

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Hospital looking to sell acreage to support expansion

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Union General Health System is hunting a buyer for the 576.1-acre River Bend Farm Road parcel the hospital purchased in 2014 under former CEO Mike Gowder.

Any sale would primarily benefit the ongoing construction efforts of the Health System, to include a planned four-story addition at Union General Hospital to accommodate expanded services for a growing region.

At the time of the 2014 purchase, Gowder convinced Hospital Board members to buy the acreage with a vision of turning the property into a retirement village of sorts, according to testimony in the federal trial that resulted in Gowder's conviction for

prescription drug fraud in 2019.

The 2014 purchase cost the hospital \$2.6 million, so selling the property now at its current valuation would net a major return, as the land was revaluated last year to \$6.6 million.

Importantly, the recently advertised request for proposals is for a "potential purchase" of the property only, meaning the hospital is weighing its options without committing to a sale.

Should the hospital decide not to sell after considering all proposals, it does not have any other plans for the property, which would remain "just an asset we own," Union General CEO Kevin said.

"We currently own 78 acres here on campus, so we have some property here that we are using for our future growth," Bierschenk said.

According to the proposal, the hospital "reserves the right to reject any or all proposals, waive any informalities in the proposals received, and to accept any proposal which in their sole opinion may be in the best interests of the citizens and communities served by UGH.

"UGH does not obligate itself to accept a proposal solely on the basis of highest financial value or any other criteria."

Proposals are being accepted by Atlanta-based law firm Morris, Manning and Martin LLP, with a submission deadline of April 25. The approval process for the potential sale would include a recommendation by a specially designated committee to the Hospital Board.

Interested parties are being asked to describe, among other things, "plans for the



Above is the 576.1-acre parcel, outlined in light blue, that Union General is offering to sell on River Bend Farm Road, excluding the smaller outlined piece in the middle owned by Union County Government.

Super Chef Showdown raises \$9,100 for Hope House



Youth members of the God's Club team reacting to the news that they had won in both the Judges and People's Choice award categories for the March 12 Super Chef Showdown. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Despite a snowstorm threatening attendance for the annual Super Chef Showdown

at First United Methodist Church of Union County on Saturday, March 12, the Hope House benefit enjoyed its largest ever turnout.

The Showdown has been

going on for about 10 years now, though 2021's celebration was canceled over COVID-19 concerns.

But this year, according to Showdown Board Chairman Kenydown, the event was not only back but better than ever to make up for lost time, with plenty of terrific food, fun and goodwill "to reach further and deeper into our community to help those who are in need."

To understand how deep the roots of the Showdown run, one need only look at the principles of the contest's organizing group, Hope House.

On the homepage of https://hopehouse-unioncounty.com, people can find the Bible verse Timothy 4:10: "For to this end, we toil and struggle, because we have our hopes set on the living God, who is the savior of all people."

The toil and struggle in question is done on behalf of Union County's needy population, be they transients, low-income residents or the

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Local veterans team up for new Memorial Park at Meeks



L-R: Mike Streckert, Bob Williams, Chuck Honaker, Ed Crenshaw, Lamar Paris and Richard Hoibraten. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Representatives and members of seven local Veterans Service Organizations met at the upper baseball field at Meeks Park on March 4, along

with the architect/designer, also a veteran, for a presentation of a proposed Union County Veterans Memorial Park at that location.

The new park will augment the War Memorial Park located next to the Board

of Education in Blairsville, which has limited parking and can be difficult for newcomers to find, according to Chuck Honaker, who serves on the new park committee and is commander of local Veterans of

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Council OKs Coosa agreement, considers new aircraft hangar

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Blairsville City Council members approved a new Intergovernmental Agreement with Coosa Water at their meeting inside City Hall on Tuesday, March 8.

Several months ago, Crossing Creeks RV Park, located on Old Blue Ridge Highway outside Blairsville city limits, requested sewer-only service from the City of Blairsville because it already had water service provided by Coosa Water.

It came to the council's attention that the same setup

occurred in a neighboring county, but the municipality there that granted sewer-only service was unable to induce late-paying customers to settle their accounts because they could not use water service disconnection as leverage.

To prevent that of difficulty, Blairsville devised a plan such that Coosa Water would collect both water and sewer service payments and pay the city its due for a minimal monthly processing fee.

However, without having that plan in writing in the form of an Intergovernmental Agreement, Coosa Water was not legally bound, so the

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Towns and Union students speak with confidence in '22 Top of Georgia contest

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS – After many hours of practice over a preparing eight-week course preparing for the annual Top of Georgia Speaking Contest, area middle and high school students celebrated the culmination of their hard work on Tuesday, March 15, in the Hatcher College at Young Harris College.

During training, students learned how to effectively communicate ideas in a public fashion to assist them throughout their lives by developing skills that will benefit everything from building

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2022 Top of Georgia Speech Contest Middle School participants Katelyn Walls, Madilyn Walls, Sophia Gobin, Jolie Schmitt and Noah Lynch. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Wreaths Across America mobile exhibit comes to Blairsville

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Remember America's fallen veterans. Honor those who serve. Teach children the value of freedom. Remember, Honor, and Freedom. That is the mission of Wreaths Across America, a national initiative that began with one man's simple display of respect and gratitude.

Wreaths Across America was started in 1992 by Morrill Worcester, owner of Worcester Wreath Company, which is

"tucked away in a quiet corner of Maine."

With a surplus of wreaths at the end of the '92 holiday season, Worcester unknowingly started a national program of remembrance, honor and awareness with the laying of those surplus wreaths on soldiers' graves in an older section of Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

Wreaths Across America became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in 2007 and has

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The Wreaths Across America Mobile Education Exhibit welcomed students and the general public at the Sports Center last Thursday. Photo by Mark Smith

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Memorial Park...from Page 1A

Foreign Wars Post #7394.

“What’s great is (the new Union County Veterans Memorial Park) will be more visible to the kids,” Honaker said.

The proposed new Veterans Memorial Park would be located on property at the southeast corner of the upper ballfield area where the Vietnam Moving Wall was displayed three years ago and where younger children have, in the past, participated in the

local Easter Egg Hunt.

Funding for the park will be coming from fundraising done by the various Veterans Service Organizations involved in the effort, and the county would be supplying the property to host the park.

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris attended the gathering and said that the county wants to do “whatever we can do to honor veterans and all the veterans that have fallen.”

“We’ve pretty well

determined to set aside this property right here, so let’s just see what you can come up with and see what we can do to help,” Paris said to the veterans gathered that Friday.

Navy Seabees Island X-3 Cmdr. Ed Crenshaw introduced Registered Architect Mike Streckert, who created the proposed design. Streckert is a retired commander with the Civil Engineer Corps of the U.S. Navy Reserve.

“First of all, I want to thank everyone. I have to say, in 35 years as an architect, and over 20 years in the military, this is probably the biggest honor I’ve had. It’s great to be able to give something back to all of us,” said Streckert, speaking as a military veteran to the veteran assembly.

“We all stood up at some point in time and (committed to military service), so it’s good to see the county wanting to recognize that,” he said.

Streckert handed out design concept packets with artist renderings to each VSO leader and presented

his proposal to Paris and the gathered veterans.

“What we have is a circular memorial site with a compass rose in the center – compass rose reflecting everywhere around the world that everybody’s been,” said Streckert, referring to military veterans.

On the south side of the compass will be the six service monuments supporting service flags on flagpoles standing for the six military branches, three on each side of the centered Union County monument, which will be supporting the American flag displayed on a 25-foot flagpole.

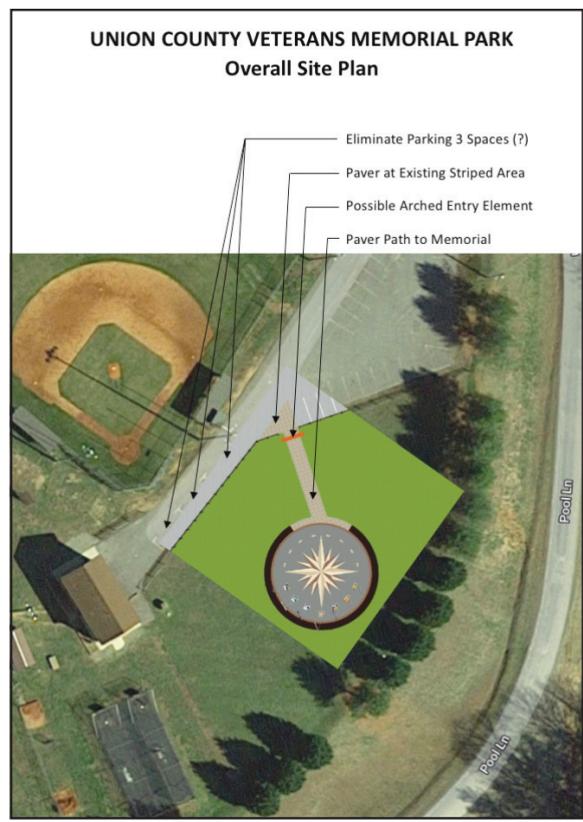
The county monument will serve as the dedication monument for the park, to read:

“This park is dedicated to the men and women of Union County, who stood the watch against all who might threaten our freedoms and our homeland. Let all who come here never forget their sacrifice and always remember that while all of them gave some, some of them gave all.”

“So, on one side of that (dedication) monument, you have three services, on the other side you have the other three services” Streckert reiterated.

“The services are in order of precedence (from left to right),” he said, meaning the first service founded will occupy the far-left side and the last service founded will occupy the far-right side.

So, United States Army first, then United States Marine Corps, United States Navy,



United States Air Force, United States Coast Guard and, finally, United States Space Force, which was founded Dec. 20, 2019.

To complete the circle, Veterans Service Organization monuments will be placed around the north side of the compass rose, with all monuments facing the center to signify solidarity.

A discussion about

placement of walkways and possible materials to be used, as well as an impromptu cost-benefit dialogue, followed Streckert’s presentation.

For more information on the project or to donate, call VFW Post #7394 Cmdr. Chuck Honaker at 706-897-3144, or Navy Seabee Island X-3 Cmdr. Ed Crenshaw at 706-897-2649.

Blairsville Council...from Page 1A

language of the agreement needed to be hammered out by the attorneys and agreed to by both parties.

The agreement has finally been worked out and approved by both parties, which City Attorney Marvin Harkins described as a “one-off” arrangement.

Moving along, Wayne Wolke addressed the council concerning a project he and his partner, Cory Payne, have been working on to build an approximately 100-by-100 aircraft hangar on the north side of the Blairsville Airport across the tarmac from the new W.C. Nelson Terminal.

Wolke submitted a two-page Memorandum of Understanding to council members, which Harkins referred to as an “agreement to agree,” that is, for the city to allow Wolke and Payne to “continue down the path of negotiating (with the city) a (land) lease for that property” on which the proposed hangar would sit.

The details of the project are still being worked out, which Wolke said is the reason they are not ready to come to the table at this time. However, the pair want to know that their efforts are not going to be in vain when they do have a solid plan put together.

All council members present voted to adopt the Memorandum of Understanding.

In other news, AirMedCare Network and LifeForce Air Ambulance Representative Shelley Eyerly addressed the council to offer city employees a discounted rate on air ambulance services on a payroll-deduction basis.

Eyerly said she was authorized to give city employees the senior rate of \$65/year, as opposed to \$85/year. Eyerly said she was aware that both Union and Towns counties have relationships with AirLifeGeorgia via AirMethods and that this would be supplemental air ambulance coverage.



Blairsville City Councilwomen Rhonda Mahan and Kayla Hemphill voting in the March 8 regular meeting.

Photo by Mark Smith

In an emergency where more than one air ambulance is necessary, if a patient is transported by a service of which they are not a member, they could be responsible for the full cost of the medical emergency transport, which could be tens of thousands of dollars.

So, to provide this coverage possibility for city workers, the council voted to approve adding the AirMedCare/LifeForce membership to the city’s benefit package as an optional employee deduction.

Fiscal Year 2021 auditing services performed by Rushton CPAs was ratified by the council. City Clerk Kaye McCann said the city was done with the audit and that the cost this year was \$26,000, which is \$2,000 more than last year.

The council also voted to approve the change to Standby Service Solutions for maintenance/inspection contracts.

“This is a company that services all of our generators at the wastewater plant, and also at the water treatment plant,” Mayor Jim Conley said. “We’re saving quite a bit of money by going with this company.”

An amendment to the 2023-27 Airport Capital Improvement Plan to include the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding of \$159,000 per year was approved by the council. Conley said this was more stimulus money for the

city.

The council approved the city sick leave policy such that employees may donate some of their sick leave hours to a “bank” to be used by employees, with committee approval, in dire situations should anyone run out of sick leave time.

Moving along, Conley said Blairsville Police Chief Michael “Bear” Baxter had recommended a security system at City Hall.

Wolke offered to buy the equipment for City Hall and install a system that would be on a 24-hour continuous loop DVR, which would eliminate the need for costly remote monitoring.

“Sounds like a no-brainer right there,” Conley said. The council approved the offer and thanked Wolke for his generosity.

Finally, the council approved the reinstatement of benefits for Blairsville Police Officer Dustin Walker. Walker has been a part-time employee of BPD since 2019, until he went full-time last month. He was a full-time officer for five years up until March of 2016.

Baxter said Walker is one of the most trained-up officers in the department and has attained degrees in criminal justice and business.

The Blairsville City Council meets on the second Tuesday of every month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall.



Tips for Parkinson’s Disease Awareness Month

Written by Leslie A. Chambers, President & CEO, American Parkinson Disease Association

Did you know that April is Parkinson’s Disease (PD) Awareness Month? Did you also know that although a tremor is a common symptom of PD, not everyone with the disease has one? Or that PD is not just an older person’s disease? Parkinson’s disease Awareness Month is the perfect time to learn a bit more about this disease that affects more than one million people in the U.S.

You can make a difference this April – or any time -- by taking action in a host of ways: Spreading awareness about

PD! Share an article from a reliable source like apdaparkinson.org on your social media or through email or even just start a conversation about PD with a friend or neighbor. Learn some of the most common signs and symptoms of PD. Get involved and get to know your local PD community! Register today for the APDA Georgia Optimism Walk taking place on Saturday, April 23, 2022 at Pernoshal Park, 4575 North Shallowford Road, Dunwoody, GA. Visit apdaparkinson.org/GA to sign-up.

If you are concerned

about symptoms that you or your loved one has noticed, make this the month when you finally schedule an appointment with a neurologist.

Reach out to someone you know who has PD or is personally affected by the disease to say hello, offer support, or just lend an ear.

If you’re able, show your support with a donation of any size to make sure important programs and support that help people with PD live life to the fullest can continue. Visit www.apdaparkinson.org/GA to make a gift.

Hospital Property...from Page 1A

property” and “how your proposed use of the property will support the Union County Community,” such that the Health System may evaluate proposals depending on what each brings to the community.

As to why the Health System has decided to investigate selling the acreage, Bierschenk said the timing just seems right, both from a market and construction timeline standpoint.

Real estate is a particularly hot commodity of late, Bierschenk said, and the hospital is presently building a large new facility on its main campus and planning a four-story tower expansion of Union General Hospital to be built over the next couple years.

“We’ve got a lot of construction going on,” Bierschenk said. “We’re building a medical office building that started out to be about a \$10 million investment, and with cost increases due to COVID, short supply of product and steel and everything, our costs have skyrocketed, and we added some more square footage.

“And then, we got approval (from the state) to start looking at adding onto the hospital. So, those two large construction projects alone –

we need to figure out how to pay for it.”

Union General will be expanding its main hospital “because we’re running out of beds,” a need that, though talks have been ongoing since before the pandemic, came to the forefront during the recent COVID-19 patient surges stretching the local facility to well beyond its max capacity.

Speaking on the proposed hospital expansion, Bierschenk said, “Where the helicopter sits today, we would add a four-story tower,” to include additional observation beds for the emergency room, operating room, labor and delivery unit and intensive care unit.

“We’ve been (seriously) talking about this for the last year,” Bierschenk said. “We got drawings together, we got pricing together, submitted to the state, and our Certificate of Need was approved in January.”

So far, preliminary plans have been drawn up, and now, the hospital is further pricing out the expansion, examining financing options, and looking to get official plans drawn up to bid construction, which could begin as early as first quarter of 2023 and take two years to complete.

As for the medical office building currently being built, Bierschenk said the hospital anticipates construction will conclude at the end of October, and that everyone should be moved into the building by January ‘23.

The new three-story building will feature 42,000 square feet to house existing and new medical offerings, serving as both an expansion and a way to free up space for growth within the main hospital building and elsewhere.

Any potential sale of the hospital’s acreage on River Bend Farm Road would not include a 3.382-acre parcel located in the middle of the hospital property that is owned by Union County Government, which the county purchased in 2020 to protect the hospital’s larger investment.

On behalf of the county, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris decided to purchase the smaller parcel, consisting of a life estate for one of its previous owners, saying it was his intent to keep the property unified with the hospital’s land so as not to diminish Union General’s holding.

The county purchase was controversial at the time because of its proximity to

Gowder, who purchased it himself in 2014 and sold it to another individual about half a year before the county bought it, and because of the life estate.

Keeping with its original intent, the county said last week it plans to recover its \$750,000 investment by offering to sell the 3.382 acres in the middle

to whichever party the hospital decides to sell its much larger parcel, if such a sale takes place.

The Health System’s three-page request for proposals on the 576.1 acres may be viewed at <https://bit.ly/3vCEwQ3>.

“We’re just looking at future growth of our

community,” Bierschenk said. “I truly do believe we have a great community, and I believe our local elected officials are doing a great job; that’s why the growth is here.

“And you have to have health care. Two things people are moving for is health care and education, and we have both.”

Georgia Legislative Session Update: Week 10

The Georgia House of Representatives reconvened for Legislative Day 28, otherwise known as Crossover Day, on Tuesday, March 15, 2022. Crossover Day is always one of the longest days of the entire session as it is the last day for legislation to pass out of its chamber of origin and still be eligible to become law this year. In preparation, we dedicated the day before as a committee work day to ensure that legislation had ample opportunity to be considered ahead of this deadline. During Crossover Day, we spent the entire day in the House Chamber debating and voting on legislation, and we passed almost 60 bills and resolutions by the time we adjourned around 11 p.m.

My colleagues and I passed House Bill 1354, the Wrongful Conviction Compensation Act, this week to help streamline and standardize the compensation process for wrongful convictions in our state. This bipartisan legislation would create the Wrongful Conviction Compensation Review Panel under the authority of the state’s Claims Advisory Board, and this panel would review claims and provide recommendations to the Claims Advisory Board for those who have been wrongfully convicted. While we can’t give people back the time that they served for their wrongful conviction, however, this measure would provide a pathway for a standardized process and reparations for these individuals, which is long overdue in our state.

The House also passed legislation on Crossover Day to help low-income Georgia students access financial aid to complete their undergraduate degrees. House Bill 1435 would allow part-time and full-time college students to apply for a needs-based financial aid program to fill an outstanding financial aid gap, which is the amount of money remaining after qualified institutions account for the cost of attendance and other funds. After their other funding has been applied to their schooling, these students could apply for up to \$2,500 in grant funding to cover this gap. This grant program would be offered for students at all University System of Georgia and Technical College System of Georgia schools, as well as non-proprietary institutions that are eligible for Tuition Equalization Grants. Students who are close to earning their college degrees should not miss out on this opportunity to cross the finish line due to

a lack of financial assistance, and I believe that this legislation could help thousands of Georgia college students reach their graduation day.

Late in the evening on Crossover Day, we also passed legislation to expand grant funding opportunities to low-wealth K-12 school systems that need help building and maintaining their schools. House Bill 1482 would revise the eligibility criteria for project-specific capital outlay grants for low-wealth school systems, which is a grant program that allows K-12 school systems access to funding for school construction. Currently, 44 school systems, mostly in rural areas with low populations, desperately need access to this funding. With low SPLOST revenues, these schools cannot afford to build new facilities in today’s expensive construction market, but these grants would help these systems replace their aging buildings to offer better learning environments for our students.

As many of us know, the state has experienced challenges in hiring and retaining workers, especially nurses and doctors, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exasperated this issue. Therefore, we passed two bills on Crossover Day to support health care systems and workers alike. House Bill 1520 would create the Georgia Council on Addressing Health Care Workforce Challenges, and this council would actively meet until July 2025 to provide strategic thought, leadership and recommendations on the future of the health care workforce in Georgia. We also passed House Bill 1533 to provide protections for health care professionals who seek to address their career fatigue and wellness confidentially through a professional mental health program.

Additionally, we passed House Bill 918, which would create the Georgia Rare Disease Advisory Council within the Department of Public Health to advise the General Assembly and state agencies on the needs of those with rare diseases in Georgia. This council would meet at least every quarter, offer opportunities for public comment and convene public hearings. The council would also consult with experts, evaluate recommendations, publish resources and identify best practices. Starting in June 2023, the council would publish an annual report about its work and its recommendations, which would be provided to the governor and General Assembly



and be made available for public comment. Approximately one in 10 Georgians currently live with a rare disease, and this legislation would provide hope and greater resources for those Georgians.

House Bill 1484 was also passed on the House floor, and this bill would create a pilot program to help diagnose, treat, and expand coverage for pediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infection (PANDAS) and pediatric acute onset neuropsychiatric syndrome (PANS). Advocates estimate that approximately 13,000 Georgia children are suffering from these illnesses that cause a sudden onset of a variety of neuropsychiatric symptoms, such as tics and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Administered by the State Health Benefit Plan, this three-year pilot program would begin in 2024 and help treat up to 100 individuals annually using intravenous immune globulin therapy and other treatment methods. The Georgia Department of Community Health would work with a patient advocacy organization to create outreach and educational resources for the eligible population and pediatric providers. At the end of the program’s first year, the department would submit an annual report to the House and Senate Health and Human Services committees with extensive details to include covered treatments, cost, as well as the total number of participants, providers and claims. In 2019, the Georgia House established a study committee to delve into PANS and PANDAS, and this study committee found that patients and families face barriers for treatment due to medical providers being unfamiliar with these diseases and unreliable medical coverage by insurers. This new program would help spread awareness and educate the medical community and insurance providers about the evidence-based legitimacy of these diagnoses, and in turn, help more families access treatment for these debilitating diseases.

After Crossover Day, the House convened for three more legislative days this week, and our committees began considering legislation that passed in the State Senate before the Crossover deadline, and the Senate began reviewing House bills before the week ended. We will spend the remainder of the session meeting in our respective committees and on the House floor to consider these Senate bills, as well as give final approval to House legislation that could undergo changes by the Senate. I encourage you to contact me regarding bills that may be up for consideration during these final weeks of the session. You can reach me at my Capitol office at 404-656-0325, or via email at Stan.Gunter@House.GA.Gov or house.ga.gov.

As always, thank you for allowing me to serve as your representative.

NGTC Spring Job Fairs open to the community featuring local companies



North Georgia Technical College is hosting a job fair at the Blairsville, Clarkesville, and Currahee campuses and invites the public to attend.

The job fairs will be held from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., April

11 at the Blairsville campus (Great Hall); April 13 at the Clarkesville campus (Industrial Technology Center); and April 19 at the Currahee campus (Conference Center).

Each job fair will feature local companies offering on-site interviews for part-time and full-time positions.

For more information or to reserve a company booth, contact Emily Sullens, student affairs specialist, at emily.sullens@northgatech.edu or 706-754-7728.

Super Chef Showdown...from Page 1A

homeless. Services include lodging, utility bills, heating and air assistance, medical treatments and prescriptions, transportation needs and more.

It's worth noting that Hope House itself was founded by a variety of churches of different denominations. Familiar names like the First United Methodist Church, All Saints Lutheran Church, Antioch Baptist Church and Grace Presbyterian are only some of the sponsors.

"People were going from church to church to try to get assistance, so (those churches) hatched a plan to form Hope House as a one-stop-shop for those who are in need in the county," Engle said. "And so, by the churches and local businesses supporting us, people were able to commit to one location."

"They were looking for different ways to raise funds, and the Super Chef Showdown was born. It's been an excellent endeavor, and we've done well with it."

Contributing to the success of the Showdown, and by extension Hope House and residents in need, has been the annual showing of support by a giving community, evidenced by all the different chefs lending time – and food – to the event. "This started purely as churches, and now you see we've got the Blairsville Police, the Sheriff's Department," All Saints Pastor Dave Wesche said. "We've got other community organizations that are part of it now."

"So, it's not just a church thing; this is a community-based organization. We don't want to just help people in a confined way."

Competition was fierce but friendly between a whole host of chefs, precisely 17, including individuals as well as representatives from various local organizations:

The Woman's Enrichment Center; Faith-Based Information Sharing & Analysis Organization; Union General Hospital Rehabilitation Center; Positive Pathways; New Union Baptist Church; Full Throttle Ministries; Ben Johnson; Larry Queen; Melaleuca; Goodies From the Heart; God's Club; Appalachian Shrine Club; Blairsville Police Department; Union County Sheriff's Office; Valor Clinic;



The Blairsville Police Department always participates in the Super Chef Showdown benefiting Hope House, including Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter and Assistant Chief Shawn Dyer. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

All Saints Lutheran; and, of course, United Methodist's own contribution.

And the menu was as diverse as the guest list. For example, chicken chili and parmesan meatballs added a little spice to combat the wintery day, and hearty Brunswick stew and corn chowder warmed guests up nicely.

After enjoying their savory samples, eventgoers enjoyed sweet treats like strawberry cupcakes filled with white chocolate mousse and chewy pecan praline.

Indeed, it seemed there was a little bit of everything to suit all tastes, and everyone loved the time they spent at the church that day.

Wayne and Kitty Jones of Blue Ridge braved the drive in the snow because they are members of First United's flock and "wanted to support our group from the church," with Kitty noting that "it's all for a good cause."

Informative slideshows on either side of the main stage touted the event's "celebrity judges," who certainly lived up to their reputations.

First on the list was James "BBQ" Grubbs, a local chef with over three decades of experience and a feature on Netflix's "The American Barbecue Showdown."

Chef Kevin Sharpe of the Bean Pod Shoppe graduated from North Georgia Technical College, where he earned his Chef's Coat in Culinary Arts.

As the owner of the Young Harris Wing House, Adam Daniel has experience with a variety of dishes and is no stranger to gustatory innovation.

And area Chef Andy Comer has experienced a

variety of cultures and recipes over the span of 20 years by traveling across the United States via freight train.

Gracing the stage was the Southwind Band performing bluegrass and classic rock sensations that had the crowd getting into the groove by singing along to well-known and loved songs like "My Girl" by The Temptations.

A few particularly spry and spirited guests took a chance and busted out some moves to the Osborne Brothers hit "Rocky Top," eliciting giggles and claps from fellow diners.

Showdown winners were announced in two categories. First up was the Judges' Choice Award, with First Place going to God's Club with their deluxe cupcakes, while Second Place went to the Faith-Based Information Sharing & Analysis Organization and their caramelized pork.

The People's Choice Award was decided by evaluating the tip jars at every organization's table. In First Place was Dave and Sally Wesche of All Saints Lutheran for their crack chicken chili. In Second Place was United Methodist's Men for their corn and clam chowder with hushpuppies. And in Third Place, God's Club tasted an even sweeter secondary victory.

Between the silent auction and ticket sales, Hope House was able to raise \$9,103 in funds, which will be used to benefit those in need in the form of everything from amenities like lodging to critical medical care.

To become a sponsor or sign up for next year's Super Chef Showdown, visit <https://hopehouse-unioncounty.com/>.

Wreaths Across America...from Page 1A



Local Vietnam Veterans Ron Tanner, Jim Reed and J.W. Preston, with Stefan Brann of Wreaths Across America Mobile Education Exhibit on March 17. Photo by Mark Smith

grown ever since, transforming from its humble beginnings into a national program supported by thousands of volunteer U.S. veterans and American patriots alike.

On Thursday, March 17, the Wreaths Across America Mobile Education Exhibit visited Blairsville, spending the day in front of the Union County Sports Center greeting student groups from Union County High School in the morning and opening to the public after 11 a.m.

Organization Driver/Ambassador Stefan Brann and Ambassador Jennifer Merrill spend weeks at a time on the road thoughtfully delivering remembrance of, honor to, and education about Americans who have fought and died in defense of their country and values.

Neither Brann nor Merrill are veterans.

"We probably set a record today," Brann said. "We had over 300 people through the trailer – around 168 students and 132 of the general public – and we pinned and welcomed home 27 Vietnam Veterans. It was an incredible day."

Part of the initiative of the Mobile Education Exhibit is to recognize and "welcome home" Vietnam Veterans who were severely mistreated both mentally and physically upon their return from the Vietnam conflict by the very people they were serving.

Their recognition and welcome home were signified last week by the pinning of a 50th Anniversary Vietnam Commemorative Medal on their person and the gifting of a challenge coin within a handshake in a small public ceremony by Brann and Merrill

inside the exhibit trailer.

The medal was officially commemorated by former President Donald Trump on Memorial Day 2017.

Though they may never forget the cold reception they experienced upon returning home from war, the hope is that maybe they can forgive and find peace of mind. It's also a way for Americans to say, "We were wrong. Please accept our apology and our thanks for your service."

American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121 hosted the Wreaths Across America event. Post Cmdr. Dan Wickersham and officers/members Jim Reed, Ron Tanner, Marcus Tuschel, J.W. Preston, David Patterson, Glen Cousins, Linda Cacchioli, Richard Snapp, and Mike and Kathy Merritt spoke to students and interacted with the public.

North Georgia Honor Guard Member Mark Haverson was there representing Bugles Across America as well.

"Blairsville hospitality was amazing," Brann said. "Our vet hosts today invited us to dinner, so we went and had dinner on them. What a great community. I'd move here in a heartbeat. It's patriotic, friendly – we were overwhelmed."

Added Brann, "The teaching aspect of (the exhibit) – that's Jennifer and myself traveling the country, doing a little of what I call 'Wreaths Across America Awareness. There are a lot of people from Maine to California that have never heard of us. That's why we're out here doing what we're doing every day."

"We've been laying wreaths for 30 years. This past Dec. 18, 2021, was our 30th wreath-laying at Arlington

National Cemetery," he said, noting that the one-millionth wreath was laid at Arlington in December 2012, 20 years after the effort's inception.

Today, the count is well over two million wreaths, and Brann and Merrill said thousands of wreaths are laid every year at World War II cemeteries in Europe and in American territories, like Guam, as well.

Merrill said the duo travel three or four weeks at a time, then are relieved for a short period by another crew that flies in from Maine. Then they're back at it a week or two later.

"We've had so many requests – it's just been so well received by communities," Merrill said. "Everybody's so excited about (a visit by the Wreaths Across America Mobile Education Exhibit). We had almost 200 schoolchildren come through (today). That's huge."

Brann also mentioned how impressed they were that Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill made an appearance, as did High School Administrative Assistant and veteran Art McCann.

National Wreaths Across America Day this year will be on Dec. 17, 2022.

The Wreaths Across America sponsor for the North Georgia area is American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121. For more information, contact iwpost121@gmail.com, or check the Wreaths Across America website at www.wreathscrossamerica.org.

Wreaths can be sponsored at local cemeteries online at <http://wreathscrossamerica.org/GA0206P>. Wreaths are \$15 each.

Top of Georgia...from Page 1A

personal confidence and good relationships to advancing career opportunities.

The 2022 Top of Georgia Student Development Inc. team put on the training and contest, which included Dr. Jennifer Hallett of the YHC Communication Studies Department; Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley; Betsy Young of the Towns County GOP; Charlotte Slezczkowski of the Towns County Democrats; YHC Assistant Professor of Communication Studies and Psychology Dr. Amyre Ponivas; Betty Phillips; and Dr. Gerald "Gerry" Chotiner, MD.

Judging the student speeches that evening were Young Harris College Professor of Business and Public Policy Dr. John Van Vliet, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies Dr. Joshua Guitar and Assistant Professor of Communication Studies Dr. Anne Major.

"When judging, we look for delivery, organization, how they grab the attention of the audience, and eye contact," Major said. "Pacing of the speech and confidence are also key factors, as well as stage presence and body gesturing."

Chotiner welcomed everyone to the event, relating how proud he was "of all these students for making it through this contest and coming up here tonight with the courage to show their presentations in front of us all."

He then introduced the night's keynote speaker, District Attorney Jeff Langley.

"I really believe public speaking is important for our students to learn," Langley said, "because it will help them develop for scholarship interviews, job interviews, college entrance interviews and way more."

"We all have a deep fear of public speaking, and if this program taught these kids to be a little more comfortable with themselves and overcome their fear, which we should all admire, then that is a victory."

Hallett introduced each participant in the contest, announcing their division and topic, with the Middle School up first.

Sixth-grader Madilyn Walls from Towns County



2022 Top of Georgia Speech Contest High School participants A.J. Edwards and Taylor Carroll. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Middle spoke on the advantages of a gluten-free baking diet.

Seventh-grader Katelyn Walls, sister to Madilyn and also a student of Towns County Middle, discussed Anne Frank.

Noah Lynch, a seventh grader with the Georgia Cyber Academy, talked about 3D animation, graphic imaging and software.

Union County Middle seventh-grader Sophia Gobin touched on typhoid fever and how people contract the disease.

And Union County eighth-grader Jolie Schmitt spoke about World War II British Army hero "Mad Jack Churchill."

The results for the middle school division featured a Fourth Place tie between Madilyn Walls and Noah Lynch for a \$100 dollar cash prize apiece; Katelyn Walls earning Third Place and \$200; Second Place and \$300 going to Schmitt; and Gobin as the First Place winner of \$400.

"This was the first time I have tried a contest like this, and it was so exciting if I won or not that I want to do another one," Schmitt said. "My ultimate goal is to be a veterinarian, but a lot of my motivation comes from becoming a better public speaker and pushing myself to become the best that I can possibly be."

Speaking in the High School Division of the competition were junior A.J. Edwards from Towns County High on social media influences and their impact on youth and society, Union County High senior Taylor Carroll with a topic of service animals and

their benefits.

Carroll earned Second Place and a \$300 cash prize, while the overall winner in First Place was Edwards, who was awarded \$400 and will be eligible for a \$5,000 renewable scholarship should he decide to attend Young Harris College after graduating high school next year.

"My motivation for this project was, everyone can look at something, and it can be a positive or negative thing depending on how you look at it," Edwards said. "So, I think that was something everyone can relate to, and it helped challenge the audience rather than inform them, so that kept them attentive and engaged."

Edwards said he plans to pursue a career in law, "like Mr. Langley," so he wanted to get some firsthand experience with public speaking.

"I want to say I am so proud for all of these kids that participated here and worked so hard to achieve something that they wanted to do," Hallett said. "How they came out feeling more confident may just be the ultimate prize here."

Contest sponsors included Young Harris College; Jacky Jones Automotive; Boundary Waters Resort & Marina; Rick Andrews of Century 21 Realty; Mountain Graphics; Diana and Gerry Gutenstein; Mike and Jennie Priven; Dr. Samuel Le Church; Precision Docks with Jeff Stamey; Harvey Cohen, CPA; Attorney Stephanie W. McConnell; and WJRB.

"Without them, none of this would have been possible," Chotiner said of the event sponsors.

Woody Gap students participate in Little Builders Workshop



Woody Gap School students in grades two through five participated in the Little Builders workshop. Sponsored by Construction Education Foundation of Georgia (CEFGA)/Construction Ready and Home Depot, the workshop was presented live via a Zoom meeting with Kayleen McCabe. Each student built a wooden toolbox. Several of the middle and high school students helped the younger students. CEFGA provided the kits, hammers, tape measures and safety glasses. All of the tools were then donated to Woody Gap School.