

North Georgia News

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McCorkle survived ranks of 'Frozen Chosin'

By Mark P. Harbison
Guest Contributor

Every day, as people go about their lives, they unknowingly encounter small bits and pieces of living history.

The quiet, friendly, polite woman next to you in line at Ingles, as a young Peace Corps volunteer, lived among natives of the Amazon rain forest. The older man that walks his dog every morning in my subdivision, as a 15-year-old, worked as a deckhand on a supply boat in Singapore.

These are just two examples of the hundreds of people we encounter in our lives that are not quite what they appear to be. They have a story to tell, experiences to share, if someone would just ask.

Once saw a cartoon of an old man with a bent back, using a cane to walk, and wearing a Veteran's ballcap. The caption read something along the lines of "as a young man, he was tougher than you will ever be." We have the living embodiment

of that cartoon living right here in Blairsville.

His name is Jack McCorkle, and I have had the honor of serving alongside of him in the North Georgia Honor Guard for the past three years.

Jack is a Marine. He does not have a bent back. Jack has no filters and will tell you exactly what he thinks, usually rather loudly, since he is hard of hearing. He is a good friend and a fierce supporter of Veterans. He has been a member of the North Georgia Honor Guard for more than 31 years and attends most of our funerals. Jack is 91.

Of all the things Jack is, he is a veteran – no, strike that, he is a survivor of the 1950 battle at Chosin Reservoir, North Korea.

This "fighting withdrawal" has been generally accepted as the most brutal in modern military history. Estimates put the temperature at minus 35 degrees. This cold weather created considerable danger of frostbite casualties, icy roads and weapon



Blairsville resident Jack McCorkle as a 19-year-old U.S. Marine Corps circa 1950.

malfunctions.

It has been noted in numerous articles that the cold was so fierce that Medics had to hold morphine syrettes in their mouths to defrost them. Blood transfusion bags froze and were useless. Batteries in Jeeps and radios did not work properly. Even the grease in the weapons gelled, making them useless. Firing pins even

froze in place, making the weapons unable to fire. The battle quickly devolved into brutal hand to hand, eye to eye combat.

This battle matched 20,000 UN Troops against 120,000 Chinese soldiers. After this epic battle was completed, the 1st Marine Division reported 7,338 non-battle casualties due to the cold weather. That's "casualties," not W.I.A., Wounded in Action. In other words, they froze to death. All told, UN Forces in and around the area of the Chosin Reservoir lost over 10,000 lives.

The approximately 1,000 survivors, known as the "Frozen Chosin" or the "Chosin Few," were recently invited to attend a reunion that took place Sept. 7-11, 2022, at the Hilton Crystal City in Arlington, Virginia. Jack attended accompanied by North Georgia Honor Guard Cmdr. Wayne Roshaven. He was looking forward to seeing old friends.

Friendships forged in the fires of battle are difficult



McCorkle, 91, wearing his "Chosin Few" ballcap at a recent Marine Corps League event honoring the anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima. Photo by Mark Harbison, Sr. Vice Commander, North Georgia Honor Guard, Eastern Division

to explain to non-Veterans. They tend to transcend any conventional definitions or expectations of what a friendship is.

War-born friendships are such that you cannot see one another for years at a time, and

when you do meet, it's like it was only yesterday when you were last together. You pick up right back where you were, sometimes even finishing an aborted conversation.

Sadly, fewer and fewer

See Frozen Chosin, Page 2A

UGH expands medical services with new building



Union General Hospital cut the ribbon for its new Medical Office Building on Friday, welcoming local officials and members of the public to the event. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union General Health System held an open house and ribbon-cutting ceremony for its brand new, state-of-the-art Medical Office Building on Friday, Feb. 24.

The occasion marked the culmination of over a year's worth of progress at the site located near the hospital on the main campus, with groundbreaking for the facility having taken place on

Dec. 9, 2021, only to wrap up a couple months later than the projected completion timeline in 2023.

Union General officials and medical professionals were excited last week to open the doors and exam rooms of the three-story building to the public, providing tours to reveal just how much the facility has to offer.

Following brief remarks by Commissioner Lamar Paris, Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe, and Union General CEO Kevin Bierschenk, alongside

Facilities Director Chad Hooper, everyone gathered outside for the center's first big incision – the official ribbon cutting.

"I was here for the groundbreaking," noted Paris, who added that he "couldn't imagine what it was going to be like and how beautiful it is."

"Thank you for making our county so much safer because we have such excellent medical care and medical facilities, doctors (and) staff," Paris said.

For his part, Rowe said

See New Medical Building, Page 6A

Convicted ex-doctor loses in federal appeals court

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has handed down a loss to former Blairsville physician James Heaton, signaling a potential end to his lengthy legal battle to overturn his federal conviction for prescription drug crimes.

Heaton, 66, is about 20 months into his 72-month sentence, which he is serving at Estill Federal Correctional Institute in South Carolina.

Although federal convictions do not offer parole, inmates with good behavior are eligible for early release, and Heaton is slated to be set free Dec. 13, 2025, after about 54 months in prison, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

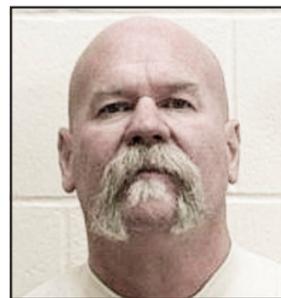
In the runup to the appellate court's decision last

month, the defense team for the former owner of Blairsville Family Practice had been working to appeal his conviction on more than 100 counts of illegally prescribing controlled substances.

The Court of Appeals' ruling, posted on Valentine's Day, affirmed his conviction in a 46-page opinion.

Heaton was convicted in 2019 in the U.S. District Court in Gainesville of 27 counts of aiding and abetting the acquisition of controlled substances by deception and 102 counts of unlawfully dispensing controlled substances.

The ex-doctor was tried alongside former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder, who was convicted of 75 counts of aiding and abetting Heaton's dispensing of controlled substances, and 27 counts of



James Heaton

acquiring controlled substances by misrepresentation, fraud, deception and subterfuge.

Gowder, 65, was sentenced to a year and a day in prison plus two years of supervised release. He was released from prison Jan. 14, 2022, and will be under the supervision of the U.S. Middle District of Tennessee until Jan.

See Heaton Loses Appeal, Page 2A

UCSO deputy arrested for alleged cruelty to children

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation arrested Union County Sheriff's Deputy Kaitlyn Dey on Friday, Feb. 24, for one count of second-degree cruelty to children, a felony, the GBI said Monday.

"On Feb. 15, 2023, the Union County School Police requested the GBI to conduct an investigation into a possible child abuse incident," GBI Region 8 Special Agent in Charge Kim Williams said. "As a result of the investigation, a warrant was taken for Kaitlyn Dey in the Union County Superior Court."

Deputy Dey, 27, turned herself into the Union County Sheriff's Office and Jail on

Friday afternoon and was released on bond shortly after her arrest.

She has been suspended without pay from her position as a patrol deputy pending the outcome of the case, according to the Sheriff's Office.

Sheriff Mack Mason declined to comment, saying that the GBI was handling the case, and additional details were not available by press time.

"The investigation is ongoing," SAC Williams said. "Upon completion of the investigation, the case will be provided to the Enotah Judicial Circuit for prosecution."

The charge in question pertains to O.C.G.A. 16-5-70(C): "Any person commits the offense of cruelty to children in the second degree when such person with criminal negligence



Kaitlyn Dey
UCSO Deputy

causes a child under the age of 18 cruel or excessive physical or mental pain."

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

BOE honors achievement, discusses electric buses



UCHS STAR Student Destiny Gibson, center, with proud parents Amber and Travis Gibson in the February Board of Education meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In their Feb. 21 regular meeting, members of the Union County Board of Education recognized 2023 STAR Student Destiny Gibson and her chosen STAR Teacher Dixie Conger.

STAR status is awarded to the senior student who gets

the highest SAT score in a single sitting of the test among their peers.

Introduced by Union County High School Principal C.T. Hussion as a phenomenal student "voted most likely to cure a disease," Destiny reiterated why she chose Conger as her STAR Teacher.

"She treats every single one of her students with respect

– the same respect that she expects in return. She is overall just a brilliant teacher with a heart of gold," Gibson said of her biology teacher, who was unfortunately unable to attend the meeting due to illness.

Already, Gibson is interning with King's Quick Care on Young Harris Street, and she plans on attending the

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Frozen Chosin...from Page 1A

of these “Chosin Few” are able to make it to these reunions. Jack’s friend did not make it to the reunion. The reason why is unknown, but he is confident that they will meet again.

Jack remarked to me on his return that he was “the only one upright,” that “everyone was using walkers, canes or wheel chairs.” And if they were walking, “they were stooped over, couldn’t get up straight,” and it was “sad to see.” Reminds me of that cartoon mentioned earlier.

The battle of the Chosin Reservoir was fought Nov. 26 through Dec. 13 of 1950. Leading up to the 72nd anniversary last year, I decided to write this article not only to thank Jack, and all the Frozen Chosin survivors, but to honor those thousands that did not survive.

As a secondary goal, I

hope this article causes some of our younger citizens to begin to understand that what came before them, no matter how benign, or how brutal, or how horrific, it all melds together to give them the opportunity to go out on a Friday night after a football game and have fun with their friends.

The withdrawal from Chosin, if it appears at all in modern textbooks, is likely only a few sentences or maybe a footnote. It’s nowhere near enough for a true understanding of how something like this changes our everyday lives and profoundly affects those that lived through it.

The appearance of Communist Chinese Forces (CCF) soldiers came as a surprise. Gen. Douglas MacArthur was attempting to push the communist North Koreans across the Yalu River and into Manchuria (China) or into Russia.

On Nov. 9, 1950, he informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that complete victory was still possible and reiterated his belief that U.S. air power would prevent the Chinese from crossing the Yalu in decisive numbers.

He was wrong – very, very wrong. CCF Divisions silently crossed the Yalu in numbers reported to be 120,000. This massive force somehow managed to keep its presence concealed as 20,000 United Nations troops took up positions around the Chosin Reservoir.

I should point out that the UN Forces consisted of U.S. Army units, Royal Marine Commandos, from England, South Korean Marines, with the bulk coming from the U.S. Marine Corps. All of these units have a story to tell that is filled with heroism and a tenacious fighting spirit. This story focuses on the U.S. Marines.

During my talks with Jack, I asked him if he blamed any one event or person for the

failure that allowed them to be surrounded and trapped at Chosin. Without hesitation he responded with a single word, “MacArthur.”

That seems to be the consensus of most survivors and historians. Volumes have been written on this and debated by scholars far smarter than I am. However, I can say that as a Vietnam Veteran, I fully understand politics or the hubris of a single individual causing untold damage and loss of life.

MacArthur was warned that the Chinese would come to the aid of the North Koreans if American forces approached the Yalu River, and the Chinese did intervene on behalf of the North Koreans.

Some suggest that this, combined with MacArthur’s belief that Chinese forces did not have the equipment or the “will” necessary to cross the Yalu, prolonged the Korean War by two-and-a-half years and cost the lives of thousands.

My friends, this has been repeated through every war ever fought, as history does indeed repeat itself.

Of course, the answer to this question about placing blame is far more complex than pointing a finger at a single individual, although MacArthur’s failure to fully understand the capabilities of the CCF and their willingness to cross the Yalu in the dead of winter is the single greatest contributor to the failure at Chosin. This is not only borne out by numerous academic debates within our own country but in South Korea as well.

On the Chinese side, they did not misjudge the strength of the force that would be necessary to chase the UN forces out of North Korea and send them fleeing for their lives.

Mao Zedong, the communist leader known as Chairman Mao and the founder of The Peoples Republic of China, told Chinese General Song Shilun:

“The American Marine

First Division has the highest combat effectiveness in the American armed forces. It seems not enough for our four divisions to surround and annihilate its two Regiments. You should have one or two more Divisions as a reserve force.”

I have a childhood friend who is a Korean War orphan, adopted by a U.S. military family and brought from Korea as a young boy to rural northeast Texas. Now that had to be quite the culture shock! His name is John Kennedy, and a few years ago, he traveled to South Korea for the first time and actually made contact with brothers and sisters he did not know he had.

When John was in Korea visiting them late last year, it occurred to me to have him ask his relatives about some of these things. He was intrigued by the idea of this and readily agreed to ask. He had to use his interpreter to ask the core question above.

Yes, he did need an interpreter. Although John is ethnically Korean and strongly resembles his brothers, he doesn’t speak a word of the language. Besides, if he did, it would be with a Texas accent coming out of that definitely Korean face, which no doubt would have caused much confusion throughout the village of his birth.

Unlike here, most all of them were at least familiar with the disaster at Chosin. When asked the same question, blame was directed at MacArthur or sometimes more broadly as “America’s failure to fully understand the capabilities and tenacity of the CCF.”

Editor’s Note: This is one half of an article highlighting the contributions of Blairsville resident Jack McCorkle as a Marine who bravely fought in the Battle of Chosin Reservoir during the three-year Korean War. Next week’s edition of the newspaper will feature the second half of the article detailing the battle and its brutal conditions and conclusion.

Heaton Loses Appeal...from Page 1A

13, 2024.

Heaton appealed his conviction within two weeks of his June 24, 2020, sentencing, while Gowder missed his deadline to appeal.

As previously reported in the North Georgia News, the men were arrested in 2016, and their trial took place in October 2019, with the COVID-19 pandemic causing unusual delays in their subsequent sentencing hearings and dates to report to prison.

Heaton’s appeal was scheduled to be heard before the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in December 2021, but his attorneys requested a delay until the U.S. Supreme Court could issue a decision on two cases that they felt could potentially impact Heaton’s case.

The cases that went before the Supreme Court similarly involved physicians convicted of prescription fraud: Ruan v United States and United States v Kahn.

As background, Xiulu Ruan of Mobile, Alabama, was convicted in 2017 for violation of the Controlled Substances Act and sentenced to 21 years.

Shakeel Kahn, an Arizona physician, was convicted in 2019 of, among other charges, conspiracy to distribute oxycodone and other drugs resulting in death. He was sentenced to 25 years.

Both men used “good faith” as a defense, that is, each believed he was acting in “proper medical practice” in prescribing pain medications.

The Supreme Court heard the combined cases of Ruan and Kahn in March 2022 and issued its ruling the following June. In a 9-0 decision, the justices sent both cases back to the lower courts, which ruled that the government had not proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendants “knowingly or intentionally acted in an unauthorized manner.”

With a Supreme Court decision that looked like it might help his appeal, Heaton’s case advanced to the appellate court for a Nov. 16, 2022, hearing for oral arguments.

The appeal attempted to establish three facts: 1) the evidence presented was insufficient to sustain a conviction; 2) the particular law, known as the Controlled Substances Act, is unconstitutionally vague; and 3) the judge’s instruction to the jury was a “misstatement of law.”

That allegation “misstatement” involved the use of the conjunctive versus disjunctive, specifically the use of “or” rather than “and” in the jury instructions at the conclusion of the 2019 federal trial.

Heaton was convicted of 102 counts of writing prescriptions “outside the scope of professional practice and not for a legitimate medical

purpose.” When U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story instructed the jury on considerations for a conviction, he linked those two phrases with “or” instead of “and.”

The distinction mattered to Heaton’s attorneys because, in their assessment, both elements would have to be proven with “and” to warrant a conviction, thereby increasing the burden on the state to prove both rather than one or the other.

Furthermore, the appeal stated that the phrase “outside the scope of professional practice” was “unconstitutionally vague.”

The trial prosecutor, Assistant U.S. Attorney Laurel Boatright Milam, responded to the appeal by citing court precedents confirming the use of “or” versus “and.”

She also rejected the “unconstitutionally vague” argument, pointing out that the jury was given ample evidence of the standard of care in Georgia. She wrote that Heaton was “on notice that repeated failure to prescribe controlled substances according to the standard of care in Georgia was a crime.”

Years before his arrest, in 2010, Heaton was called before the Georgia Medical Composite Board to answer a complaint about his prescription practices. In responding to the complaint, Heaton presented two forms he said he required of all pain patients to ensure they weren’t misusing the drugs he prescribed, according to Milam.

One form was a questionnaire in which patients described their pain. The other was a contract requiring patients to agree not to ask for prescriptions early or to increase dosage or frequency; to only use one pharmacy and notify the office if they changed pharmacies; and not to share or sell their medication.

When the DEA examined the files of the patients who testified in Heaton’s federal case, those forms were absent.

Additionally, two women testified about having sexual relationships with Heaton while he was writing them prescriptions for pain medications. In 2014, the Medical Board issued him a “letter of concern” about the “boundary with patients” rule that prohibits unprofessional conduct like sex with a patient.

At the appeals hearing on Nov. 16, 2022, Heaton’s attorney, Kristen Novay, described him as the “quintessential country doctor,” pointing out that he was convicted “with respect to three of his 2,000 patients.”

“The jury was wrongfully instructed as to the law with regard to mens rea, and wrongfully instructed with regard to the conjunctive/disjunctive,” Novay said. The legal term “mens rea” simply means criminal intent.

Novay went on to differentiate Heaton’s office from a “pill mill,” pointing out

that each of the three patients had testified about their extensive pain: “There was clearly a legitimate medical purpose,” she added.

Arguing for the prosecution, Assistant U.S. Attorney Elizabeth Hathaway told the court that mens rea was not part of Heaton’s appeal, thus it had nothing to do with the Supreme Court’s Ruan decision.

As to standards for a “legitimate medical purpose,” Hathaway said that a medical expert testified at trial on the standards for doctors prescribing pain medications in Georgia. She said that, with the patients who testified, Heaton had not conducted physical exams, gathered medical history, or looked for signs of addiction in those patients.

In its ruling on Heaton’s case, the 11th Circuit stated that the prosecution “presented 13 witnesses and overwhelming evidence of Heaton’s unlawful dispensation of controlled substances,” pointing out that “from 2013 through 2015, Heaton prescribed these three patients thousands of pain pills, including hydrocodone, oxycodone and methadone.”

Not only were the forms Heaton supposedly used with pain patients not in their files, the “evidence showed that those patients’ dosages were increased and sometimes prescriptions written early, in spite of evidence that two of the patients had become addicted,” per the ruling.

And Heaton’s third patient, Mike Gowder, had received prescriptions for 15,000 pain pills over a two-year period, with only one record in his file documenting it.

Likewise, the court rejected Heaton’s argument about the use of “or” rather than “and,” citing previous cases and stating that a prescription must have both a legitimate medical purpose and be in the usual course of professional practice. If either is missing, the prescription is not authorized, thus the “or” was proper.

The court found there was an error in the instructions to the jury in Heaton’s case, however, it ruled that the error was “harmless,” meaning that “the Court is satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt that the error did not contribute to the jury’s verdict.”

Regarding a further appeal after last month’s ruling against him, Heaton’s attorneys had not responded to a request for comment by press time.

The deadline to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court is 90 days from the Court of Appeals’ ruling. According to the Supreme Court’s website, it receives requests for hearings in 3,000 cases a year and agrees to hear about 80 of those, or roughly 2.7%.

New Medical Building...from Page 1A

that the new facility shows the Health System's commitment to growing along with the rest of the community to provide the best possible care for residents of the area.

"You can't have a community if you don't have good recreation, good school systems, and good health care," Rowe said. "We are so excited to have this ... It attracts the best surgeons and doctors out here."

Hospital COO Michael Gay's tour group started on the second floor dedicated to obstetrics and gynecology – the new home for the hospital's Women's Health Center. The floor boasts a spacious lobby with a private room for breastfeeding moms waiting for their appointments.

Four doctors in total practice out of the second floor, each having their own office space along with 14 examination rooms, two ultrasound rooms and two procedure rooms.

To help accommodate the needs of both physicians and patients, there are two nursing stations and ample storage space.

With around 650 births in Union County last year, the OB-GYN level was built with local statistics and needs in mind.

"It's beautiful, it's nice,



The 42,000-square-foot Medical Office Building houses orthopedic, OB-GYN and cardiac medical services at the main hospital campus in Blairsville.

it's so easy. They make our job easy," remarked Dr. Kimberly Denton. "We just come to work, see our patients, don't have to worry about anything else. It just makes it nice."

Next up was the third floor, which is being leased out to the Piedmont Heart Institute. At the time of the tour, Piedmont's physicians and staff hadn't quite moved in yet.

The third floor has 17 exam rooms, one procedure room, two echocardiogram rooms with treadmills, one hot lab, and

six provider spaces.

"It's a detailed part of the complex, and Piedmont has been very good to work with during this process of the build, so we're happy to have Piedmont as part of our system here," said Chad Hooper.

Added Bierschenk, "Thank you to everybody back at Georgia Heart for utilizing our services here at Union General. Without having our patients and physicians and staff at Georgia Heart, we couldn't be successful."

Finally, Gay took his group

to orthopedics down on the first floor to show them the two new X-ray machines with computers located behind safety desks.

"It's all electronic, so just as soon as you take an X-ray, orthopedic doctors can come in here and take a look at it, Gay said. "They do not have to wait on the radiologist to read it. Radiologists can literally pull it up sitting at home, take a look at that image, and be able to see it."

Patients on the first level can expect to find two X-ray machines per room for a total of four machines in two rooms, one casting room, and one procedure room.

Twenty exam rooms provide a lot of opportunities to help patients with simple or complex broken bones and similar injuries, and a special emphasis is placed on sports medicine with the Union County, Towns County, Young Harris College, and University of Georgia jerseys and photographs decorating the walls.

Four orthopedic surgeons will practice out of the area, including new arrival Dr. Hamidreza Doroodchi.

Dr. Doroodchi practiced sports medicine in Blue Ridge at Fannin Regional Hospital before moving up to the new Union General building.

His experience is extensive, spanning medical school at the Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Iran; residency at Krankenhaus Barmherzige Bruder in Germany; and fellowship training at the American Sports Medicine Institute in Alabama.

"We really tried to go

first-class with everything we're doing here," Gay said. "We wanted to make it the exact same level (of care as we do) with the hospital."

There are plenty of little details that make a difference in the facility. For example, Gay pointed out the rounded corners in each room, which create a "softer," more cozy ambiance than the sharp corners in most other buildings that also get "beat up" easily with their protruding edges.

Another design choice is the glass on the upstairs balcony overlooking the foyer that serves as a dividing half-wall. After concerns were raised about the clear glass being a potential safety hazard to children, those panels were decorated with stylistic stripes to make them more "solid."

Many folks picture sterile white walls when thinking of medical facilities, but special efforts were taken to design something more welcoming. Photographs and paintings by local artists line the walls of the Orthopedics and OB-GYN levels, and up a big wall visible at the entrance of the building are decorative metallic leaves.

And Union General Hospital's vision for expansion doesn't end with the new Medical Office Building.

According to Bierschenk and Gay, hospital administrators are still planning to add a tower onto the current main building, but the process to make it a reality will have to be completed in phases.

"When we originally looked at that, we were looking

at it being somewhere maybe between \$50 million to \$60 million," Gay said of estimated construction costs. "But as you can imagine, what happened with COVID, now we're up to \$100 million."

Added Bierschenk, "We're actually going to expand the OR. Currently, we're going to expand from four beds to seven beds. The tower will have expanded ER, we'll have a new OB service area, we'll have ICU on the fourth floor, and on the third floor will be all (medical) services."

It's still too early to pin down an approximate date of completion for the tower, but including a new power plant and observation beds, Bierschenk hopes that the entire project will be done within a year or two.

Until then, he and Gay hope that the community will come to take advantage of the new TeleMed services being offered at the hospital.

TeleMed is often met with skepticism for the sole reason that folks would generally rather see their doctor in person, and some problems just can't be fixed electronically.

But for some things, it's easier to streamline the process using TeleMed options. For example, someone with a sinus infection can do a video chat with a provider in the comfort of their own home while having medicine called in on the same day for fast treatment.

As stated above, the new 42,000-square-foot facility is now open to the public, located at 190 Doctors Way on the main campus of Union General Hospital in Blairsville.

Board of Education...from Page 1A



School Police Chief Chad Deyton was happy to present "Extra Mile Awards" to School Resource Officers Jeff McConnell and Chris Jackson in the Feb. 21 School Board meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Georgia Institute of Technology to one day earn a degree in obstetrics and gynecology.

Also recognized that evening were School Resource Officers Jeff McConnell and Chris Jackson of the Union County Schools Police Department, as the two had earned themselves a couple of Extra Mile Awards.

For McConnell, the honor came in the wake of completing the 80-hour extensive general course of instruction in safety, which Police Chief Chad Deyton described as an incredibly difficult class.

To put the accomplishment into perspective, the class started out with about 25 students, but only 12 completed the two-week course. Not only will the course allow McConnell to train incoming officers at the school, but it will also give him the authorization to train others in the community.

Jackson achieved similar status as an instructor by becoming a certified trainer for the D.A.R.E. Program, likewise attending an 80-hour course and receiving an "outstanding student award."

In other news, Superintendent John Hill announced that Transportation Director Kody Owenby had successfully acquired grant money through the Environmental Protection Agency for four electric buses valued at \$375,000 each with an \$80,000 charging station.

The schools have a matching cost of \$50,000 to install the charging station, "which was really our out-of-pocket to accept this grant, and that would be a total grant of \$1.58 million," Hill said.

"This has all been in the last few months," he continued. "This is a trial run basically at the cost of \$50,000 to the district to see what these buses are capable of, just use them on short routes."

"You may not be aware, but we are continuously moving students on our campus throughout the school day, and really, that potentially could save us some money (in the long run)."

Primary School Principal Debbie Decubellis presented some statistics and updates on how the panther cubs are doing.

Currently, 772 students are enrolled at the Primary School, and according to

Literacy Resources Inc., there's been a marked increase in students reaching benchmark levels of reading comprehension and phoneme understanding between the fall and spring semesters.

"To have 162 students not meet benchmark in the fall, and now only 30? That's a huge success," said teacher Kayla Duckworth, who helped Decubellis during her presentation.

The main factor behind academic deficits was found to be a history of repeated absences. During the presentation, a slide demonstrated how much a lack of attendance can negatively impact the learning process.

For example, when a student misses two days per month, they miss 20 days a year, 30 hours of math in one school year, 60 hours of reading and writing in one school year, and over one year total of school by graduation.

"We're not saying we want them to come if they're sick, but we want them to be there if they can," Decubellis said. Attendance rates have dropped since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and "there's a true mixture" between excused and unexcused absences.

"Guys, there is a direct correlation to missing school and poor academic performance, for whatever reason," Hill said. "There are absolutely children who have a lot of challenges with their health, but there's also children (who) miss too much school."

Duckworth suggested raising awareness of the detriments of poor attendance by informing parents, and Board Chair Tony Hunter made the point that the same habit, given the chance to persist to adulthood, would likely result in unreliable employment.

Toward the end of the meeting, Assistant Superintendent Dr. David Murphy revealed that the Department of Education's Facility Review Team had shared that Union County Schools was one of five debt-free systems in the state and had the third-lowest school millage rate in Georgia.

That said, it came as no surprise that the School Board voted unanimously for the Five-Year Local Facilities Plan to continue without change.

After that, the public

forum allowed Vincent Peterson to voice his concerns over board transparency and the short-notice availability of meeting agendas.

"The public barely has the 24 hours before the meeting to register to speak about an action item on the agenda," he said. "Why is the content of the action item not posted on the website before the board meeting? This does not give the board or the public sufficient time to study the action items covered in the agenda."

"Currently, the public is left in the dark as to what the board is doing until after the actions have been (decided). This is not the way that confidence in the workings of the School Board is achieved with the public."

Before adjournment, Superintendent John Hill proposed an amendment to the agenda in order to discuss a treasury suggestion.

"I would like for the board to consider ... moving a portion of the money that we have in the General Fund into the short-term notes to help generate a little bit more interest revenue that can help offset some of the inflation costs we have received now, which is close to 6%," Hill said.

The board was receptive to the idea, and the vote to adopt it was unanimous.

"Hopefully that'll save our taxpayers some money," Hunter said.

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

Bell Ringing Union County Old Courthouse



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