

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

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Wednesday, February 15, 2023

Students shine brightly in 'Evening with STARS'

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce hosted the annual "Evening with the STARS" recognition banquet on Thursday, Feb. 9, inside the ballroom of the Union County Community Center in honor of the brightest from Union County Schools.

Achievements by select Union County High seniors were on full display in a celebration by school staff, friends, family members and more, complete with a delicious steak and chicken meal by LongHorn Steakhouse.

The occasion served as the official recognition of the PAGE Foundation STAR Student and Teacher for 2023, who for Union County High are

senior student Destiny Gibson and Anatomy/Biology Teacher Dixie Conger, respectively.

A STAR Student earns the prestigious title by obtaining the highest SAT score among his or her peers on a single test date while being ranked top-of-class based on GPA. The student then chooses a STAR Teacher who has made the biggest educational impact on him or her.

UCHS Principal CT Hussion introduced the pair, and both got up to say a word or two regarding their stellar accomplishments.

"For me, this honor represents more than a test score or grade point average," Gibson said. "This award is 12 years of climbing the ladder of well-rounded competitive
See Evening with STARS, Page 2A



The Chamber of Commerce was pleased to recognize a talented group of UCHS "stars" for its annual student awards banquet on Thursday. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Short-Term Rental Ordinance nears completion



The county hosted another standing-room-only public hearing for the proposed Short-Term Rental Ordinance last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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More than a hundred people attended the second public hearing for the proposed Short-Term Rental Ordinance on Thursday, Feb. 9, leaving Union County Government and its volunteer STR Committee more tweaking to do on the

ordinance.

It was a "courtesy hearing," as the county is only required to host one official public hearing, which took place Dec. 5. Last week's hearing occurred in the large Jury Assembly Room on the lower floor of the Union County Courthouse to better accommodate attendees offering feedback.

And while the Commissioner's Office is working to get the ordinance enacted and STR licensing moratorium lifted "as quickly as possible," it is still trying to give people ample opportunities to help shape the ordinance before putting it into effect.

Enacting the ordinance will lead to the first-ever
See Ordinance Input, Page 3A

Suspect arrested in Feb. 6 Hiawassee-to-Blairsville chase

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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A Towns County resident allegedly fled law enforcement from Hiawassee to Blairsville on Monday, Feb. 6, only to get away after authorities called off the chase for safety reasons during a busy time of day on Georgia 515.

Thanks to interagency cooperation between the Union County Sheriff's Office and the police departments of Hiawassee, Blairsville and Fair Hope, Alabama, investigators were able to verify the identity of the driver and negotiate his surrender the very next day.

Caleb Matthew Price, 23, of Hiawassee, was arrested and charged with multiple misdemeanors in connection with the chase, including fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer, reckless driving, passing in a no-passing zone and failure to obey traffic control devices.

His bond was set at \$20,000 last week, and he remained in custody at the Union County Jail at press time.

The chase began around 4 p.m. that Monday when Hiawassee Police Officer J.R. Murray spotted a dark Ford Explorer that had been the subject of a "be on the lookout" for erratic driving, Hiawassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker said.

Murray tried to pull the vehicle over after it entered city limits from the west, but the Explorer declined to stop and continued to drive erratically while turning around in the McDonald's parking lot, and the pursuit headed westbound out of the city toward Young Harris.

Towns County E-911 Dispatchers contacted authorities in Blairsville to alert them to the chase as it approached the county line, and soon after, Officer Murray called off his pursuit near Ensley Road in Union County due to traffic conditions growing heavier.

To prevent the dangerous driver from heading into town, Blairsville Police and the Union County Sheriff's Office stopped eastbound traffic at Windy Hill Road and set up a spike strip in front of the Blairsville VA Clinic, according to Blairsville



Caleb Matthew Price
Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter.

UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer drove ahead to find the vehicle, which officers knew was traveling their way. As he passed Mountain Building Supply, Dyer said he saw the Explorer going west on the wrong side of the road, and he had to swerve his patrol car to avoid being hit.

When the driver got to the roadblock, he successfully navigated around the spike strip and continued toward
See Car Chase, Page 3A

'Night to Shine' returns to full gala experience in 2023

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For the Ninth Annual "Night to Shine" prom night experience on Friday, Feb. 10, First United Methodist Church of Union County rolled out the red carpet for area people with special needs, providing a fun, activity-filled gala for

those who deserve a special day devoted solely to their enjoyment.

It was one of hundreds of such gatherings that evening, as the international "Night to Shine" event sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation welcomed more than 75,000 honored guests at 622 churches across the U.S. and in 46 countries around the

world. Participants and caregivers at the local "Night to Shine" featured individuals from Union, Towns and Fannin counties in Georgia, and Clay and Cherokee counties in North Carolina, and still others who came from father away.

"Tonight is very exciting because we are back live (for
See Night to Shine, Page 6A



Each February, local organizers of the Night to Shine event treat very special guests to a luxury-filled evening of dancing and other activities. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Fairgrounds revs back up for Annual Classic Car Show



The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds' Car Show Committee will be meeting several more times between now and the April 28-29 main event. Photo by Jeremy Foster

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE - On Monday, Feb. 6, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds and the Memory Lane Classic Car Museum held the first of several joint Car Show Committee meetings to begin brainstorming ideas for the upcoming Third Annual Classic Car Show.

The show is slated for Friday, April 28, and Saturday, April 29, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

each day.

Hosted in the conference room of the Fairgrounds Main Office, the meeting featured Alvin Gibson, Marty Roberts, Charles Turner, Matt Turpin, Miranda Burnette, Brian Grubbs, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason.

As of the meeting, 23 cars had registered to participate, and it's still super early, so Thomason feels confident that the 2023 show will exceed the

200-plus cars that turned out in 2022.

"We have Atlanta Motor Speedway being represented by bringing their pace cars, and we're still getting calls and emails with questions and ticket purchases, so this is very exciting, and we're sure that this will be our biggest one yet," Thomason said.

The Car Show will offer families plenty of fun activities regardless of age, including a car corral, raffle prizes
See Classic Car Show, Page 2A



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Evening with STARS...from Page 1A

education. I was taught at a very early age that 'good enough' is not good enough, and that attitude has always pushed me further in life.

"Out of all my influences in life, one of them has had the biggest impact on me. Always bringing the most every day, she loves what she does, and it truly shows."

"I am truly grateful to have found a teacher who has been one of my biggest supporters every step of the way, my STAR Teacher, Mrs. Dixie Conger, for being a significant person in my high school experience and a true inspiration."

A former Union County High School graduate herself, Conger said it was an extreme honor "to be selected by a student who has found impact in my classroom."

"Destiny and I clicked very quickly and formed a great relationship," Conger said. "We were both on the same page about how each other worked - we had a very similar sense of humor - and how my classroom works; that is based on a mutual respect system."

"And on my side as a teacher, I had the opportunity to watch how easily Destiny was able to digest really complex information. She is truly a gifted young lady, and I have no doubt that as she goes on, she will be able to overcome any obstacle she has in her way. She has the drive and determination to make it possible, and her success will be a benefit to all those around her."

"She is a respectable and caring young lady, she has a gift for learning and being compassionate towards others, and absolutely without a doubt, a superior STAR student, Destiny, I'm so proud of you."

Continuing with the accolades, Assistant Superintendent Dr. David Murphy and Superintendent John Hill took turns giving out the following awards to seniors who have gone above and

beyond in their time at Union County High.

Autumn Skinner received the Community Star Award; Mattie Brookshire, the North Star Award; Eli Underwood, the All-Star Panther Award; Courtney Foster, the Shining Star Award; and Tristan Hayes, the Reaching for the Stars Award.

The Alumni Pacesetter Star Award went to Emmi Schakat, a recent

graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and her father, Bill Schakat, accepted the award on her behalf.

Three "STARS Scholarships" were also presented that evening: \$3,900 to the Union County Schools Foundation from the Chamber Shoot for the STARS Golf Tournament; \$2,000 to Union County Schools Foundation donated by SouthState Bank; and lastly, \$2,000 to North

Georgia Technical College donated by Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co.

Event sponsors were Union General Health System; The Mountain Life Team of Keller Williams Realty; United Community Bank; River City Bank; Granddaddy Mimm's; Visit Downtown Blairsville; Nelson's Tractor Company; Cozy Cove Cabin Rentals & Realty; and Traditions Health.

Classic Car Show...from Page 1A

featuring a Ranger-brand ATV, silent auction, delicious food vendors, arts & crafts, a swap meet and more.

"Our idea for now on the new car corral feature is where individuals will bring any kind of vehicle they want to try and sell, put a price on it, and try to sell it right there," Gibson said. "Inclusion of the car corral is included in the price of vehicle registration, so it's no extra charge."

"That just helps everybody get more out of everything going on; we don't want people to pay extra money to try and sell their car and end up not being able to get rid of it."

Commissioner Bradshaw reflected on the fact that the

event has continued to grow since its inception, "and people keep registering even up to the day of onsite, so we're extremely looking forward to this year's turnout."

The show will rev into gear with a Kick-Off Party at the Hamilton Gardens the night before opening day on Thursday, April 27, from 6-9 p.m.

And throughout the show's entirety, folks can look forward to musical acts such as Chris Stalcup & The Grange, Wyatt Espalin, Scott Low Band, True Youngblood, The Murphs and The Old Futures included with ticket prices.

Pure Prairie League and the Atlanta Rhythm Section will play a hard-ticket concert

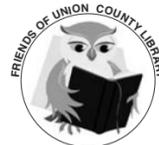
that Saturday night, and so far, "over 1,100 tickets have been sold for that," Thomason said.

Car Show tickets are \$10 for spectators and free for children 12 and under.

Vendor and car registry guidelines are as follows: \$100 for vehicle-covered booth with security (limited availability); \$30 for vehicle and/or swap meet; \$50 for arts & crafts; \$200 for commercial vendor; \$150 for food vendor; and \$200 for a six-person table at the Kick-Off Party.

Visit www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com for more information or stop by the office at 1311 Music Hall Road of Hiawassee.

2023 Friends of Union County Library Officers



Advocating for Libraries, Literacy, and Lifelong Learning

In addition to the officers shown here, Connie Rosenberry is our Newsletter Editor; Arlene Gray is Corresponding Secretary; and Webmaster Robert Harford manages our website (foucl.org). Special thanks go to "retiring" officers, but continuing active members, Nancy Bryant and Sally Woodworth. Members and officers together create a strong team advocating for libraries, literacy, and lifelong learning.

Why do people join FOUCL? There are probably as many reasons as there are members. Here's President Jackie Volk's story: "As a young child just learning to read, I was often allowed to go to the library while my parents were working. The one-room library in our small town was right next door to the variety store my parents owned. There were no events or summer reading programs. Our library was staffed by one person and open only two afternoon a week; but I spent lots of time there selecting and checking out books from the children's section. I believe my love of reading and libraries began then - it was a safe place and a free resource for me. After



2023 Friends of Union County Library Officers: Recording Secretary Jackie Millstone; Treasurer Debora Quigley; Vice-President Ken Arrington; and President Jackie Volk

marriage, a relocation, and children, I discovered all the additional resources offered by larger libraries when I took my kids to many of the special programs and learning experiences our local library offered and, of course, we checked out many books, too. Finally, many years later when my children were grown, I enthusiastically applied for and was accepted to work on the staff of the public library where I was living. It was physically harder work than I anticipated, but very rewarding. Requirements included standing at a circulation desk for hours, lifting and processing hundreds of books from the drop box every morning before the library opened, searching for books to be put on hold, reshelving books, and making sure patrons were finding what they needed. Getting to know our "regular" library patrons, watching the children

grow as they trooped in for storytime week after week, and sharing authors and titles reinforced for me the importance and joy of a local public library. I also saw all the good the Friends organization of that library did. I had a behind-the-scenes education about how significant they were. When I moved to Blairsville, I knew I would be part of the Friends here because I believe strongly in the value of community libraries."

If you use our library, please consider joining us. We contribute quarterly to the library for expenses that are above and beyond their set budget and we also fund special purchases like book giveaways to library families. Yearly memberships are only \$10 per person or \$15 for a family. Visit our website or pick up a membership form at Union County Public Library.

Ninth District Opportunity, Inc. awarded federal funds under The Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program Phase 40



Ninth District Opportunity, Inc. has been awarded federal funds under The Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program Phase 40.

Union County has been chosen to receive funding to supplement emergency food and shelter programs in the county.

The selection was made by a National Board that is chaired by the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency and consists of representatives from American Red Cross; Catholic Charities, USA; National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.; The Salvation Army; United Jewish Communities and, United Way of America.

The Local Board was charged to distribute funds appropriated by Congress to help expand the capacity of food and shelter programs in high-need areas around the country.

A Local Board made up of various local agencies and churches will determine how the funds awarded to Union County are to be distributed among the emergency food and shelter programs run by local service agencies in the area. The Local Board is responsible for recommending agencies to receive these funds and any additional funds available under this phase of the program.

Under the terms of the grant from the National Board, local agencies chosen to receive funds must: 1) be private voluntary non-profits or units of government, 2) have an accounting system, 3) practice nondiscrimination, 4) have

demonstrated the capability to deliver emergency food and/or shelter programs, and 5) if they are a private voluntary organization, they must have a voluntary board. Qualifying agencies (not individuals) are urged to apply.

Union County has distributed Emergency Food and Shelter funds previously with Ninth District Opportunity and other local agencies participating. These agencies were responsible for providing food and shelter for local individuals and families.

Public or private voluntary agencies (not individuals) interested in applying for Emergency Food and Shelter Program funds must submit a request to Brenda Dalin, Ninth District Opportunity, Inc., P.O. Drawer L, Gainesville, GA, 30501.

The deadline to submit a request is February 25, 2023.

2023-2024 Pre-K & Kindergarten Registration

Open February 13th To March 31st, 2023

Pre-K and Kindergarten School Registration for the 2023-2024 school year:

Monday-Friday, February 13th to March 31st, 2023 from 8:30 AM - 2:00 PM at the Union County Primary School. Pre-K seats are filled on a first come first serve basis.

Please call 706-835-4321 or email registrar@ucschools.org to set up a registration appointment.

If your child turns four (4) years old for Pre-K or five (5) years old for Kindergarten on or before September 1, 2023, and you are a Union

County resident, your child qualifies for our Pre-K or Kindergarten program. When registering, bring these items with you to complete the child's registration process.

NOTE- Students who are currently enrolled in the Union County Schools Pre-K program at Union County Primary School will NOT need to register for Kindergarten.

Below is a list of (six) required documentation for new enrollment

1. Birth Certificate; 2. Social Security Card; 3. Georgia Immunization Certificate (DPH Form 3231); 4. Certifi-

cate of Vision, Hearing, Dental, and Nutrition Screening (DPH Form 3300), (Completed by the health department or a physician); 5. Two Proofs of Residency documents with physical address and name (Examples include: rental agreement, utility bill, homeowner's or renter's insurance bill, property tax notice, mortgage payment document, etc.); 6. Complete the online registration forms at this link: <https://www.ucschools.org/parents/student-registration>

Failure to supply all the required documents will delay your registration. NFeb1524CA

Ordinance Input...from Page 1A



The volunteer Short-Term Rental Committee, pictured here, should not be confused with the STR Enforcement Board outlined in the proposed ordinance, which has yet to be appointed. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

regulations on short-term rentals in Union County, so everyone involved – most vocally those who have already invested or plan to invest in STR businesses – is eager to make sure their interests are best served.

As highlighted in the roughly two-hour-and-45-minute meeting, the ordinance is a “living document” that can be amended by the county at such a time that problem areas are identified following enactment.

There were plenty of opinions regarding problem areas in the latest ordinance draft No. 4, which can be found on the homepage of <http://www.unioncountyga.gov/>.

About three dozen people who are either STR owners, property managers, investors, or real estate agents delivered remarks in the hearing, engaging in robust exchanges with members of the STR Committee and Assistant County Attorney William Mercer, who led the hearing.

Compared with the first public hearing, nearly double the number of people signed up to provide input on Feb. 9. For the most part, STR advocates seemed in favor of or at least resigned to the fact of impending regulation, but they expressed many concerns about the particulars.

Among those concerns, advocates most often cited the limit of two licenses per applicant, the 5% cap on STRs in relation to total housing, the inability to transfer licenses in property sales, proposed jail time for ordinance violators, occupancy restrictions, owner vs renter liability, potential regulatory impacts for other types of housing, a lack of provisions regarding “nuisance neighbors,” detrimental effects on the local tourism industry, and the required “Good Neighbor” notification as being onerous and/or unnecessary.

Some of the feedback will certainly be incorporated into the next ordinance draft once the county and STR Committee have a chance to process the information from the hearing, which was augmented by a dedicated STR roundtable hosted by the Chamber of Commerce on Feb. 6.

Draft 4 of the ordinance contains several changes from previous drafts, notably the inclusion of an STR owner and a local property management company on the yet-to-be appointed STR Enforcement Board; a lengthening of the response time required of local registered agents in the event of an ordinance violation; and the addition of “Temporary Variance Applications.”

A few residents who live near short-term rentals spoke against such properties in the meeting, though they were greatly outnumbered by speakers with vested interests in the success of STRs, including those who argued that such rentals add to the vitally important tourism industry of Union County.

Concerns expressed by neighbors of STRs dealt largely with quality of life issues surrounding noise, late-night parties, overcrowded streetscapes and property intrusions by individuals staying in short-term rentals.

It was pointed out that there are already existing laws governing some of the negative aspects associated with STRs, such as prohibitions on loud music and trespassing. But the transient nature of short-term renters can make it difficult to keep the same problems from being repeated by different people occupying the same property over time.

Another issue has been raised regarding the trend of local homes being purchased to serve as short-term rentals, with fears that such purchases will deplete the stock of available

homes for permanent or long-term housing for locals, with implications for workforce development.

While the final draft of the ordinance to be enacted remains to be seen, it is clear that, coming from an environment of no local regulations, the STR Ordinance will necessarily have a limiting effect on the short-term rental market here in Union County.

The STR Ordinance stipulates rules governing level of occupancy, septic capacity, fire and life safety, parking, amplified sound, pets, trash, violations enforcement, etc., all of which the Commissioner’s Office has deemed necessary to regulate with the recent influx of STRs.

Commissioner Lamar Paris said in the beginning of the hearing last week that it is necessary to control the growth of this market primarily for reasons of safety and quality of life, as his office has identified the need to address the potential for fire hazards and other public health concerns as well as existing issues involving complaints by neighbors of short-term rentals.

That said, Paris acknowledged that the situation was essentially a conflict of property rights and intimated that his office and the STR Committee saw it as their job to strike a fair balance between the interests of STR owners, managers and real estate agents and people simply trying to enjoy their property without undue quality-of-life intrusions.

The ordinance aims to support “the health, well-being, and safety of guests and residents while minimizing the negative secondary effects on surrounding properties, to ensure proper safety precautions are in place, and to facilitate the collection and payment of STR taxes and related fees.”

There is no firm timeline on when the STR Ordinance

might be finalized and enacted, but both the county and many of the STR advocates in attendance communicated the need to move “as quickly as possible,” as the timely process has already featured much research and public input, and investments are being held up as long as the licensing moratorium remains in effect.

According to information presented in the hearing, there are currently 461 active short-term rental licenses in the county. Under the proposed ordinance, given an approximate total housing unit number of 15,100 with a 5% cap, there will be a little more than 750 total available licenses.

An Online STR Tax Collection System is expected to be up and running shortly after enactment of the ordinance and will be used for “processing STR applications, licenses, fees, and taxes associated with operating an STR in Union County.”

The ordinance defines a short-term rental as “a lodging accommodation offered to transient guests for a period of time not to exceed 30 consecutive days,” which include more traditional vacation rentals like cabins and the rise of recently popular examples like Airbnb and Vrbo.

Changes are still being made to the ordinance, and people may mail additional feedback to the Commissioner’s Office at 65 Courthouse Street, Suite 1, Blairsville, GA 30512, or email renee@unionogv.com.

Car Chase...from Page 1A



Investigators discovered last week that the Ford Explorer involved in the Feb. 6 chase had been shot three times prior to the pursuit. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Blairsville proper, where he blew through the red light at GA 515 and Farmers Market Way, Baxter said.

At that point, authorities decided that continuing the chase would be too risky, as it was a busy time of day in a busy section of the county. So, in the interest of the “safety of the general public,” they terminated the pursuit.

“It didn’t meet the criteria

for us to continue chasing it,” Chief Baxter said. “The main criteria were the amount of traffic and the safety of the motoring public, and it just was not worth anybody getting hurt for us to continue chasing this individual.”

A deputy waited at the GA 515/325 intersection to see if the driver would attempt to leave the county toward Fannin. When he failed to

show up, local law enforcement stepped up area patrols to see if he was trying to hide on a side road, and they searched until dark.

The next morning, on Tuesday, Feb. 7, UCSO Staff Sgt. Brandon Hogsed found the Explorer parked beside Coosa Methodist Church off Mulky Gap Road. An investigation revealed that the driver had abandoned the car there and gotten a ride from an unknown person shortly after the chase.

Blairsville authorities coordinated with Hiwassee PD to confirm the Alabama tag of the car that fled Towns County, and when a driver’s license photo came back, Dyer, who got a look at the driver the day before as the two passed each other on 515, verified Price as their suspect.

Chief Baxter reached out to the Fair Hope Police Department in Alabama – Price had just moved to Towns County from there about a month ago – and Fair Hope PD contacted his mother, who helped negotiate Price’s surrender to Dyer at the McDonald’s in Hiwassee later that day.

Initially, authorities were concerned about the wellbeing of the driver, as they discovered that the Explorer’s windshield had been struck by three bullets at some point prior to the chase.

As it turned out, Price was OK.

“You could tell that somebody had walked up to that vehicle and fired three rounds in the windshield from the passenger front fender,” said Dyer, who also serves as Assistant Chief of Blairsville PD. The origins of the gunfire remain under investigation.

The above law enforcement officials were pleased that good interagency cooperation led to the arrest, and Chief Parker commended Officer Murray “for keeping a level head” during the chase and recognizing when to call off the pursuit for public safety as conditions grew unfavorable.

Price has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Public comments welcome for draft Regional Transit Plan



The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) has been working with consultants and the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission (GMRC) to develop a first-ever Regional Transit Plan – A guidance document that reviews the performance and priorities for public transit services within the 12-county area. Input from the general public, from transit service providers, from a stakeholder committee, and from area leaders throughout the process has helped the project team create the draft document, which is now available for review on the project website (<https://regionaltdp-gdot.hub.arcgis.com/pages/gmrc>) for the public review period. The goal of the document is to provide a

broad overview of ways the GMRC, GDOT, and other proponents can advance and support transit services across the region. As these documents are completed across the State, the information will help GDOT shape future policy and programming in hopes of delivering more efficient and effective services.

The public is encouraged to provide input on the draft document by sending all comments and questions to RegionalTDP@dot.ga.gov with “Georgia Mountains TDP” in the subject line. Once the comment period is done, the plan will go before the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission Council for adoption on February 23, 2023.

Thurman's legacy lives on at GA Mtn. Fairgrounds

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It is common knowledge that former Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds General Manager Dale Thurman was both dedicated to his job and well-loved in the community.

Terms like “gentle,” “easy to talk to,” “outgoing” and “respected” come up when people talk about him and the legacy he left behind, and it goes without saying that he will be missed following his passing on Tuesday, Jan. 17, at the age of 78.

Although he was born in Marietta on July 14, 1944, Thurman was a Towns County resident. His parents already lived in Hiawassee; his father was from Ducktown, Tennessee, and his mother was from Union County, just down the road.

“When he was real little, his dad owned Farmer and Colwell Cabins (in Blairsville),” recalls Thurman’s wife Beatrice. Having gone to Marietta for

work during the war, his parents just happened to bring Thurman into the world in the city only to return home later.

It was here that Thurman would become involved in his community through organizations like the Hospital Authority Board and, perhaps most prominently, the Lions Club.

Through his Lions membership, Thurman volunteered for the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds – then a very different place compared to its sprawling layout today. It was once nothing more than a forested park under the Tennessee Valley Authority, and some can still remember it being so.

“Now, he didn’t actually get the fair started,” explained Terry Taylor, a longtime member of the Georgia Mountain Fair Board. “The fair started back in the early ‘50s. It had been run under a volunteer operation up until that time, and (Thurman) helped grow the fair.”

Thurman’s involvement

at the fairgrounds grew from working events as a Lion to managing and then expanding the venue at its new location after the forest was cleared in 1976, and Taylor became the engineer and designer behind the fairgrounds that Thurman developed.

“Our friendship grew when he was big into the Georgia Mountain Fair and so was I – it was sort of a mutual hobby,” Taylor said, recalling when Thurman became the first paid full-time manager of the fairgrounds.

“At the time, when we moved into the new site, the fair was pretty much just a one-week type event, and that’s about all we did. And Dale helped grow it into pretty much a year-round type of event, bringing in different concerts and shows.”

Through his dedication, Thurman made the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds a “full-time operation,” and although he didn’t have a hand in constructing the Anderson Music

Hall, it was his idea to provide more frequent entertainment.

“I enjoyed very much working with him at the fair,” remarked Taylor with strained emotions. “We spent a lot of time there, and we went on fair trips for one reason or another, too. And we went on Lions Club trips also.”

It took a long time for Thurman to decide on accepting a job offer to run the Greater Gulf State Fair in Mobile, Alabama, after 12 years of managing the Hiawassee-based fairgrounds.

“We still stayed in touch, you know,” said Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason, who served as secretary of the fairgrounds back then. “And of course, he’d come home on the weekends some and I’d see him in town.”

Upon his return to Georgia, Thurman moved to Gwinnett County, where he managed the Gwinnett County Fairgrounds for 27 years, making it his third management position since the 1980s.

He remained busy with annual visits to fair conventions, whether in Georgia or South Carolina, and even won Top Fair Organizer

for the State of Georgia almost three decades ago. This was another way Thomason stayed in touch with Thurman, giving him the chance to see her continue the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds’ development when she became the site’s new manager.

Just last year on Nov. 1, Thurman’s lengthy career came to an end when he decided to retire and return to Hiawassee full-time.

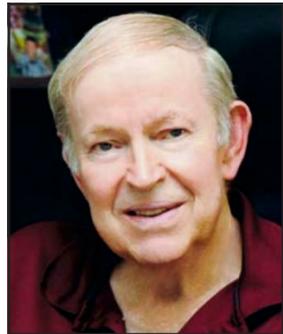
And on Jan. 17, a few months after returning home, he passed away. He had been married to Beatrice for 55 years, and beyond his passion for the people, they raised a family.

“It’s still hard to even realize that he’s gone,” said Beatrice, remarking that she, Thurman and their two daughters “just lived it day by day.”

“We all think we’re going to live forever,” she began, holding back tears. “He was just – everybody admired him, and he was a good man.”

Taylor echoed her sentiment, noting that he will always remember Thurman as “really a good guy, and he really cared about the fair and the people of Towns County.”

As for Thomason, she will



Dale Thurman

always be honored to carry on his legacy. That’s why his name has been bolted onto one of the chairs at the Anderson Music Hall via a special memorial plaque, leaving behind some physical trace of his touch outside of the legacy he built.

“Nothing makes me happier than to see all the smiles and the happy faces on people who have come to the Georgia Mountain Fair and have brought their family and (are) having such a fun time together,” Thomason said, and she looks forward to keeping Thurman’s torch alight with her own passion for maintaining the fairgrounds and all the smiles that come with it.

Night to Shine...from Page 1A



A popular attraction at Night to Shine 2023 was the party bus that took guests from First United Methodist Church for a ride around the Blairsville Square. Photo by Jeremy Foster

the first time since the onset of COVID-19,” church volunteer Sandra Buchanan said. “In 2021 we had to do it remotely by virtual, so we did not eliminate it. In 2022 we had an outside parade with a drive-by.

“This is geared towards having a special evening for our special guests, and at the end of the evening they are all crowned King and Queen.

“When guests come in tonight, they are greeted and walk down the red carpet and get a boutonniere or a corsage and escorted to their tables with their ‘buddy’ that is assigned to them.

“There will be groups that rotate to each area in intervals. We have the dance room with a live DJ, a karaoke room, and there will be a limo ride provided by ‘Go Go Party Bus’ that will take them around the (Blairsville) Square.”

Buchanan said the gala was one of her “top favorite things” she gets to be involved with, as the Night to Shine is all about service to one’s community.

“It is truly a community event,” she said. “There have been several hundred volunteers

that have worked to help pull this off. During this event, not only do the guests get a meal, but all the caregivers will get a night off.

“They will leave their kids in charge of us and will be served a dinner downstairs with bingo games and other stuff so they can have a little respite. So, it’s very nice, and everyone just looks forward to it all year long.”

Scott Terry is a member of First United and, along with his wife Elizabeth, coordinated the gala event in 2023 – a first for the couple.

“We are honoring 94 guests tonight,” Scott said. “That is representative of five counties, so of course it has been an amazing experience thus far.

“This has been great for us because my wife and I are both retired educators, and so we understand the value of special needs individuals through that, and it’s just a great opportunity to share God’s love and the value of all lives and the special needs community, the caregivers, the parents and all those that run the agencies – they’re just wonderfully special

people.

“I really want to thank and give my appreciation to every one of the volunteers, local businesses, and anyone of this community who has helped out by working or pouring in financially for making this night possible.”

Devan Persaud is a local caretaker with Avita Community Partners of Blairsville, and he, too, wanted to share the joy he receives through his volunteer role with Night to Shine.

“I have been involved with (Avita) five years now,” Persaud said. “This is my third Night to Shine, and my favorite part of this is the excitement and thrill they get from having a lot of fun.

“This is a different setting for them compared to others or the usual, so you know there is a lot more to do and they probably feel luxurious, and they carry on very well.

“I think more people should give the intellectually challenged clients a chance so they can see the other side of them. The clients have a lot to offer, but sometimes there is no room in their life that they can show it out.”