

Renowned concert promoter Mike Blackwell leaves lasting legacy

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
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When Michael “Mike” Blackwell passed away last month, the North Georgia Mountains lost a mountain of a man who helped bring considerable joy to the area as the longtime concert promoter at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

Blackwell, 69, died at Piedmont Columbus Regional Hospital – Northside Campus, following a brief illness on Feb. 22.

“I’ve been in business with him for around 13 or 14 years, and he rented the Music Hall from me and brought acts in for concerts,” Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said.

Thanks to Blackwell, many of the acts who’ve graced the stage at various points over the last few years have been industry giants, including Hank Williams Jr., Vince Gill, Jamey Johnson, Josh Turner, Travis Tritt, the Charlie Daniels Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd and ZZ Top, to name a few.

The many acts brought to the Fairgrounds have helped not only the venue gain in popularity but also area businesses gain customers due

to the crowds that each sold-out show brought to town.

Of course, the Fairgrounds will continue to have concerts, but Blackwell and his promotional talents will be missed, especially his ability to bring so many people together around music.

“We have had some sold-out concerts several times, and we are going to continue having acts ourselves,” Thomason said. “I have other promoters that want to come on board, so we plan on continuing concerts. We have to move forward.

“He’s been a great friend and business partner, and working with him has been a wonderful experience. He’s brought a lot of business to Towns County, and not just to the Fairgrounds – all the businesses have benefited from the work that he did.”

Charlie Stephens was Blackwell’s best friend for a lifetime, and he has been to the majority of the shows that he has put on over the decades.

“About 50 years ago, Mike and I got acquainted, and he’s been a large part of my life every day,” Stephens said. “I attended almost every concert that he had, probably 99 percent of them.

“Mike was a good guy,

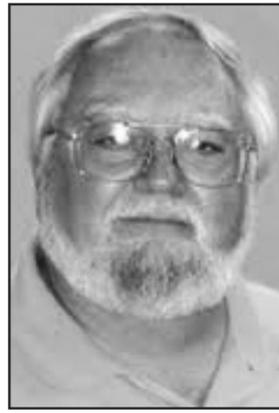
and his funeral had a lot of company and friends. He was my very best friend, and there was no doubt about it. He took care of me, and we had a lot of good times and a few bad times.

“Most of his shows were great. Sometimes he had a loser, and he would just accept it and go on with it. He had many more winners than he did losers. He enjoyed most of the shows we did, and he had a memory like an encyclopedia book. He could tell you who the lead singer of the Temptations was 40 years ago.”

With Blackwell gone, Stephens said he is proud of the memories the two made together, but he does not believe that the shows will be the same or have the same connection they used to when his friend put them on.

“There won’t never be another Mike Blackwell,” Stephens said. “They say the shows must go on, but I don’t think they will go on the same without him.”

According to his obituary, “Mike was a well-known concert promoter in the Columbus community. But he was equally known as a husband, father, son, brother, Pop Pop, uncle, coach, matchmaker, son-



Mike Blackwell

in-law intimidator, instigator, card player, farmer, sheep herder, chicken man, teacher, night club owner, entrepreneur, gardener, politician, risk taker, bread truck driver, carpet layer, Spanish speaker, world’s worst driver, and an especially loyal friend.”

DDA Board...from Page 1A

another developer, meaning the DDA would potentially need to bring in dirt from elsewhere to level the parking lot.

In addition to getting parking lot design quotes, the DDA Board will be working in the near term to figure out how much usable dirt the Haralson parcel could potentially bring to the parking lot project in the event board members decide to go that route.

Cockerham purchased the land nearly two years ago with intentions of building a mixed-

use commercial development dubbed “Courthouse View,” though he put the project on indefinite hold in February, citing rising building costs.

During the design phase, Cockerham calculated about \$3 million in construction costs, which would have allowed him to recover his investment in retail rental income and condo sales. But when he bid the project, four contractors came back with bids in the \$5 million-\$5.5 million range.

At that point, Cockerham,

his architect and his builders went back to the drawing board to cut costs on the building design before the final contract could be awarded. Unfortunately for the project, it remained cost-prohibitive at about \$4 million after re-bidding.

The 15,000-square-foot building would have featured three floors, 10 retail spaces for future businesses, four two-bedroom condos, and an outward aesthetic meant to blend in with the Historic Downtown area.

Belanger...from Page 1A



What was once known as the “book swap” is now the Betty Belanger Library, named after the woman who started the venture. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

sharing fond memories of my mother.

“She really encouraged reading and instilled reading into my life and the lives of others. I’m thankful that everyone decided to put her name above the book swap and name the library after her.”

Betty Belanger was an integral part of the community who reveled in reading to students at Woody Gap Schools and advocating for literacy in the area.

Her clear passion also manifested with the inception of the book swap program at the Suches Community Center, which influenced residents to read more often and enjoy the worlds and education found within literature.

More than 30 people showed up to the dedication to honor Belanger and her contributions to the community

and individual lives.

“As a librarian, she retired here and became a mentor to all of the kids,” said Lexi Adkins, organizer of the event. “The kids would all sit around and look up to her while she would read.

“When you have a small community, there really isn’t a lot of things going on, and when the Community Center was built, she decided to start a book swap.

“Everybody started donating books, and every Saturday, it is open for people to come in and swap their books. She began that whole thing, so we thought it was only fitting to call it the Betty Belanger Library and no longer the book swap.”

To honor Belanger at the dedication, each table was decorated with her favorite hobbies, which included

hiking, bird watching and other activities that she enjoyed in her free time.

Belanger was also a Gaddistown Homemaker, which is a group of ladies who contribute to their community by practicing noble traditions, helping to preserve the natural beauty of the area, and raising money for the community, including Woody Gap and the Suches Fire Department.

The meal provided for dedication attendees was made using Belanger’s recipes, and copies of those recipes were distributed to anyone wanting them.

Above all else, the family wants Belanger to be remembered as a reader, because that is what she loved to do most and committed her life to promoting.

Important Notice from Union General Health Systems

For the safety and wellbeing of our patients and staff due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19), Union General Hospital and Chatuge Regional Hospital, will both be on lockdown effective immediately. All doors will be locked and remain locked except the Main Entrance/Emergency Entrance for Union General Hospital and Main Entrance for Chatuge Regional Hospital. No visitors will be allowed until further notice.

If you need treatment, you will be asked a series of questions and your temperature will be taken.

If you have a fever and respiratory symptoms and have traveled within a widespread affected area within the past 14 days, or had exposure to someone with a confirmed COVID-

19 case, please call us from your car at (706) 745-2111 or ask for a mask immediately!

Most elective procedures will continue for now, but please consult your physician to discuss whether or not your procedure should be delayed. COVID-19 screenings and precautions will be taken before, during and after your procedure.

Union General Health System owns and operates 21 affiliated facilities within the Tri-State area. All of the other affiliated facilities have taken precautionary COVID-19 measures as well. Some of these include, the Union County Nursing Home and Chatuge Regional Nursing Home are no longer allowing any visitors into their facility to help protect

the health of their residents. The Union General Wellness Center has closed indefinitely to help reduce the spread of the virus. The Union General Child Care is only providing care for health care worker employees at this time so they can continue working and providing care to our community. All of the affiliated clinics and doctors’ offices will be screening their patients before providing treatment to help reduce the spread of the COVID-19.

Union General Hospital’s community events/meetings have been cancelled until further notice. For more information on the COVID-19 and the latest updates to Union General Health Systems affiliated facilities, please visit www.UnionGeneralHealthSystem.com.