

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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The Mealors welcome first baby born locally in '22

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Not too long after noon on Jan. 3, Joseph and Hope Mealor of Blairsville welcomed their son Ryker Joseph into the world, making him the first baby born at Union General Hospital in 2022.

The little bundle of joy weighed in at 6 pounds, 9 ounces and measured 19.5 inches in length. Considering they were both heavier babies, the Mealors were expecting Ryker to be larger, though both parents are of the opinion that he is "perfect" just the way he is.

"He was fed really well throughout the pregnancy," quipped Joseph. "He ate a

lot of steak, a lot of healthy nutrients."

Indeed, Hope said it was an easy pregnancy, and she "loved every bit of it." While she had been previously told that she would never be able to have children, that didn't stop the couple from trying when they were ready.

"It's weird because I never really imagined myself having kids," said Hope, who was attached from the start. "So, being pregnant with him, the love kind of grows while he's in the womb."

The new parents found out they were expecting while on vacation traveling from state to state to admire the American landscape. Their original destination had been Colorado, but plans changed when they hit New Mexico and

discovered the big news.

And though their trip was cut short, they still enjoyed a month in the Southwest before returning home to the mountains, where they began to plan for the long term. Most importantly, they needed a name.

Hope said the name "Ryker" came to her first, as she wanted something that was different and "powerful." Joseph, finding the meaning to be "a powerful and successful man," was on board, and so far, Ryker has lived up to the moniker.

Before he was even born, he traveled through several states and notable locations such as the Notable Divide. What's more, the little guy was Blairsville's first baby of 2022 and arrived on a snow day, to

boot.

"It feels like he was born a winner," said his father, still awestruck at the culmination of their luck and faith.

The circumstances of Ryker's actual entrance into the world were, in Hope's words, "scary." Although his birth went smoothly overall, there were some complications that worried first-time mother Hope. For one thing, doctors lost the baby's heartbeat several times after inducing labor.

An emergency cesarean section was briefly considered, but Dr. Cynthia Mercer ultimately delivered Ryker via vacuum extraction, and after "an incident" with the umbilical cord that proved non-fatal and unworthy of panic, Hope calmed immediately.

See Baby Mealor, Page 6A



Joseph and Hope Mealor with their son Ryker on Tuesday, Jan. 4. The newborn was the first baby born at regional Union General Hospital for 2022. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Thompson shines as 2021-22 STAR Student at UCHS

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

First block was in full swing at Union County High School on Jan. 5 as Emma Thompson quietly made her way to April Krieger's classroom with the news that not only had she earned the place of 2022's STAR Student, but she had chosen Krieger to serve as her STAR Teacher.

STAR stands for Student Teacher Achievement Recognition. To be a STAR Student, a high school senior must fall into the Top 10% or Top 10 students of their graduating class by grade point average.

Additionally, they must earn the highest score among their peers in one sitting of SAT testing and achieve a score equal to or higher than the national average. This information is sent to the

See UCHS STARS, Page 3A



UCHS STAR Student Emma Thompson with her STAR Teacher April Krieger shortly after the honors were announced at the High School on Jan. 5. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Woody Gap's Logan Disser earns 2021-22 STAR Student

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

SUCHES - Congratulations to High School Senior Logan Disser, who has been named the 2021-22 STAR Student for Woody Gap School.

STAR stands for Student Teacher Achievement Recognition, and for the teacher portion of the recognition, Disser selected retired educator Althea Cantrell to serve as her STAR Teacher.

According to the Professional Association of Georgia Educators Foundation, which administers the STAR Program, for a high school senior to earn STAR Student, he or she must score highest among their classmates in any single sitting of the SAT.

Qualifying students must

See Woody Gap STARS, Page 3A



Woody Gap School STAR Teacher Althea Cantrell is proud of her former student, Logan Disser, for performing so well on the SAT that she earned STAR Student honors this school year. Photo/Submitted

One injured, home destroyed in Saturday morning fire

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Editor@nganews.com

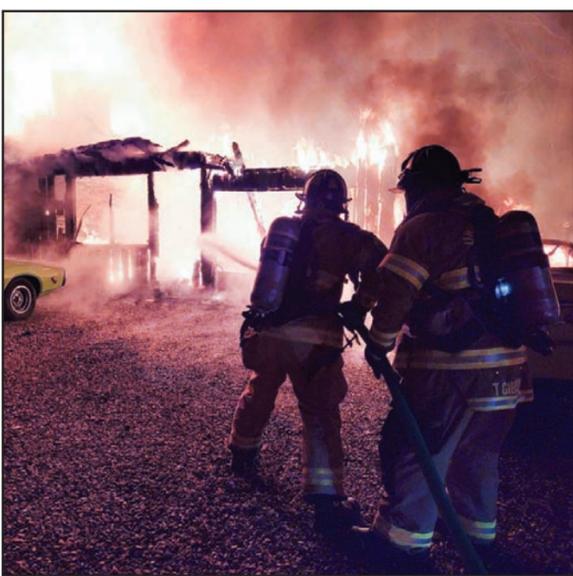
Union County Firefighters knocked down a pre-dawn blaze that destroyed a home and RV on Saturday, Jan. 8, resulting in one injury and the deaths of multiple pets at 264 Eagle Bend Road.

"We did salvage a few things from the house, but as far as the actual structure, it is a total loss," Fire Chief David Dyer said.

Shortly before 7 a.m. Saturday, a man awoke to a fire in the house, Dyer said. He alerted his sleeping son and grandson, and all three managed to escape the home and call authorities.

The grandfather was the only person injured in the incident, and Union General

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Union County Firefighters working to extinguish a pre-dawn house fire in 20-degree weather on Jan. 8. Photo/Facebook

City Hall approves plan by Rotary Club for City Park



New Blairsville City Attorney Marvin Harkins swearing in Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and Councilman Robert "Buddy" Moore to new terms of elective office in the Jan. 4 city meeting. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Members of the Blairsville City Council approved a plan for a city park submitted by

Union County Rotarian Bob Ramay at the Tuesday, Jan. 4, regular city meeting.

The plan is to turn roughly 2 acres of undeveloped land between City Hall and Arby's Restaurant, next to the

newly paved municipal parking lot on Bob Head Street, into a city park/greenspace with picnic tables, a walking trail, a foot bridge and, maybe, a small, open-air stage.

See New City Park, Page 2A

Union County Primary School renovations a go for Summer '22

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In a special called meeting last month, the Union County Board of Education voted unanimously to approve the guaranteed maximum price of \$3,637,935 for renovations and modifications at the Primary School.

The major project is being funded completely through Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax collections and is the last big project allocated under ESPLOST V.

Charles Black Construction Company, Inc. was hired in July to serve as the construction manager for the project, after which Breaux & Associates Architects, which also contracts with the school system, got to work drawing up the plans.

Once those plans were completed this fall, Charles Black bid out the various aspects of the renovation, like painting, concrete work, plumbing, etc., and all the subcontractor bids were presented as part of the guaranteed maximum price approval in the Dec. 17 called meeting.

As the name suggests, this See UCPS Renovations, Page 3A



L-R: C.J. McDonald of Charles Black Construction with Union County School Board Members Janna Akins, Julia Barnett, Patrick White and Tony Hunter, as well as Superintendent John Hill. Photo by Mark Smith

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House Fire...from Page 1A

EMS transported him for local medical treatment of burns and smoke inhalation, Dyer said.

When firefighters arrived, the RV had already been destroyed and the single-story wood-frame home was 80% involved in flames, Dyer said. Stations 1, 2, 3 and 4 responded, with firefighters spending approximately four hours putting out the fire.

A couple of vehicles were also damaged due to their proximity to the blaze, but the fire was successfully contained to the property.

The blaze seems to have started in the RV that was parked adjacent to the home, and though the cause of the fire is unknown at this time, Chief Dyer said foul play is not suspected.

Several cats perished inside the RV.

Fire Department personnel reached out to the American Red Cross of Northeast Georgia Saturday to assist the family in their time of need.

People living nearby reported on social media hearing explosions, but Dyer clarified that this was a structure fire and not a home explosion; some ammunition did go off inside the home without incident, and a couple of propane tanks popped off the camper.

Chief Dyer said winter



Tragically, a family lost their Eagle Bend Road home to fire over the weekend; fortunately, everyone made it out alive.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

structure fires are not exactly rare due to people heating their homes during the colder months.

"This is the season when people are trying to keep their homes warm," Dyer said. "I suspect that this camper had some sort of heating unit in it that was trying to keep it going, and that could be a possible source."

"So, this is the time of year, when it gets this cold,

that people are doing things that could potentially start a structure fire."

Fighting fires in winter presents its own challenges. The temperature outside was about 20 degrees on the morning of Jan. 8, and while it may seem intuitive that sub-freezing temperatures could assist firefighters in controlling a fire, that is not generally the case.

"Cold weather actually

hinders us, because water goes everywhere, it freezes, it's slick, it's hard to maneuver and hard for the crews when you're out there and it's cold," Dyer said. "So, the lower temperatures really don't help us at all."

Dyer commends his firefighters for a "good response" extinguishing the blaze, adding that he's "really sorry that this happened to these folks" but is glad that the fire did not result in loss of life.

New City Park...from Page 1A

Ramay was accompanied by members of the newly formed Park Committee: Rotary Club of Union County President Daniel Duello, Union County High School CTAE Director Josh Davis, High School Construction Instructor Charles Cattanaach, Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe, and Downtown Development Authority Program Manager Darren Harper.

The mayor and all council members present seemed positively excited, not only by the idea of a city park, but that the plan calls for hands-on community and high school student involvement, so, they approved the plan as presented.

Rotary Club of Union County members have amassed \$4,500 to dress the land, build a foot bridge and picnic tables, and create a walking trail, and a donor has pledged \$1,000 for flowers and shrubs. The city will be responsible for maintaining the park.

The name of the park will be the Blairsville Community Park. There are no plans to rename the park after any personage because the park will be a product of the efforts of the community. For more



The grassy area behind Blairsville City Hall will soon be home to a nice public greenspace thanks to plans drawn up by the Rotary Club of Union County.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

information or to participate, call 706-379-2018.

In other news, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and City Councilman Robert "Buddy" Moore, who ran unopposed as incumbents in the November 2021 Municipal Election, were sworn in for new terms to run Jan. 1, 2022, through Dec. 31, 2025.

Councilman Tony Dyer, who also ran unopposed last November, couldn't be at the meeting but will be sworn in at the next meeting of the City Council on Tuesday, Feb. 8.

Attorney Marvin Harkins, who was officially appointed as the new Blairsville City Attorney in the meeting, performed the Oath of Office ceremony for Conley and Moore.

City Clerk Kaye McCann, who was out with an ailment, was re-appointed as Blairsville City Clerk for 2022.

Each year, the mayor and council members are appointed as liaisons to city departments or city interests for one year. The Mayor Pro Tempore is appointed for a one-year term as well.

For 2022, Moore will return as Mayor Pro Tempore and will liaise with the Blairsville Airport.

Mayor Conley will liaise with the Union County Historical Society; Councilwoman Rhonda Mahan, the Downtown Development Authority Board; Councilwoman Mary Ruth Cook, the Blairsville Street Department; Councilwoman Kayla Hemphill, the Water/Sewer Department; and Councilman Tony Dyer, the Blairsville Police Department.

Moving along, the first

reading of Ordinance No. 2022-01 changing the regular City Council meeting day from the first Tuesday to the second Tuesday of each month was made. The second reading and approval by the council will be on Tuesday, Feb. 8, the second Tuesday in February.

As previously reported, the reason for the meeting day change is because Attorney Harkins is also City Attorney for Young Harris, whose regular meeting day is the same as Blairsville. So, Harkins requested that Blairsville change its meeting day since he was committed to Young Harris first.

The second reading of Ordinance No. 2021-04 to amend the Water/Sewer Ordinance to include sewer-only service was made, and the ordinance was approved.

However, Harkins said the agreement between the city and Coosa Water, such that Coosa Water agrees to be responsible for collecting both its water and Blairsville's sewer fees, has not yet been consummated. It is expected that the agreement will be executed by the next meeting.

In other business, the council approved the 2022 Intergovernmental Agreement for Hotel/Motel Tax distribution in which the chamber gets 40%, Historical Society gets 25%, Downtown Development Authority gets 25%, and the city gets 10% for administration.

Also, the council approved Resolution R2022-02 to renew all existing multi-year contracts, such as equipment service contracts, as they are all working well.

It seems that Blairsville is getting back to normal as DDA Program Manager Harper reported that all but two of the annual local festivals have been scheduled for 2022. And the two not yet firmed up are in the works.

Chamber President Row announced upcoming chamber events including the 40th Anniversary Chamber Awards Banquet at Brasstown Valley Resort on Jan. 20, the Eggs & Issues Breakfast at the Community Center on Feb. 2, and the "Evening with the STARS" event at the Community Center on Feb. 10.

For more information on these and other Chamber events, call 706-745-5789.

The council approved the annual contribution to the Union County Public Library in the amount of \$9,000.

An equipment purchase for the Water/Sewer Department in the amount of \$16,014.60, with a \$6,700 GMA Safety Grant offset, was also approved. The remainder of the purchase will be paid out of SPLOST V collections. The purchase is for shoring boxes.

Airport Manager Aaron Mannheim reported that his new part-time hire, John Page, who was approved by the council at a rate of \$14 per hour, was a fast learner and working out well.

Additionally, there was discussion among the mayor and council members regarding insurance reimbursement for elected officials. Harkins said it was an option that could be enacted with a city ordinance, since the city provides insurance for city employees.

Chronic Wasting Disease detected in Alabama Deer; prevent spread to Georgia



The Alabama Department of Conservation and Wildlife Resources announced Friday that Chronic Wasting Disease has been detected in a sample collected from a harvested deer in Alabama, a first for that state. CWD has not been detected in the state of Georgia, accord-

ing to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Resources Division (WRD).

Chronic Wasting Disease is a fatal neurological disease of deer, elk, and moose caused by infectious proteins called prions. Currently, there are no treatments, and the disease always results in the death of the infected animal. There are no preventative vaccines to protect animals that have not been infected.

How You Can Help Prevent Spread: Hunters are advised that live importation of all deer species from other states is prohibited and has been since 2005. Georgia hunters that hunt in CWD positive states may only bring home boned out meat,

hides, cleaned skull plate with antlers attached, elk ivories, and finished taxidermy mounts. All other carcass parts must be left behind.

CWD positive states and locations are Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming as well as Canadian provinces Alberta, Quebec, and Saskatchewan.

For more information, visit the WRD website at <https://georgiawildlife.com/cwd>.

UCHS STARS...from Page 1A

Professional Association of Georgia Educators Foundation, submitted for this school year in December.

Then, a STAR Student is tasked with selecting their STAR Teacher – the educator who has “made the most significant contribution to the STAR Student’s scholastic development.”

Local chambers of commerce sponsor the STAR Program in any given district, and it is to them that the PAGE Foundation sends confirmation of each STAR Student. Until then, the STAR’s identity is kept hushed.

It just so happened that Jan. 5 was the day to reveal Emma Thompson as Union County High School’s 2021-22 STAR Student.

Even with an entourage that included Principal C.T. Hussion and Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe in sharing the announcement, Krieger was still one of Thompson’s biggest supporters.

“She’s got a bright future ahead of her; she’s got great qualities,” Krieger said, recalling the complicated school environment in the wake of COVID-19 and commending Thompson on her intuitive nature and flexibility – attributes she is sure to make great use of the rest of her life.

Thompson’s plans line up with English Teacher Krieger’s

predictions, as she recently was accepted into the University of Georgia.

The senior anticipates working toward a master’s degree that will allow her to travel abroad as an English teacher herself. Particularly, Thompson has her sights – and heart – set on South Korea but plans on returning to the states to eventually become a full-time author.

As for the STAR award, Thompson feels satisfied having something to show for all the hard work she has invested in her education. Moreover, she believes it to be representative of the bond between teacher and student.

“Here’s a title for the relationship I had with my teachers and the two-way street that education is with teachers and students,” Thompson said.

But it’s not all about academics. In describing her choice to name Krieger as her pick for STAR Teacher, Thompson said, though Krieger is her “biggest inspiration when it comes to English,” that is not the only subject the educator specializes in.

“I walk into her class every day like, ‘OK, how’s my world going to change today?’” Thompson said, adding that the reason she feels this way is because of all the critical conversations Krieger facilitates, “even (about) simple

things.”

For her part, Krieger said being a teacher is more about specializing in the scholastic generally.

“Sometimes, especially today in the craziness of the world, education takes a bad rap as just being schooling, and I can’t just school people,” Krieger said. “It’s not just about school.”

In this spirit, Krieger sets a goal for her students to take something meaningful away from her class, whether academic in nature or “a life lesson,” and in Thompson’s estimation, she accomplishes this goal daily.

As for what helped Thompson score as well as she did on the SAT, she believes it was Krieger’s guidance, coupled with her family’s influence in getting her interested in reading.

“After I took Mrs. Krieger’s AP class, my English score went up a lot because of all the practice we did in her class and with the AP Exam,” Thompson said.

While she made sure to study for the challenges that math – one of Thompson’s least favorite subjects – brought to the table, the STAR Student decided more than anything to let her talent for English shine.

“I knew if I could do well in English, then I could study a little bit for math and it would

be cushioned by my English score,” Thompson said, noting that her thought process went something to the tune of, “Let’s just focus on what I really love and what I’m good at.”

Pursuing her passion has brought Thompson far, and now, she must prepare for the Feb. 10 “Evening with the STARS” awards banquet to be hosted at the Union County Community Center.

The Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce holds the annual celebration to honor the STAR Student and Teacher, and there will also be honorable mentions for other categories such as sports or for students who go the extra mile in setting up clubs or helping their community.

“We like to recognize students that would typically

not be recognized,” Chamber President Steve Rowe said.

By the end of the banquet, however, the focus will return to the STARS. Until then, Thompson will continue to look forward to learning everything

she can from Krieger before graduation in May.

“I feel like when I do what I want to do in the future, I’m going to say, ‘I was meant for this,’ and (Mrs. Krieger) led me there,” Thompson said.

Woody Gap STARS...from Page 1A

also be within the Top 10% or Top 10 students of their class based on grade point average, and those nominated must achieve SAT scores equal to or higher than the latest available national averages on the evidence-based reading, math and writing sections.

Disser, 17, is no stranger to academic prowess. She is graduating early from Woody Gap School as a dual-enrolled student with enough credits to begin as a sophomore with the University of North Georgia, Dahlonega. In fact, her college classes started this week.

“Once my grades are received from UNG because of my dual enrollment, Woody Gap can finalize my transcript, and I will then be considered an early 2022 graduate,” she said.

Disser hopes to follow in her brother’s footsteps as Woody Gap valedictorian – Grant Disser graduated valedictorian for Class of 2021 – and her ultimate aspiration is to become a teacher.

“I had originally thought that I wanted to teach around the second-grade level, but I know in the world of education, especially in your first few years, that you cannot be picky as to what class you get to teach, so I will be happy to teach any elementary school grade,” she said.

Continuing, “But I also plan to take the (Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators) test, which allows you to teach all grades so I can have that

flexibility.”

And while Disser said she doesn’t know if she will be returning to Woody Gap to teach, she is thrilled to have been a part of the Suches-based school and incredibly grateful to have earned STAR Student.

“To me, the honor of being named the STAR Student means that hard work is recognized, and (it is) a good representation of both a teacher and a student,” Disser said. “The preparation process going into this to be ready (for the SAT) was pretty much try and fail and try again.”

“I would study and take the test and not get the score I wanted until I kept studying and retaking it until I did. My advice for students to take the SAT in the future would be to not get discouraged by the score that you do not want and just keep going after it, even if it takes you multiple attempts.”

In addition to her studies, the Marietta-native enjoys extracurricular activities such as hunting, painting, running and exercising, and hanging out with family and friends, all of which she has been able to accomplish with ease in Suches.

As for why she chose Cantrell to serve as her STAR Teacher, Disser said “she was able to help me bear my least favorite class, which is math.”

“She got down on your level, and she was real and straightforward with you and helped you work things out with support and encouragement,”

Disser said.

The process of selecting a STAR Teacher requires students to pick an educator who has “made the most significant contribution to the STAR Student’s scholastic development.”

Cantrell, retired as of December 2020, was a shoo-in for Disser’s choice as STAR Teacher, having taught her in multiple disciplines, including Algebra I/II, Geometry and Local Studies.

“It meant a great deal to me for Logan to select me as her STAR Teacher because I feel I have made a positive impact in some way,” Cantrell said.

Offering insight into the type of person and student Disser is, Cantrell said she expects her “to achieve anything that she attempts.”

“She is a go-getter and a hard worker and just a very smart and talented beautiful young lady, and she is going to go far in anything that she tries to do,” Cantrell said. “I would like to tell everyone in the community that she is truly an amazing young lady, and I expect great things from her; it is going to be fun to see what she accomplishes in her life.”

The pair are set to be honored in the Feb. 10 “Evening with the STARS” event at the Union County Community Center. Sponsored by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, the affair is meant to make students feel special for their hard work and accomplishments.

UCPS Renovations...from Page 1A

guaranteed maximum price is the most the district will pay to complete the project, with Charles Black committing to cover any additional costs.

The price was approved in a called meeting because the bid process was not completely finished until the day after the Dec. 14 regular school board meeting.

Charles Black has worked on other Union County Schools projects, including the visitor fieldhouse and remodeled existing home fieldhouse in Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium, and the currently under construction College & Career Academy and vocational building renovation.

Included in the Primary School renovations bid is an 8% contingency allowance of \$269,477 for unforeseen construction issues that can come up in renovation projects as opposed to new construction.

Renovations will begin at the end of the current school year and are scheduled to be completed by the beginning of the 2022-23 school year. So, the renovation will take place during the summer of 2022. No displacement of students is anticipated.

Charles Black Project Manager C.J. McDonald said all the subcontractors have agreed in writing to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week if necessary to complete the job on time.

Superintendent John Hill said the Primary School building was built during the

1982-83 school year, or about 40 years ago. The ceilings, floors, lighting, doors, painting, and mechanicals are all in need of repair and upgrading.

Fortunately, the project came in under internally projected costs.

“The goal was a very, very good, solid, quality, practical remodel,” Hill said. “We did not want all the fancy bells and whistles that drive the cost up. We wanted to keep it well within budget. To get this number at this price point in this current state of construction is really impressive.”

Something that has lowered initial estimates is that the plumbing is in much better shape than originally thought, so tearing out swaths of concrete slab to replace pipes will not be necessary. And that saves a major expense.

In addition to a practical remodel, the Primary School will be getting a 160-foot-long, 6-foot-wide, cantilevered, aluminum awning outside the building over the car-rider area where the kids are dropped off and picked up, to protect them from the elements all year long.

Further, School Facilities Director Mike Patton said the stage in the Primary School gym is no longer being used and will be ripped out and enclosed to create a new music room, as the current music room will be converted to much needed dry storage and cooler space

for the kitchen portion of the renovation.

This project has been in the works for at least the last two years, though the district and School Board wanted to save up enough SPLOST collections to pay for the renovations instead of borrowing the money to do it.

Also approved in the special called meeting was a guaranteed maximum price for a new fire alarm system for the entire High School complex in the amount of \$314,954. This is likewise being covered by ESPLOST V.

“The (existing) system is so antiquated that if we don’t call (the Union County Fire Department), trucks roll every time we do a fire drill, so, we have to call ahead of time,” Assistant Superintendent David Murphy said.

Union County High will be able to operate the new state-of-the-art system as one integrated fire alarm system across all the buildings on campus. Installation of this system is expected to be completed sometime this summer when classes are out of session.

As mentioned above, the new \$3.8 million grant funded regional College & Career Academy is being constructed now, and stakeholders expect it to be ready to accept students by the start of the 2022-23 school year.

For more information on the Union County School District, visit ucschools.org.

Baby Mealor ...from Page 1A



Delivered by Dr. Cynthia Mercer at Union General on Jan. 3, at birth, Ryker Joseph Mealor weighed 6 pounds, 9 ounces and measured 19.5 inches in length. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

That isn't to say that she and her husband didn't trust the staff of Union General. In fact, Joseph said "it wasn't all that scary" for him, adding that he "had total faith in the doctors; they do this all the time."

Hope recalls with fondness her very first moments with their newborn baby boy, when all her fears washed away.

"When he comes out and they instantly put him on you, your whole world changes," Hope said. "It's like a different kind of love – it's the best feeling in the world."

Of course, it helped that one of their nurses had just given birth five months earlier, and by pure happenstance, her own son was also named Ryker.

"You know, you've got to find comfort in the fact that everybody you know has either been born or given birth or both," Joseph said.

The New Year Baby of '22 has already proven to be a quiet sort, as his parents say that, so far, he only cries when hungry. Additionally, on his first evening in the world, he managed to accomplish something most new parents can only dream of – sleeping through the night.

As of the day after his birth, Ryker was peaceful and even languid with his lidded eyes and pleasant disposition. Even the gentle waving of his limbs seemed cautious and deliberately planned.

There's a bit of a theory as to why Ryker is so laid-back. When in-utero, his parents made an effort to interact with him. They recall tender, thoughtful moments where Joseph would touch Hope's stomach only for Ryker to eventually push back. The bond already runs deep among the new family, and

they'd have it no other way.

It's also possible Ryker's getting a head start on the mindful outlook his parents would like him to develop.

"We always want to encourage him to think," said Joseph while holding the newborn. "We don't want to encourage him to just accept anything anybody tells him. We want him to think about things and kind of understand them from a deeper perspective; let him make his own decisions and his own mistakes."

They anticipate a busy year ahead as they begin saving up for Ryker's schooling and preparing for various immediate needs such as diapers, food and clothing. While it's still exciting to think of how their son's life will unfold, the closer-in-time perspective of accomplishing more immediate goals helps the Mealors look forward to the rest of 2022.

In the medium term, the Mealors believe the best course of action regarding their son's education will be to homeschool him for the first few years of his life, especially in an ever-changing world.

"You never know if it's going to be a mask mandate, no mask mandate, this kind of vaccination, that kind of vaccination, five booster shots – you never know what they're doing," Joseph said, explaining that it will be easier to focus on Ryker's initial upbringing in a more stable environment like the home.

From there, the plan is to enroll him publicly when he gets ready for middle school to give him the best of both worlds, allowing a more personalized upbringing for his formative years while offering him more of a chance to socialize as he discovers who he is.

As of yet, the COVID-19 pandemic hasn't had too much of an impact on the Mealors, at least insofar as Ryker is concerned. They didn't run into any complications driving out West, nor did they experience any on their way home, and there were no health scares during the pregnancy.

Which is one of the reasons why, basking in the afterglow and enjoying the depth of a love developed over the span of nine months, everything seemed to come together in the best way possible last week.

The Mealors attribute their fortunate circumstances to their faith, citing David's verse in the book of Psalms

that humans are fearfully and wonderfully made.

"It's crazy; nine months produces something like this

that you couldn't build in nine months with your hands," marveled Joseph, still holding Ryker as Hope rested beside

them. "And then he comes out and he can live 80, 90, 100 years. You never know. He can be anything he wants to be."

Firewise Program to be held at St. Francis of Assisi January 18th

Wildfire was responsible for the destruction of over 1,000 homes in Colorado recently. Learn how to protect your home and community from wildfires by attending an upcoming Firewise Program. Frank Riley and other fire experts will explain this fire protection and safety program for houses and communities and will answer questions.

There will be a short film showing how to assess and improve the fire safety of

your home. Someone who has obtained Firewise grants for his community will describe that experience.

The program is free and open to the public. It will be held in Marian Hall, which is adjacent to St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Blairsville, on Tuesday, January 18th at 6 PM.

For additional information, please contact Joe Boone at booned@windstream.net or 706-835-2269.