

North Georgia News

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Harkins ready for more fishing after banner season

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Sports Editor

Blairsville's Will Harkins has some unfinished business when he hits the water this week in Oxford, Alabama, to open the National Professional Fishing League's 2024 season.

During his rookie campaign in 2023, Harkins just missed reeling in NPFL Angler of the Year honors, finishing second in the standings on the strength of four Top-10s, three Top-3s and two runner-ups.

While Harkins is seeking to bring home the hardware in year two, he's also looking to avoid the dreaded sophomore slump.

"Initially, my biggest goal is to just stay relevant," the 22-year-old said. "Everyone is out there to win each event and, more importantly, the Angler of the Year award."

"The (2024 NPFL) schedule looks really exciting

this year. I'm looking forward to Lake Hartwell and Saginaw Bay, Michigan; those are probably my top two.

"But my goals are just continuing to learn, get better and continue having an impact on all the communities we visit."

The NPFL's outreach programs are something near and dear to Harkins, who's thankful for the opportunity to use his platform to give back to the towns and communities during the league's many stops around the nation.

"At each event, (the NPFL) gives us a day to go out and visit schools and senior-living centers," he said. "Continuing to do that and making an impact at each place we visit is another big goal for me this year."

As for his time on the water, Harkins noted that the high point and the low point of his rookie season occurred

on the same day in September when the league visited Lake Eufaula, Oklahoma.

Harkins entered the third and final day in contention for his first win before getting chased down by Louis Fernandes' 15-pound day-three haul. As a result, Fernandes and Harkins tied atop the leaderboard, but Fernandes came out on top via the heaviest one-day total tiebreaker.

"I hated losing that way, but I ended up second and second in the Angler of the Year, and if you had told me that going into the season, I would have taken that all day, every day," he said.

"But this is a dream job," he added. "I've worked for this since high school and I've invested a lot of time into it, but it's also not as glamorous as it sounds. There's a lot of stress, travel and long days, but I wouldn't trade it for anything



Will Harkins is using his fishing prowess to make his hometown proud on the national stage. Photo/Facebook

Symphonic Band achieves high honors at Reinhardt



The UCHS Symphonic Band took center stage for the prestigious honor band performance at Reinhardt University's Falany Performing Arts Center earlier this month. Photo/Submitted

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

WALESKA, Ga. – The Union County High School Symphonic Band made history on Saturday, Jan. 20, when they took the stage at the Falany Performing Arts Center of Reinhardt University.

Each year, Reinhardt hosts an honor band event for area students looking to

improve their musical abilities. During the three-day event of clinics, masterclasses and rehearsals, two outstanding high school band programs are featured as guest performers.

This year, the Newnan High School Wind Ensemble and the Union County High School Symphonic Band were spotlighted.

The UCHS Symphonic Band was selected for this

honor based on Director Will Stafford's ambitious reputation and recordings he submitted from the latest Large Group Performance Evaluation, at which the band received straight Superior scoring and A's in all subcategories.

After attaining these kinds of scores for nearly a decade, Stafford's ensemble was officially on the radar of

Alexander's Store named Chamber Business of Year

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Every year, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce hosts an elegant awards night and banquet for the board members and local business owners who make up its membership. This year, the special evening fell on Jan. 19.

For three hours that Friday, individuals were treated to a fine dinner, awards ceremony and musical show at the Charles Suber Banquet Hall of Young Harris College.

While the meeting featured several guest speakers, saw numerous awards bestowed and unveiled loads of information, the primary focus of the night fell on the recipient of Business of the Year.

Chamber President Steve Rowe presented the award, explaining that the recipient



Alexander's Store employee Mathew Gibson accepted the Business of the Year Award on behalf of Mark and Kenneth Alexander this month, pictured here with Chamber President Steve Rowe. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

is chosen from the group of the previous year. In 2023, that group

four competitors that received Business of the Quarter awards. See Chamber Awards, Page 6A

Sheriff's Office Scam Class resonates with residents

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With assistance from United Community Bank, the Union County Sheriff's Office hosted a Scam & Fraud Awareness Class for residents on Jan. 23 – and it was a resounding success.

Every seat was filled in the upstairs ballroom of the Community Center that Tuesday as attendees learned tips on keeping their finances safe and spotting potential predators looking for easy exploits.

UCSO Inv. Robert Calamari with the Criminal Investigation Division opened the class, introducing himself as "one of you" to the audience. As a 68-year-old former Marine, he wanted to emphasize, "I care about the community, and I care about the people in our community."

Calamari shared that from January 2022 to November 2023, there were 55 fraud cases involving the elderly in Union County. Over



UCSO Inv. Robert Calamari led the Sheriff's Office Scam Class last week. Calamari has been assigned to handle local scam and fraud cases with the Criminal Investigation Division. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

that same period, there were 229 theft cases, and Calamari estimated that 20% to 30% of those were perpetrated against seniors.

Scamming is big business for criminals; on a national

level, 2022 saw an \$8 billion loss due to scams. Sixty percent of those cases involved victims aged 50 and up, translating to 152,813 cases total, while 88,262 victims were people

See UCSO Scam Class, Page 2A

State legislators mulling 3% property assessment cap

By Chris Denson
Guest Contributor
GPPF

Perhaps no public policy debate raises the ire of Georgians quite like property taxes.

State legislators often say it is the issue they most frequently hear about from the folks back home, especially in recent years as the housing market boomed.

It is the issue that my organization, the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, often receives the most queries about. Typically these come from seniors on fixed incomes.

"Mr. Denson... my 'fair' market value that my home was assessed by went up ~37% from my 2021 property taxes."

Well, this might finally be the year the Georgia legislature provides some much-needed property tax relief: a Senate committee recently held their first hearing on a bill that would cap the assessed value on a homeowner's primary residence at no more than a 3% per year increase.

Escalating property taxes typically come from these assessments, which are also the least transparent – and

most confusing. Fair market value is primarily determined by an aggregate of local deed transactions over the past year, then projected to anticipate what the value will be on Jan. 1.

So not only are long-time homeowners penalized through no fault of their own as neighboring home prices rise, they are also subject to the perils of economic forecasting. Now that you've got a handle on that methodology, the property is assessed at 40% of the fair market value to complicate this even more.

Yet, not only would a cap represent a sliver of clarity when it comes to property taxes – and a heightened ability for those on fixed incomes to plan accordingly – it is important because the property value assessment only represents one component of property taxes.

Another component is the millage rate, which is the rate at which the property is taxed and is determined by the local governing authorities, such as the county commission, city council, and local school board.

Since these rates are often set by elected officials, they are subject to greater



Chris Denson
GA Public Policy Foundation

scrutiny and political pressure by constituents. Plus the state requires these local taxing authorities to advertise, hold public hearings and explain why they are raising the millage rate if they wish to do so.

Thus, one intention of this bill is to force any tax increases at the local level through the front door via millage rate increases rather than the back with property value assessments.

Here I should note the final component for many Georgians' property tax bill: the plethora of state and local property tax exemptions. Plus

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UCSO Scam Class...from Page 1A



On Jan. 23, United Community Blairsville Bank President Adam Born and Branch Manager Bradley Barrett gave a bank's-eye-view of how people can protect themselves from scams.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

over 60.

More than \$1.2 billion was lost to social media scams, and on average, there was a \$1,400 loss per person when it came to phone scams in 2022.

"The days of writing a bad check are over," Calamari said, noting that most scams occur online nowadays. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these criminals are overseas, so the odds of catching a fraudster are, in Calamari's words, "slim to none, and Slim's out of town."

Calamari gave examples of local cases he's worked on, including one where a couple lost \$8,000 and needed loans to pay their bills. They fell victim to a popular scam that relies on fraudulent electronic security notifications disguised as antivirus companies like McAfee and Norton.

Another common scam consists of scammers initiating a romantic relationship with their victims, with criminals "stringing along" their targets, asking for monetary gifts to purchase plane tickets to come visit or help pay for sudden medical emergencies for themselves or family.

The "grandparent scam," covered more closely by United Community Bank President Adam Born and Blairsville Bank Branch Manager Bradley Barrett, is an especially popular type of fraud.

In this scam, a caller claims that a grandchild or other loved one is in danger, and sometimes threatens the victim if they try to verify information or hang up.

Recently, recent occurrences of this particular fraud have seen callers using AI technology to mimic the voices of family using audio from

videos posted on social media to provide a more convincing story.

Born, Barrett and Calamari suggest hanging up on such calls and instead getting into contact with the loved one in question.

Calamari once spoke with a would-be victim who made sure to dial his grandson after the suspicious call claimed he needed to pay bail. The grandson convinced his grandfather he was safe and not in police custody, ensuring the scam fell through.

Many of the appropriate "responses" to scams may seem to be common sense in nature, though Born and Barrett warned that scammers "are good at what they do," with manipulation tactics and technology becoming more sophisticated by the year.

Some of them even try to impersonate official organizations, like charities, law enforcement, banks and money collection agencies. Calamari said that most organizations, particularly law enforcement and the IRS, will never reach out to settle official matters via phone call.

For their part, Born and Barrett reassured everyone that United Community follows a strict ethical code to help prevent scams at the bank.

They also shared things to remember when faced with a potential impersonator, noting, for example, that the bank will never call and ask for personal information or make threatening demands.

Other general tips shared for preventing fraud included holding family financial meetings; leaving notes with passwords and tips next to computers or

phones; maintaining open communication with trusted family and friends; and having a plan and a secret family password.

People are also advised not to sign their name on blank forms, to never pay to collect lottery "winnings" or sweepstakes, to trust their "gut," to feel confident saying no, and to report fraud.

Dr. Brent and Kristen Davidson attended the class and were pleased with the results. Davidson shared her experience with her mother's funeral fraud to warn the audience to pre-plan how to handle loved ones' final finances and avoid rash decisions made with strong emotions.

"I left there knowing that the citizens of Union County have real options to avoid being scammed and defrauded," she said. "It helps us to know when and how to seek assistance in identifying and avoiding becoming a victim and losing money, and what not to do in certain situations right up front before any information is able to be acquired for use against us."

The Sheriff's Office plans to host other Scam & Fraud Awareness Classes in 2024, so stay tuned for date announcements.

If you or a senior you know is being pressured into financial decisions, whether online, over the phone or in-person, contact Adult Protective Services by visiting www.eldercare.acl.gov or calling 1-800-677-1116.

For more information, visit www.consumerfinance.gov/askcfpb/. To check on the veracity of a business, visit the Better Business Bureau at www.bbb.org or Charity Navigator at www.charitynavigator.org.

Harkins Ready to Fish...from Page 1A

else."

The son of Robert and Shara Harkins, Will graduated from Union County High School in 2020 and then went on to fish at Young Harris College, where he graduated last spring.

"I started fishing a lot of events in college to get my resume built, and that got me my invite to the pros," he said. "Between college and other amateur events, I probably spent 200 days on the water."

On the heels of his breakout rookie year, the NPFL featured him in an original

film titled "My Story: Will Harkins," which can be viewed at <https://thenationalprofessionalanglingleague.com/2024/01/04/my-story-with-will-harkins/>.

"They filmed it right after the last event, so it was a reflection on the year and my background," he said. "That was definitely cool and something I didn't expect."

"The whole year has been a blur and very surreal, especially being my first year. But I'm very blessed to have this opportunity in the first place and looking forward to kicking off the new year."

For additional info, visit his website at getfishingguide.com. He's also on Facebook and Instagram at Will Harkins Fishing.

In closing, Harkins thanked the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, Cameo Fencing and Heaven's Harvest.

"Those are my three biggest backers, and I couldn't do this without them or the support from the entire community," he said. "Everyone has been so helpful, and I'm so undeserving of it, but at the same time, I'm very grateful to have that support."

Property Taxes...from Page 1A

many local governments have already passed referendums to freeze property tax increases for homeowners. This bill is intended to keep those in place.

One cautionary tale against this type of cap came from the chief appraiser of the Columbus-Muscogee County Board of Assessors, as their consolidated government froze homestead increases completely in 1983.

She spoke of how the tax burden has fallen on new homeowners and commercial property owners. One example

was how two homes in the same neighborhood that are nearly identical and both valued around \$300,000 – yet purchased over three decades apart – resulted in one homeowner that paid \$7.19 in property taxes last year, while the other paid over \$3,000.

Ultimately, the senators on the committee seemed unmoved by this – many mentioned positive results after capping property tax valuations in their home counties – and expressed their willingness to move forward with the bill after

a few tweaks to its current form.

One cruel irony of our current housing market is that rising home mortgage interest rates has made even the prospect of downsizing more costly, as potential homebuyers contemplate a higher monthly payment for less home – that is, even if they wish to move. In a time of inflation, property valuations are one inflationary measure that needs to be limited.

Chris Denson is the Director of Policy and Research for the Georgia Public Policy Foundation.

Free Talk on the Science of Chocolate at the Library

The Union County Public Library is hosting The Science of Chocolate on February 7th at 2 PM. This presentation will be given by library assistant Taylor, who has a degree in Baking and Pastry Arts, and has interned at bakeries in France.

The presentation will give a closer look at how chocolate is made, along with the different types of chocolates and their by-products. Taylor will also share tips on working with chocolate at home.

This event is free and open to the public, and is for adults and teens (ages 13 and up). To see even more of the programs and events the library is offering, follow them on Facebook or Instagram, or visit their website: www.mountainlibrary.com.

Chamber Awards...from Page 1A

consisted of River City Bank, Seasons Inn, Mountain Life Team and Alexander's Store.

After much deliberation, the chamber decided that Alexander's Store was the most deserving of the Business of the Year title in 2024.

"(Hoyt and Ruby Alexander) purchased a small trading post in Union County in 1953," Rowe shared. "They began selling feed, seed, a few groceries and gas to those in the community and anybody else that may pass through.

"If a customer came through the store looking for something that they didn't have, (the Alexanders) were more than happy to make a special trip wherever needed to get whatever the customer wanted. This began their service to the community.

"Not too long after, they saw the need in the community for clothing and shoes, so they set aside a small section of the store and began carrying a few clothing necessities and shoes.

"In 1977, their son (Eddy) added hardware supplies and appliances to the store's inventory and later expanded it again to include sporting goods.

"In 1978, Eddy met Sandy Gibson, and they increased the store again to include furniture. Today, Eddy and Sandy's son Mark and his wife Kennetha operate the store that has become an institution in Union County."

Mark Alexander was unavailable to attend but sent store employee Mathew Gibson in his place. Gibson graciously accepted the award honoring one of Union County's most successful businesses.

Crystal Fairless, the director of operations and marketing at the chamber, was proud to present the Ambassador of the Year Award to Makayla Fairless, her daughter.

Crystal explained that, like the Business of the Year, the Ambassador of the Year is chosen from the four previous Ambassadors of the Quarter. In 2023, the recipients were Gene Boyd, Tara Morgan, Regena Phillips and Makayla Fairless.

After a busy year attending eight of 10 ambassador meetings, visiting 57 chamber members, attending 19 ribbon cuttings, selling over 80 Fourth of July raffle tickets, sharing 21 chamber Facebook posts, introducing two new members and volunteering at nearly all of the 2023 events, Makayla was an obvious choice for the honor.

Crystal also presented Misty Mashburn, a long-time Chamber Ambassador, with an award of appreciation.

For the Nonprofit of the Year award, Adam Born of United Community Bank



The Andrews Brothers Dueling Pianos entertained guests of the Chamber of Commerce's annual awards banquet at Young Harris College on Jan. 20.
Photo by Daysha Pandolph

stepped to the podium to honor the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club, which began in 2007 and has been supporting the community as an official nonprofit since 2019.

"They transcend from the traditional notion of a car club beyond their passion for classic cars," Born said. "The Cruisers have become an integral part of the community's fabric. What truly sets them apart is their unwavering commitment to philanthropy.

"Through initiatives like Shop With a Cop (and Shop With a Cruiser), the cruisers raise funds to ensure that our local children experience the joy of Christmas by personally selecting their gifts.

"Their impact extends far beyond the realm of chrome and engines, exemplifying the transformative power of community-driven initiatives."

Crystal Fairless stepped up once more to present a surprise award to Chamber President Steve Rowe in recognition of his more than five years leading the chamber.

Along with the many awards, the chamber took a moment to recognize the new and retiring board members in 2024. Outgoing Board Chair Daniel Liberatore said it was his pleasure to have worked alongside the other departing members, Colton Payne and Chris Collins.

Liberatore was also pleased to introduce Tony Dyer as his replacement as board chairman.

Individuals joining the board this year include Katie Sayres, Scotty Jarrard, Doug Smith and Josh Swanson. Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris administered the oath of office to these new members.

State Sen. Steve Gooch attended, speaking with those gathered about his appreciation for local businesses and their investment back into their communities to make "us the No. 1 state to do business in for 10 years in a row – and we recently got that recommendation again."

Gooch shared some of the

Georgia General Assembly's plans for the upcoming year, such as a statewide income tax rate decrease and increased spending on education and public safety.

State Rep. Stan Gunter followed Gooch's comments with a few announcements of his own, such as a plan to reform the juvenile court system.

Before the meeting officially adjourned and the Andrews Brothers Dueling Pianos stole the show as the evening's entertainment, Rowe gave a brief recap of 2023 at the Chamber of Commerce.

"We welcomed in 113 new members, hosted 71 ribbon cuttings and reached the 800-member threshold this year," he said. "We (also) completed a couple of projects that we had started in 2022.

"We were able to secure the first supercharger funded by TVA in North Georgia. Working with the Union County Historical Society, we were able to freshen the remodel of the historic law office and open it as a Downtown Welcome Center."

Their work alongside the Historical Society in other projects, such as the Heritage Festival, also contributed to the chamber being named Preservationist of the Year in 2023.

The chamber recorded 33,000 visitors to downtown festivals, 31,000 at Meeks Park festivals and attracted 18,000 people for the annual Fourth of July fireworks show last year.

"In 2024, we're looking to keep that momentum going," Rowe said. "We are addressing several issues that are not only facing us in our community, but are also facing other communities in the state. We are going to work on a workforce housing project (and) work on childcare.

"We are looking at working to expand infrastructure – that includes water, sewer and fiber, just to name a few. We also look forward to working with the College and Career Academy to ensure that the pathways align with our industries."



Commissioner Lamar Paris had the honor of helping to swear in new Chamber of Commerce Board Members on Jan. 20.
Photo by Daysha Pandolph

North Georgia Chamber Symphony Quartet at the Union County Historical Courthouse



The North Georgia Chamber Symphony

A quartet from The North Georgia Chamber Symphony will perform at the Union County Historical Courthouse on Friday, February 2, 2024, at 7 PM.

The program will have a Valentine's Day theme and

will feature a number of romantic favorites, as well as light classical works by Mozart, Massenet, Borodin and others. The Quartet will also play some engaging and well-crafted 'pop' and/or 'jazz' numbers.

The program is free, and will last about an hour or a little more.

All donations are accepted and appreciated.

We look forward to seeing all our North Georgia friends.

Symphonic Band...from Page 1A

the Reinhardt University band director, who sends invitations to specific, high-achieving high school directors across the state.

Those directors are then asked to submit recordings of their bands to be reviewed by a panel of blind judges. The two ensembles with the highest average ratings will then appear at the Reinhardt University Honor Band event.

After going through the grueling acceptance process, the UCHS Symphonic Band became the first group in over 50 years of the program's existence to perform at an invitation-based honor concert.

"I've been looking for an opportunity like this for a long time," Stafford said. "It's always been one of my career goals to do something like this, and it's not for the accolades; it's just because, when I go to these things and I hear these exemplary bands, they are always from metro-Atlanta.

"I don't like that rural schools aren't represented equally with urban schools, so that's what it meant to me. It meant that our kids (were) going to get to display that they are every bit as good as any kid in any part of Georgia."

And the ensemble did not fail to impress that Saturday. Their program featured six songs and three guest conductors aside from Stafford himself.

To direct the opening piece, "Overture for Winds," renowned Band Director Lois Wiggins stepped to the podium. Now retired, Wiggins worked as a music educator for 33 years in Kentucky, Tennessee and Indiana.

She served on several important band and music educators committees throughout her career, and received numerous honors such as the International Women's Brass Conference "Beacon Award" and being a 2016 Grammy Music Educator Award National Finalist.

Wiggins is often featured as an adjudicator, guest conductor or clinician at honor bands and festivals, and she currently serves as a co-conductor for the Central Kentucky Youth Repertory Orchestra and a part-time faculty member in the School of Music at the University of Kentucky.

"It was a wonderful



UCHS Band Director Will Stafford holding up awards received by the band and himself following their honor band participation and performance on Jan. 20. Photo/Submitted

opportunity, because she was the clinician for the Reinhardt honor band," Stafford said. "Ironically, I student-taught with her (in college), so it was a remarkable experience to go on the big stage at Reinhardt and have the lady who taught me how to teach get up there and direct (my) band. It was an experience that I will never forget."

Other guest conductors were UCMS Band Director Daniel Foster directing "Toccata for Band," and Reinhardt University Assistant Professor of Music Education Dennis Naughton directing "Governor's Own." Stafford directed "O Magnum Mysterium," "Sheltering Sky" and "Khan."

Stafford described the amount of work preparing for honor band as being twice that of Large Group Performance Evaluation, only in "half the amount of time."

The band started working on the Reinhardt pieces sometime between late August and early September. For the first few months, however, they had to balance the Reinhardt preparation with marching band and scheduled school concerts such as the Veteran's Day Ceremony.

Throughout the entire preparation process, several clinicians worked with the ensemble to fine tune their performance such as Dr. Hayes Bunch from Young Harris College, Dr. Scott Barnstead from Fannin County High, former UCHS Band Director Kerry Rittenhouse, Nolan and Chloe Walker of Notes to Self

Music Studio, UCHS Band Student-Teacher Cassandra Schreiber and UCMS Band Student-Teacher Anthony Stevenson.

UCHS Chorus Teacher Alicia Covington was also instrumental in pulling off the Reinhardt performance. The closing piece, "Khan," featured a piano solo, which Covington agreed to play. She dedicated a lot of time toward the UCHS band in learning and performing the song.

"I felt fantastic about the performance," Stafford said. "I was really blown away by the level of musicianship on stage. I don't have words for what happened on stage that day; it was something special."

He was also pleased to accept several awards that afternoon. Foremost, the band received a plaque that reads "Reinhardt University High School Honor Band Clinic in recognition of outstanding performance as an invited guest ensemble."

Stafford himself was also surprised with a citation of excellence from the National Band Association.

Looking forward, Stafford hopes to take his band to more honor band events such as the Georgia Music Educators Association Conference or Jamfest at the University of Georgia.

He shared that he will likely submit the recordings from Reinhardt as audition materials for those festivals, because, like Reinhardt, these kinds of opportunities are audition-based and feature only the best bands in the state.