential whereabouts, and the Sheriff's Office said it followed up on many false leads, including reports that Jadyn had been abducted in Cherokee County, North Carolina.

"We have been aware of the alleged incident that took place at the Hot Spot in Murphy, NC, and have looked into it," the Sheriff's Office said on Facebook Dec. 27, hours before Jadyn was located. "We have found out, at this time, there is nothing to support the events that have been posted on social media surrounding this incident."

After being returned home safely, a member of

Jadyn's family reached out to the North Georgia News to dispute the account of the investigation by the Sheriff's Office, saying that "hundreds and hundreds" of leads were not followed, and that Jadyn had "never actually ran away before."

"She's snuck out the window a few times and would go to the girl's house across the road, sometimes cruise around with friends and come home in an hour or two," said the family member, who asked to remain anonymous. "This time it was different, and we knew it."

According to this family member, Jadyn had initially left home to hang out with a couple of friends but ended up with another group of people who

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Spouses bring in '22 with 'Wishes and Midnight Kisses'

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Smoky Mountain Foothills Community of United Marriage Encounter set its New Year's Eve festivities apart by focusing on a non-alcoholic night dedicated to the particular enchantment that comes with celebrating the occasion with one's spouse.

Fittingly, the Dec. 31 event at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center was called "New Year's Wishes and Midnight Kisses."

Started in Rochester, New York, in 1975, the international organization United Marriage Encounter has sought to help couples build marriages on a foundation of spirituality. Divided into multiple sub-regions, the Smoky Mountain Foothills Community is the group dedicated to this area.

"It actually originated



Frank and Jane Combs celebrated New Year's Eve with friends at the United Marriage Encounter-sponsored "New Year's Wishes and Midnight Kisses" event. Photo/Facebook

Heaton delays appeal pending decision by US Supreme Court

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

Attorneys for former Blairsville physician James Heaton, who has appealed his 2019 conviction for prescription fraud, have filed a motion asking to delay any further arguments in his case pending an upcoming decision by the U.S. Supreme Court.

That request, unopposed by federal prosecutors, was granted Nov. 23 by David J. Clark, Clerk of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh

Circuit. Pursuant to this delay, arguments in Heaton's case were scheduled to be heard before the Court of Appeals in Atlanta on Dec. 14.

Meanwhile, Heaton, 65, began serving his prison sentence at the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta last June, with a release date scheduled for July 11, 2026, according to the Bureau of Prisons.

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed in November to hear two cases similar to Heaton's involving doctors convicted of prescription fraud: Ruan v. United States and United States

v. Kahn. Heaton's attorneys contend that the two cases are relevant to his appeal.

A date to hear the cases has been scheduled for March 1, and the Supreme Court's ruling following the hearing could come any time between then and June 2022.

Xiulu Ruan was a doctor in Mobile, Alabama, who was sentenced to 21 years in prison after his 2017 conviction for violation of the Controlled Substances Act.

During his trial, he asked the judge to instruct the jury that his "good faith" – that is,

his belief that he was acting in "proper medical practice" – was a defense.

The judge rejected that request, instructing the jury that "a medical doctor has violated section 841 when the government has proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the doctor's actions were either not for a legitimate medical purpose or were outside the usual course of professional medical practice."

One of the issues in Heaton's appeal is that the judge instructed the jury similarly, using "legitimate

medical purpose or outside the usual course of professional medical practice."

Heaton contends the judge should have linked the two conditions with "and" rather than "or," and that, in his opinion, the judge's failure to do so "misled the jury and misstated the law."

In Ruan's case, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the lower court judge's language and upheld his conviction.

Ruan has asked the Supreme Court if the Alabama

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James Heaton

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RCUT...from Page 1A

left turns onto 325.

To complement the RCUT, a new U-turn has been built on the four-lane about 1,800 feet north of the

intersection.

Once RCUT construction gets underway, and upon completion this month, going to Blairsville from the Union

County Saddle Club Arena, for example, will require a driver to turn right onto 515 West, get into the left lane, and then make a U-turn to head toward town.

Similarly, people wishing to head west from the Old Blue Ridge Highway side of Nottely Dam Road will need to first turn right onto 515 East before making a U-turn at Sweetgum Road about 1,000 feet down the highway or at Pony Connector roughly 2,600 feet from the intersection.

This is the same intersection design implemented for safety reasons in 2017 at the Walmart entrance/exit on SR 515 – an intersection that likewise witnessed a relatively high number of crashes.

Several residents have spoken out against the RCUT intersection at 515/325, including in recent letters to the editor of the North Georgia News, asking about safety for trucks hauling horse trailers away from the Saddle Club Arena, especially in an area with a 65-mph speed limit.

Furthermore, Union County Fire Chief David Dyer has confirmed that responses from the Jones Creek Fire Station, located off Old Blue Ridge Highway, will likely be delayed by at least a minute for calls dispatched across 515 in that area.

Dyer, who is also the director of the Union County Emergency Management Agency and E-911 Dispatch, said that, to his knowledge, GDOT had not reached out to any local first responder agencies regarding what impact altering the intersection might have on emergency services.

In response to the potential safety issues surrounding horse trailers turning toward Blairsville, GDOT said “the U-turn will accommodate trucks pulling horse trailers.”

“We’ve had callers say that they had difficulty making the left off of SR 325 pulling a trailer because their truck and trailer were longer than the width of the median,” a member of the GDOT Traffic Operations Team said. “The new turn lane and U-turn lane will accommodate this size of vehicle.”

Additionally, GDOT said that the new U-turn “will also be able to accommodate firetrucks and ambulances,” though engineers should have been aware that the restricted crossing aspect of the intersection design would result in delayed



This is what the 515/325 intersection will look like when the Georgia Department of Transportation finishes RCUT construction later this month.

emergency responses from the nearest fire station.

According to the “Restricted Crossing U-Turn Intersection Informational Guide” by the Federal Highway Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation, upon which GDOT bases its guidelines for this type of intersection design:

“RCUT intersections may be undesirable at intersections where an emergency vehicle station is located on the minor street,” as is the case with the Jones Creek Fire Station. “Emergency vehicles making left turns or through movements from minor streets will have to negotiate the U-turn crossover or cross mountable channelizing islands, which will add to the response time.”

A request for comment on how GDOT considered the issue of delayed response times from Fire Station No. 2 creating “undesirable” conditions at a potential RCUT intersection was not available by press time.

Specifically, RCUTs are used to reduce “angle crashes”

by requiring side-street traffic to make righthand turns followed by a U-turn, according to GDOT, “thus preventing a percentage of angle collisions at an intersection.”

“Georgia DOT engineers believe similar results can occur with an RCUT at (this intersection),” GDOT said when announcing the intersection in November. “Nationally, RCUT intersections reduce severe crashes by 47% and minor crashes by 69%.”

Per National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data compiled by the nonprofit Insurance Information Institute, angle crashes resulted in the highest percentage of total fatal crashes among all crash types in 2019, including head-on collisions, rollovers, and pedestrians hit by vehicles.

The decision to install the RCUT originated from a Union County Government request that GDOT evaluate the intersection for a traffic signal and safety improvements following the January 2021 crash that caused fatal injuries for Sydney Grace Jones.

Jones, 19, of Morganton, was riding in a vehicle that turned left from 515 East into oncoming traffic. Her family and others put out a call for improved safety there, starting a “Signal for Sydney” petition at change.org.

“After evaluating the location for a signal, it did not meet signal warrants,” GDOT said. “The Department determined that a Restricted Crossing U-Turn would be the appropriate intersection control which reduces vehicle conflict points.”

Construction of the new RCUT is on schedule for completion by the end of January, weather pending. The two-phase, state-funded project is part of GDOT’s Quick Response Project Program and cost \$199,420.03 for the U-turn and \$110,518.49 for the RCUT.

Incidentally, installing an RCUT at 515 and 325 will not address the safety issues that caused the fatal injuries of Jones, for whom the intersection was officially named in memoriam last year.

COVID-19 Spread...from Page 1A

receding again as it has in the past.

Elective procedures are still being conducted, but as of last week, Union General was once again above hospital-bed capacity, though the causes of hospital stays are varying much more widely than in previous surges, with about 80% of inpatients being admitted for non-COVID reasons.

It has been a little more than a year since the first COVID vaccinations began going into arms in December 2020 in an ongoing effort Barnett credits with keeping the delta surge from being worse than it was, with still more initial vaccinations and boosters assisting in the current surge.

In terms of how treatment has progressed since the onset of the pandemic, Barnett said things have certainly improved, but she recommends prevention through vaccination as the best way for most people to respond to COVID-19.

“It’s still a virus – there’s still no cure for it, and we’re mostly treating symptoms,” Barnett said. “We do have remdesivir, which is still proven to be the most effective treatment for the inpatients that we have, and we continue to use that.”

“In the outpatient setting, we continue to use the monoclonal antibodies; we have the three different ones that we are administering on a regular basis to anybody that needs those. For some reason, those seem to be a little bit less effective this go around, but thankfully, illness seems to be a little less severe.”

Dr. Samuel Le Church, who runs Synergy Health of Hiwassee and has admitting privileges at Union General Health System, Northeast Georgia Medical Center and elsewhere, agrees that the vaccines have been making a significant difference in these communities.

Vaccines are widely available to most Americans now, but back when they were being heavily rationed in the initial rollout last winter and early spring, Church hosted multiple vaccination clinics with assistance from several dozen community volunteers.

At his practice, Church said he started noticing a marked increase in new office visits for COVID the Monday before last, though fortunately, he has had very few patients in the last month or so require hospitalization.

“We are having a fair amount of cases – some of those are breakthrough cases in those who have been fully vaccinated and boosted,” Church said. “I would say, overwhelmingly, those people are not getting very sick, especially the ones who have been vaccinated.”

“But folks that are at high risk or progressing (in their illness), we have been giving them Regeneron monoclonal

antibody treatments.”

The currently available COVID-19 vaccines were designed using the genetic instructions for the spike protein of the original strain of COVID, and there are concerns that they are less effective against the omicron variant that features dozens of alterations to the spike protein.

However, even if the current vaccines are not as effective against newer variants, public health professionals believe that vaccination continues to provide protection against severe illness, as evidenced by the disproportionately higher hospitalization rate for unvaccinated individuals.

“There are a lot of folks who have observed friends and family with a breakthrough case and using that as a rationale not to be vaccinated, that it does not work,” Church said. “But the real issue is whether you’re ending up in the hospital or getting significantly ill, and the vaccines seem to be extremely protective in that regard.”

From his observations, Church said that among the increased cases his office has been seeing are more breakthrough infections than before for fully vaccinated and boosted patients, but for the most part, their symptoms have been “very mild in the scheme of things.”

“Less severe symptoms have been seen for everybody, including even the ones who haven’t been vaccinated,” Church added. “(We don’t know if it’s omicron), but looking at the patterns of things with some of these generally milder symptoms, it certainly makes you suspect that it’s a different strain. It certainly feels like it’s something different from what we were dealing with a year ago.”

Looking back over 2021, Church said he is grateful for the many community members who rallied to the cause of getting their neighbors and loved ones vaccinated.

“Health care workers were playing their role, but those things could not have happened without the assistance

of the community volunteers,” Church said. “And (there are many other instances) where the community has stepped up.”

“This has been a hard couple of years for folks, and I think we were eager to serve, and I’m looking forward to getting back into that role for lots of people who have so much to give and tap into these resources for our community to make Towns and Union counties be even stronger.”

“So, I’m optimistic about that, and I do think we’re headed toward normalcy. We just need to trudge along with following the science and asking good questions.”

The local school systems of Union and Towns counties did not observe a big uptick in COVID pre-Christmas break and will continue to monitor the situation among staff and students after classes resume this week.

Separately, professionals with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week updated COVID quarantine guidelines to be more feasible long-term, effectively shortening the amount of time people with COVID or with a known exposure need to isolate.

Per the CDC, individuals with COVID-19 can now safely come out of isolation if, at the end of five days from onset of infection, they have no symptoms or their symptoms are resolving without fever for 24 hours. Masking for five days is recommended after leaving isolation.

“The change is motivated by science demonstrating that the majority of SARS-CoV-2 transmission occurs early in the course of illness, generally in the 1-2 days prior to onset of symptoms and the 2-3 days after,” the CDC said.

COVID vaccines can be readily found at the Health Departments, Synergy Health of Hiwassee, and local pharmacies, and free testing is available Monday through Friday via the drive-thru site at Union General Hospital in Blairsville, with rapid testing available at area pharmacies.

Heaton Appeal...from Page 1A

court “abused its discretion in declining a requested jury instruction” based on the doctor’s “own ‘subjective view’ of the ‘usual course of medical practice.’”

Shakeel Kahn, a physician in Arizona, was convicted in 2019 of, among other counts, conspiracy to distribute oxycodone and other drugs resulting in death. One of his patients died from an overdose. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

Kahn also used “good faith” – a subjective standard, that is, his understanding of it – as a defense.

The District Court judge in his case instructed the jury that “good faith” must be “reasonable,” based on an objective standard. The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals agreed and rejected Kahn’s appeal.

Kahn has asked the Supreme Court to consider whether “a physician alleged to have prescribed controlled substances outside the usual course of professional practice may be convicted ... without regard to whether, in good faith, he ‘reasonably believed’ or ‘subjectively intended’ that his prescriptions fall within that course of professional practice.”

Heaton’s attorneys believe his appeal will benefit greatly if either of the similar convictions in the above cases is overturned by the Supreme Court.

As previously reported, Heaton was convicted along with former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder, the latter receiving a year and a day prison sentence. The men were arrested in 2016, and

the case was moved from the Enotah Judicial Circuit to the U.S. District Court in 2018.

Gowder began serving his prison sentence in May 2021. He has filed a motion without an attorney requesting that his conviction and sentence be thrown out based on the ineffectiveness of his legal counsel.

The prosecution responded that Gowder’s attorney would need to come before the court in a hearing to determine whether he was ineffective. That hearing had not been scheduled by press time.

According to the Bureau of Prisons, Gowder is currently serving his sentence out of a Residential Reentry Management field office in Nashville, Tennessee, with a release date of March 4, 2022.

Missing Teen...from Page 1A

were “very bad influences, and they were all adults over 18.”

Apparently, Jadyn managed to make it to a safe location in Murphy and had arranged to be picked up by family members who planned to contact authorities after receiving her, but local law enforcement received a tip that resulted in her being collected by police first.

The family member who contacted the newspaper said that the family would not have been able to find Jadyn without the help of people on social media, particularly those from Union and the Murphy area.

“I know in my soul that if it weren’t for God, people’s prayers and (social media) post shares that we would have never seen her again,” the family member said, adding that Jadyn has always been an athlete, cheerleader, and straight-A Beta Club student in school.

A reward was offered in this case but will not be

forthcoming as the family was the first to locate Jadyn in Murphy, the family member said.

When reached for comment about the information provided by the family member, the Union County Sheriff’s Office said it followed up on multiple unsubstantiated leads

over the Christmas holiday and had no information to indicate that Jadyn was in danger during her disappearance.

Jadyn’s story garnered much attention in the leadup to Christmas, including from major media outlets in the Atlanta news market and on social media, and the North Georgia News is thankful she has returned home safely.

First Snow...from Page 1A



Christmas decorations always look more festive with a snowy backdrop. Pictured here: the Union County Historic Courthouse lawn. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



Students got a single day of snowy weather before having to return to school this week following the end of winter break. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



The National Weather Service said Monday there’s a chance for more wintry mix precipitation this week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill said his staff would be making sure roads were safe before students returned to classes on Tuesday, Jan. 4. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

“Winter Weather Advisory” Sunday calling for upward of 2 inches of snow accumulation overnight into Monday.

Later in the day, the weather service upgraded its advisory to a “Winter Storm Warning,” likewise revising forecasted snow totals to between 2 and 4 inches in higher elevations.

Those revised estimates appeared to hold true for Suches, with reports early Monday morning of about 3 inches of snow there, though much of Blairsville and other parts of the county experienced less than an inch.

Also part of the storm warning was the potential for wind gusts up to 30 mph, and the Georgia Mountain Research and Education Center in Blairsville measured nearly 24 mph winds in the early hours of Jan. 3.

Local Emergency Management Agency Director David Dyer said that Union County was fortunate, having made it through the season’s first snowstorm with a few slick spots on roads, a few trees down, some power outages, “but nothing major so far.”

The Road Department stayed busy clearing trees and the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC worked to restore power to hundreds of customers Monday morning, though everyone agreed that the situation could have been much worse.

Classes at Union County Schools were set to resume after press time Jan. 4, and School Superintendent John Hill said that, while it seemed things would be OK to start Tuesday, he and his staff would be checking roads closer to dark on Jan. 3 to be sure.

The weather service issued a “Hazardous Weather Outlook” on Monday noting “a possibility for some mixed wintry precipitation in far North Georgia late Wednesday into early Thursday and again Thursday night into early Friday. Accumulations are not expected at this time.”

'Possum Drop' celebration returns to Senior Center

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Opossums have traditionally heralded the New Year in some parts of the mountains. About six years ago, when PETA was successful in putting a stop to using live opossums during the world-famous Possum Drop, some revelers got crafty when it came to bringing in the New Year.

In the case of Judy Brown, it was quite literal. As an avid crocheter and talented carver, she has a way of making decorative animals come alive. She and her husband Harold volunteer at the Union County Senior Center, and they were the ones who began the tradition.

"Judy started making the possums for us and donates all the possums for our home-delivered meal program," Senior Center Director Kathy Hill said. "After we saw the possums she made, we decided

to have our own Possum Drop."

The crochet opossums come in sizes large, medium and small, and are so popular that Brown can't keep enough made at one time. Due to the high demand around New Year's, she doesn't take orders, but earlier in the year, when she sets aside the time to make some opossums, the proceeds of their sales go toward the Meals on Wheels Program.

Still, the visitors of the Senior Center have discovered another niche use for Brown's crocheted critters, and the Union County Senior Center saw the return of its very own Possum Drop on Dec. 30 after guests finished up lunch and had moved all the tables and chairs out of the way.

Administrative Assistant Phillip McGlamery, adorned with a glittering 2022 crown, fastened the little crochet opossum to a fishing pole, and

the whole room counted down as, slowly, the line lengthened and the opossum inched closer to the ground.

When it reached the floor, all present celebrated with an attempt at "Auld Lang Syne" that quickly devolved into chaos and laughter. Not everyone knew the full lyrics, so they had to settle on enthusiastically tooting their noisemakers.

Despite the brief nature of the celebration, it was no less jolly, and before the opossum even began its descent, the party hat-clad creature had graced several heads and laps. By the end, it had also been swept up in an enthusiastic, protective hug.

Afterward, the tables and chairs were pulled out again with help from Hill, McGlamery, and kitchen staff Tiffany Payne-Martin and Rita Romano. Cupcakes and ice cream made for a fine dessert and New Year's treat. The



The Union County Senior Center Possum Drop made its triumphant return in 2021.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

UME New Year...from Page 1A

with the Catholics," said Jim Yohe. Jim and wife Judy are the incoming Executive Couple for the Smoky Mountain Foothills Community. "And then other denominations learned about it, and the Catholics helped them set up as well."

Importantly, the group welcomes "couples of all faiths, including non-believers," as members believe "all couples can benefit from following God's plan for marriage."

Typically, a couple will spend a weekend at a United Marriage Encounter course, and from there take part in a conference setting that can seat 30 couples. Using spirituality and practicality, organizers make a concerted effort to help relationships at any stage to last a lifetime.

The Yohes have been officially involved with UME since about 2002, whether through editing the organization's international magazines or becoming the Executive Couple for the Smoky Mountain Foothills Community.

And the advent of 2022 was a perfect opportunity to introduce Blairsville to the group that has, in the past, saved many marriages.

Couples spent the festive evening enjoying a savory dinner of steak and salad, asparagus bundles, seasoned potatoes, and sweet potato souffle, afterward perusing the dessert bar that featured delights such as macaroons, pumpkin pie, cheesecake and raspberry tart.

The room enjoyed the serenity of gentle '80s synth-ambience before the DJ took the floor and dancing became an option.

One at a time, braver couples joined in shimmying, jiving, and boogying to hits like "Stayin' Alive" by the Bee Gees and a remix of "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley & His Comets. The lights flashed in true disco fashion, and even those sitting had fun by dancing in their seats.

Every hour on the hour, attendees took part in toasting the New Year in other time zones, and the announcer



This married couple got an early start on the dance floor in Friday's New Year's Eve celebration held at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

listed off popular cities in countries celebrating 2022 a bit earlier than Blairsville. Guests lifted their glasses of sparkling grape juice to Oslo, Norway, and Cape Town, South Africa, at 6 p.m., and at 7 p.m. to Edinburgh, Scotland, and Madrid, Spain.

The silent auction wrapped up around 8:30 p.m., with some lucky participants receiving gifts such as a vase sculpted by local artist Steve Hicks, an unbelievably soft, larger-than-life 5-foot teddy bear, and a basket of goodies with things like a flashlight, luggage tag, shirts, and a notepad.

Of course, there was plenty of time betwixt and between for reminiscing about the old year and the upcoming new year.

Outgoing Executive Couple Tammy and Jonathan Fleischer admitted that they still

faceted hardship holding UME events, particularly considering that out of the two conference weekends they had planned, one had to be canceled due to the late summer/fall COVID surge.

"It's been really difficult to plan events like this with the unknowns and uncertainties of COVID," Tammy reiterated, saying that, despite events being nigh-unplannable, their celebrations were worth even more when they were safe to be held.

The general attitude among attendees that evening was one of positivity regarding 2022. Bob and Carol Maddox, sitting with friends George and Patricia Spencer, had high hopes and no small amount of confidence.

"We just look forward to a good year," said Bob. For her part, Carol said it was hard to know what was coming, but she thought it was important to stay positive, especially with the power of prayer.

George Spencer agreed that the Lord should have a greater influence over the nation, as he hoped to see the introduction of "more Christian people in the government," both on a national and local level.

"Until God comes back," he said, "people have just pushed Him out of the area, and He's the one that started this country. He's the one that made this country what it was."

The best way to go about doing this, the Spencers believe, is to share the word of God with as many people as possible.

"He has this all figured out," Patricia Spencer said with confidence, stating that, regardless of the political unrest and medical turmoil the world currently faces, she believes that everything happens for a reason whether human beings understand God's plan or not.

When the clock struck midnight, a chorus of hooting and tooting noisemakers blew in 2022, and there was a resounding "clink" as the final toast of the evening celebrated the New Year's arrival in Blairsville, Murphy, Blue Ridge, and the rest of the East Coast.

With one final slow dance and many hugs, the United Marriage Encounter's New Year's Wishes and Midnight Kisses event came to a close.

To learn more about UME, call 563-264-8889 or go to <https://unitedmarriage.org>.

kitchen offered several flavors, and the staff handed out plates according to what each guest requested so they didn't have to get up again.

But it wasn't all fun and games, as McGlamery revealed why the opossum was one of the unofficial mascots of the Senior Center. Its full name, Senior Center SAS, is meant to reflect on the support that seniors deserve from the community. The acronym stands for Seniors Are Special.

At one table, married art teachers Barbara and Richard Deroxtro articulated why they believe so many people shy away from visiting the center.

"You get some old people on the outside, and you say 'senior citizens,' and..." began Richard, demonstrating his point by visibly recoiling and sneering.

"They're grumpy," Barbara added.

"Right away, they're defensive," Richard explained further. "It's 'The Old People's Home,' you know? And they're afraid. They won't come."

Alongside many other regular visitors to the Senior Center, the Deroxtros want the community to know that the environment is actually one of acceptance and surprisingly vibrant energy. People can come to the Senior Center to make friends, discover new hobbies, keep healthy, or just socialize when they otherwise wouldn't have a chance.

Just about every visitor pointed to Director Kathy Hill's hard work and devotion to each guest's wellbeing as part of their inspiration to keep coming. Perhaps also because of her care, Hill wanted to clear up the common misconception that the Senior Center is a nursing home — it's not. Some visitors require

help because they can no longer drive, but none of the guests live in the building.

Rather, it's a daytime activity center. More than that, the Senior Center is a place set aside for Union County's seniors to keep active in their community as much as in their own lives, because sometimes, no matter who the person is, it helps to have others who will simply be there to listen.

Many guests have found close friends to whom they can "bare their souls," and in just one example, two widows recently met and have begun healing from their grief by talking to each other about their loss.

"You can sit and talk to a wall, but it won't respond to you," McGlamery said, describing the situation many elders feel when left alone. "But whenever you have somebody that is willing to listen, is compassionate, and will give you an honest answer, it means a lot to these folks."

During the age of COVID lockdowns, many visitors were particularly devastated by the 18-month closure from March 2020 to July 2021. Staff maintained Meals on Wheels because it was an essential service, but all other in-person programs and activities were on hold for an uncertain amount of time.

And though there's been a steady influx of recovery in both attendance and the variety of "things to do" at the center, not everything is quite back to normal.

The Senior Center used to offer services like AARP discussion groups and blood pressure checks, but some companies are wary about returning to the public, particularly medical organizations. Even so, there

hasn't been an outbreak of illness since the center reopened.

It is for this reason that so many of the Senior Center's visitors are looking forward to a 2022 that should be much brighter than its predecessor. Most of the guests are considerate and stay home if they're sick or mask up, so it's no surprise that one of the many, many wishes shared among Possum Drop attendees was health.

For folks outside of the center who are willing to listen, there are plenty of things they can do to help. The Senior Center is always looking for volunteers, especially in the form of kitchen aid or someone willing to spend time with patients in the Alzheimer's Respite program, which is a three-hour session of relaxation for caretakers and their loved ones. It may be something as simple as calling Bingo or serving as a substitute for a teacher or driver.

If availability is an issue, monetary donations are always appreciated, but more common are donations of supplies or just the mundane. Because the Senior Center offers so many extracurricular activities like sewing and painting, hobbyists regularly need thread, canvases, and other useful materials. Clothing, furniture, and other knick-knacks usually go to either the massive spring yard sale or to seniors in need. Finally, medical supplies like wheelchairs and shower chairs are invariably useful.

To volunteer, donate, visit or just learn more, call 706-439-6105 or head up to 95 Senior Center Drive in Blairsville, just downhill from the North Georgia Technical College.

...and The Favorite Reindeer is....



Favorite Reindeer Winner
PRANCER
Tommy Townsend

The First Readers Favorite Reindeer Fundraiser has come to an end. The winner is... PRANCER Tommy Townsend, local musician.

Second place is COMET Michael (Bear) Baxter, Chief of Police, and third is VIXEN Becky Brown Dyer, Owner of Hallmark Card Store.

A special "thank you" to all that agreed to participate: County Commissioner Lamar Paris, School Board Member Janna Akins, Chief Nursing Officer Julia Cook, Mayor Jim Conley, and High School

Principal C.T. Hussion, and to those who voted.

The money raised will help us 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 \$36 yearly you can provide one child a book each month for free. Please consider being a supporter of this organization.



Senior Center patrons had a blast celebrating their annual stuffed animal Possum Drop Dec. 31. It was an especially joyous occasion, as the tradition was canceled in 2020 for COVID.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks