

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

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Wednesday, March 29, 2023

City Council welcomes auditor, Sheriff Mason

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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have been following an upward trend in recent years.

The total net position of the city's assets – land, buildings, equipment, SPLOST, departmental funds, etc. – grew to \$32,382,520 in 2022, which is \$626,997 over the 2021 position.

General Fund revenues increased by \$240,865, or about 11.6%, due largely to LOST collections generating \$183,033 more than in 2021, in addition to other revenue increases.

Likewise, General Fund expenditures increased by \$171,041, or about 10.4% year over year, with costs going up in multiple areas, including Municipal Court, Police Department and Streets.

The unassigned fund balance, or city reserves, increased about \$600,000 to \$3,721,659.

In addition to summarizing and checking the finances of an entity like the City of Blairsville, audits make sure entities have the correct policies and procedures in place regarding financial accounting and reporting, which the City of Blairsville does.

And with the audit completed, the city prepared a 2022 Budget Amendment that saw relatively minor revenue/expenditure increases across several city funds, and the council voted to accept the budget amendment that evening.

Union County Sheriff

Mack Mason requested to speak in the meeting, starting off by thanking the City of Blairsville and Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter for the many years of good cooperation the agencies have enjoyed.

He attended to ask the council what they could do to get the speed limit of Georgia 515 reduced from 45 mph to 35 mph over the roughly one-mile stretch of road between the intersections of Murphy Highway and the Glenn Gooch Bypass inside city limits.

"We've got an older population that's moved in here, and a lot of us have gotten older on our own," Mason said. "And what concerns me is (the four-lane going through the

See City Council, Page 6A



Union County Sheriff Mack Mason speaking with the Blairsville City Council earlier this month.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Musician Ensley honored for service to community

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With as much as Sam Ensley has done for his community, it's no wonder that the Union County Historical Society dedicated an entire day to celebrating his lengthy list of contributions.

Friday, March 24, was declared the one and only Sam Ensley Day, and folks from Blairsville, Suches, Young Harris, Hiwassee, and even farther gathered in the upstairs courtroom of the Old Courthouse to show their gratitude and share "Sam stories."

John Samuel "Sam" Ensley was born Nov. 18, 1940, on Plot Town Road in Young Harris. While he spent some time working in DeKalb and Savannah, he moved back home to Blairsville and eventually retired from teaching in 2003.

The recent installation of new audio technology at the courthouse presented an opportunity to honor Ensley's hard work and dedication, which has resulted in countless hours of entertainment by performers from far and wide over many years bringing in people to the Old Courthouse.

The new sound system, which features more reliable hardware, crisp processing



Sam Ensley has done a lot for his community, much of it by way of the Union County Historical Society.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

and recording capabilities, will henceforth be referred to as "The Sounds of Sam."

Indeed, Ensley boasts a lengthy resume. Many folks around town remember when he was a teacher at Union County Middle School back in the day, and according to Ensley's son, Sammy, he was many a student's favorite.

"It takes a special kind of person to put in as much effort as dad has done over the years for (the Historical Society), and I think that was reflected

in his teaching, too," he said. "Through my entire life, I've had people ... come up to me and say, 'Your dad whipped my (hind end),' and without fail, the next thing out of their mouth would be, 'He was my favorite teacher.'"

Today, Ensley is perhaps best known as a hardworking member of the Historical Society, being the longtime coordinator of the popular Friday night concerts at the courthouse and putting together

See Sam Ensley Day, Page 2A

Band of Steel again wows crowds with pan music



The Woody Gap Band of Steel students put on a tremendous performance at their annual gala March 18.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Woody Gap Band of Steel played in the Union County Community Center on March 18 for the group's 2023 Annual Gala, raising funds for the student band as well as cheer for all with good food and lively music.

Band Director Doug

Roberts led the kids in a performance that featured classic hits from a variety of genres like rock, calypso, and even country.

Guests with an ear for music could pick up bingo cards on the way in that featured song names and trivia questions; the titles of the band's lineup were never revealed that night, but many quickly figured them out and had no trouble singing

along.

Catering was courtesy of The View Grill and Roberts' wife Melissa, the owner of Melissa's Custom Cakes. Dinner consisted of a starter salad followed by choices of prime rib or chicken along with baked potatoes and green beans. Cheesecake was served for dessert.

In addition to bingo See Band of Steel Gala, Page 6A

GBI called in to investigate local domestic shooting incident

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation is handling an apparent domestic-related shooting case that led to a Blairsville man having to be rushed to Northeast Georgia Medical Center on Wednesday, March 22.

By press time, the North Georgia News did not know the man's medical condition or prognosis, though he reportedly received significant injuries from being shot in the abdomen.

According to the Union County Sheriff's Office, around 3:45 a.m. on March 22, a 911 call came in from a female who had shot a man known to her in an apartment off Emory Circle near Downtown Blairsville.

The Sheriff's Office responded to the scene and requested the GBI to investigate



the shooting.

GBI said Thursday that no details would be released while the investigation remains active, such as the

circumstances surrounding the shooting, i.e., if self-defense was involved, or whether charges would be filed against either party.

By Chris Butler
Georgia Public
Policy Foundation

Many of Georgia's 159 counties are governed by boards of commissioners, but in seven of those counties you'll find something rare – and unique to Georgia.

Those seven counties – Bartow, Bleckley, Chattooga, Murray, Pulaski, Towns and Union – have only one commissioner. Most counties have five or more.

Some people call a county with a sole commissioner an outdated concept – and even counterproductive.

Actions allegedly taken by one of Georgia's sole commissioners, for instance, so ruffled certain Union County residents that they want him to serve alongside a board of colleagues, if only to hold him accountable.

Five years ago, the residents of Walker County voted overwhelmingly to shift from a sole commissioner form of government to a board of commissioners.

But four of Georgia's



seven sole county commissioners interviewed this month called their system of government more efficient. Most of those counties are rural and sparsely populated.

But change is likely coming to some of these counties, and it could create tensions between the people who have lived there their entire lives and newcomers who fled city life.

"The pandemic caused a lot of that," said Towns County

Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, whose county, per the most recent U.S. Census, has nearly 13,000 residents.

"We have a mountainous area. People came here to get away from the city and to get fresh air. And now they can work remotely from here."

Bartow County Commissioner Steve Taylor, whose county has 110,843 residents, said newcomers "aren't used to our form of

See Rural Georgia, Page 3A



Vol. 114 No. 14

Arrests - 5B Legals - 4D
Church - 3C Obituaries - 5C
Classifieds - 3D Sports - 2B
Opinion - 4A

BASEBALL

3/31 5 PM (DH)

vs. Athens Academy

Rec. Dept. Easter Egg Hunt April 1

See page 4B

Spring Market & Craft Fair April 1

See page 6B

Nat'l Vietnam War Vets Day March 29

See page 6B



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Sam Ensley Day...from Page 1A

music for events around town.

A musical legend in his own right, Ensley can play the guitar and has not been a stranger to local performances himself, including the three-generation band Sam, Sammy and Samuel featuring his own family members.

For these reasons, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris offered an official proclamation to declare last Friday's special proceedings as "Sam Ensley Day."

"You have made this courthouse – and this courtroom – so special to so many people," Paris said to Ensley, who sat in the front row. "I don't know how many people I've heard that play music up here say it's like nowhere else they've ever played."

And with his prominent



Past Historical Society President Judy Carpenter presenting Sam Ensley with a special medallion for "Sam Ensley Day" at the Old Courthouse Friday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

involvement with the Historical Society, it was Ensley who ensured that the Butt-Mock House, along with the Payne Cabin, Duncan Cabin, and blacksmith locations, would all be well preserved.

Historical Society member Bud Akins took his own turn to speak with Ensley, admitting that, to him, he was more than just a friend.

"Sam, I love you to death," Akins said after talking about their history growing up together. "Like a brother."

Judy Carpenter, also a Historical Society member, presented Ensley with a silver medallion in honor of his service to the organization, then opened the floor to other guests to speak about their experiences and fond memories.

Colleen Urbaniuk shared her memories of Ensley's support when, 18 years ago, she

became the owner of Seasons Inn next to the courthouse.

"The reason that downtown is so successful is because ... people like you who had the influence and the knowledge and the people you could pull," Urbaniuk said, her voice breaking with emotion. "I just want to thank you personally for all that you did for Downtown Blairsville."

"It is what it is today because of you, because of your influence, and your willingness to volunteer and take the knowledge that you had to pour back into this town."

One of her closing remarks seemed to summarize the entire event: "You made sure Blairsville was something people knew about and wanted to come to and (be) proud of."

Several audience

members were moved to tears, including Ensley himself.

"I appreciate everybody who came today, and I appreciate this honor. In those years, it was just all in a day's work," were his humble words in response to being dubbed a "county treasure."

"I'm feeling very warm and loved," Ensley later said downstairs over celebratory punch and cake. "Looking back on it, I don't see how we got so much stuff done, but when a bunch of people get together working..." Ensley trailed off, shaking his head with a fond smile as he regarded the Historical Society members he came to see as family.

"Long may he reign," a Facebook post emphatically stated when sharing the success of the event. It's safe to say that Blairsville – and beyond – can agree. Thank you, Sam!

One Book, One Community comes to Blairsville's Historic Courthouse with Janisse Ray's *The Woods of Fannin County*

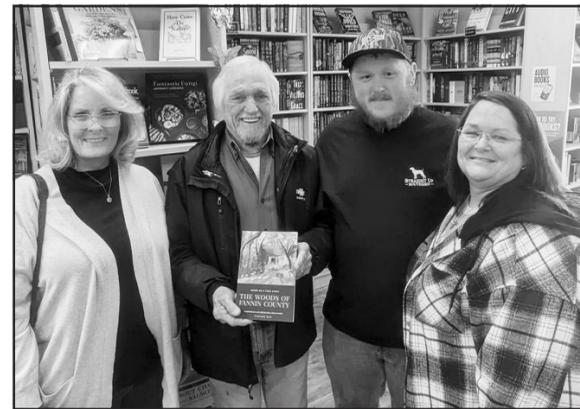
A good bookshop is not just about selling books from shelves, it is about reaching out into the world and making a difference. ~David Almond

Blairsville's Book Bound Bookstore is a dream realized for owner Sharon Davis. "When my daughters were young, we talked about where we wanted the store, what all we would carry, and how wonderful it would be to own a bookstore. I taught my final six years at Thomas County Central High School in Thomasville, GA, and after that, launched a new career in real estate but I never let go of my dream to be an independent bookstore owner. When my daughter moved to North Georgia, and my grandchildren were born, I knew it was time to relocate."

Sharon settled in Blairsville in 2019 and although she continued her real estate career, she soon realized our community was the perfect setting for her bookstore dream to become reality. Covid delayed her progress however, on June 26th, 2021, Book Bound Bookstore opened its doors at 35 Blue Ridge Street, welcoming like-minded bibliophiles who embrace Sharon's vision of cultivating a sense of community by offering a welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone feels safe to share their tastes in literature. The store hosts a monthly book club, frequent visits from local authors, and engaging children's events.

Sharon was introduced to the One Book, One Community event concept while living in Thomasville. The purpose is to promote one book that an entire community would read, and then offer activities leading up to an author event to discuss their book. Book Bound Bookstore's first One Book, One Community was held in October 2021 in partnership with the Mountain Regional Library System and local businesses.

Inspired by the positive outcome of this event, Sharon knew she could expand the concept to engage more members of our community, resulting in two hundred people packing our historic courthouse on March 16 to hear author Janisse Ray discuss her book *The Woods of Fan-*



Woods Family at Book Bound Bookstore

nin County, a work of fiction based on a true story.

In the fall of 1945, the eight Woods children, brothers and sisters ranging in age from three months to ten years, were brought by mule and wagon to a remote shack in the foothills of Fannin County and abandoned by their mother. Over the next four years they lived alone, roaming the mountains and valleys of what had been Cherokee Territory, searching for food and struggling to care for each other.

In 2015 the now adult children began to reveal their story to the author, sharing a painful, jubilant, and astounding revelation of their abandonment and survival in the Appalachian wilderness.

Knowing the setting of the book is local and of historical significance, Sharon was confident that the event would attract a larger audience, requiring a more suitable venue than her cozy store. The courthouse was a natural fit because of its historical significance, and it did not take long for the available two hundred seats to be reserved. "I am extremely grateful for the Union County Historical society in all they do, and for allowing us to host the event in the beautiful courthouse," said Sharon, reflecting upon the outcome of the event.

Hearing from an author about how they go about their craft is fascinating, but it is a rare occasion to have a character from a book share their perspective and insight. This is exactly what happened when Richard Woods, one of the surviving Woods children joined Ms. Ray for the courthouse event to share firsthand, the

events that shaped the book. When asked what he thought sustained him and his siblings throughout their time fending for themselves, he responded that he was certain that "If not for 'the Man Upstairs' they never would have survived." Mr. Woods' daughter, Kim and other family members who were in attendance also talked about how the family's history shaped their lives.

The evening was well received by everyone in attendance with many positive comments from those fortunate to attend. The consensus is that *The Woods of Fannin County* is an outstanding book and the One Book, One Community concept exposed the story to a broader audience.

An unexpected outcome for Mr. Woods and the family members who accompanied him was meeting other relatives that they did not know existed before arriving in town to attend the event. It was impactful to the family to discuss the book in the communities where the events took place and while visiting Union and Fannin counties, the family gained a deeper understanding of what their relatives endured.

Our community is fortunate to have a local book seller who believes it is her obligation to provide books and events that inspire, challenge, and engage readers of all ages. In the coming months, you can expect more outstanding events from Book Bound Bookstore including, a Story Book Walk, more author visits, and a Southern Writer's Event scheduled for this fall.

By Debra Lowe
Photos by A.J. Taheri



The audience at Blairsville's Historic Courthouse to hear author Janisse Ray discuss her book.

Rural Georgia...from Page 1A

government.”

AGITATED

Union County Commissioner Lamar Paris, who has served for more than 20 years, said he blames “a little group of folks coming in [to his county] and being agitators.” He said these people have tried, unsuccessfully, for two years to petition enough signatures for an election to do away with the sole commissioner chair and convert the county government to a commission board.

Speaking of that petition, Union resident Millard “Zeb” Blanchard, said too many local voters are afraid to sign it.

“Our commissioner is acting on his own volition, like a dictator. The local folks refer to the people running the county as a mafia,” Blanchard said.

“This man is very powerful. He is the sole commissioner. He counsels himself, and he makes the budget.”

Blanchard has filed at least two superior court lawsuits against Paris. In one, Blanchard alleged Paris had

a county road constructed without a bidding process. In another, Blanchard said the sole county commissioner spent taxpayer money on private property.

Paris said Blanchard’s lawsuits were frivolous and that’s why a judge tossed them out. He also said his opponents dislike the growth transpiring throughout the county and, by extension, dislike him.

“I am not a dictator. If I was a dictator then I would be in jail. They have been through the governor, the district attorneys, and the secretary of state trying to damn me because they are so vile,” Paris said.

“He [Blanchard] and his supporters spout and scream this stuff and call me a thief and say I waste money. We have a full-time person in this county who oversees the operation of bids, as well as a consultant who works on it. You will not find anything in this county that is done illegally.”

Blanchard, though, says Paris oversaw one county commission meeting and got carried away with his power. At this meeting, Paris called a female constituent a profanity. Although the meeting occurred nine years ago, video of the incident is still available for the public to view on YouTube.

When asked to comment, Paris said he “correctly described the woman.”

“That is the only time I know in the last nine years that they have me [on video] saying that word,” Paris said.

“It was at a time when there was a conflict going on. She is what I called her, but I did not have the right to call her that.”

GEORGIA’S HISTORY OF SOLE COMMISSIONS

This sole commissioner form of government dates to the 19th century. The Georgia constitution originally created four elected county officers: the sheriff, the tax commissioner, the clerk of the superior court and the judge of the probate court.

In 1868 the state created the position of county ordinary to administer a county’s general operations.

The 1868 constitution also authorized members of the

Georgia General Assembly to create county commissioners. Upon ratification, every Georgia county was governed by a county ordinary. But nine years later more than half of Georgia’s counties were governed by a board of commissioners rather than ordinaries. Over the years the sole commissioner form of government was mostly phased out.

THE MOST EFFICIENT?

In counties where a sole commissioner form of government still exists, proponents, like Taylor, call it “the most efficient.”

“If you need to get an answer from a commissioner then you can do so quickly. The sole commissioners are full-time county employees who have an open-door policy and are at work every day,” Taylor said.

“If you have a board of commissioners then those members have other full-time jobs and only come to a board meeting once or twice a month. People who need help must go through a county manager. Plus, a smaller county with a smaller population can’t pay five board members’ expenses.”

Chattooga County Commissioner Blake Elsberry, whose population is significantly smaller, at 24,932 people, said sole county commissioners are effective.

“I am in my third year,” Elsberry said.

“We have lowered the millage rate, cut county debt, and we have the first rural ER coming.”

The four sole county commissioners, in lieu of not having colleagues on a board to sometimes disagree or tell them no, each said that every four years voters hold them accountable.

“This is not a slam dunk you-are-in-it forever type of job,” Taylor said.

“I know what people say about one man having all the power, but that’s not true.”

But isn’t it more difficult for a challenger to beat an incumbent?

Elsberry said no. “I beat a 12-year incumbent,” Elsberry said.

“That’s because that person increased taxes, and

there was a noticeable lack of advancement in the county.”

Seven years ago, Greg Hogan defeated Murray County sole Commissioner Brittany Pittman.

In the past year, the Cartersville-Bartow County Department of Economic Development’s website announced plenty of new growth, including a new electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing plant that could create 3,500 new jobs.

Union County Development Authority officials, meanwhile, reach out to new business prospects and describe their county as a place where new businesses can prosper due to its proximity to Chattanooga, Atlanta, Greenville, and Asheville.

In a few years, however, new residents could do away with a sole commissioner in their respective counties and instead have a board. As

rural counties experience the inevitable changes that come with growth, time will tell if the sole commissioner practice fades away.

Emma Clark receives Degree

Emma Clark of Young Harris, GA, has earned a Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

Clark was among approximately 5,620 undergraduate and graduate students to be presented Georgia Tech degrees during the Institute’s 263rd Commencement exercises Dec. 16 - 17, 2022, at Bobby Dodd Stadium.

Dakota Gibson named to President’s List

Dakota Gibson of Morganton, GA, has been named to the Champlain College President’s List for the Fall 2022 semester.

Students on the President’s List have achieved a grade point average of 4.0 or higher during the semester. Gibson is currently enrolled in the Software Development major.

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City Council...from Page 1A

middle of town).” Mason reported that there were approximately 28 intersections, entrances and exits along that one-mile span of state highway – roughly 14 in each direction – with frequent turn-ins to and pullouts from 515 adding to the odds of wrecks, which have been trending upward. And Mason believes lowering the speed limit would not create an undue burden on commuters.

“If you’ve got a mile stretch, and hypothetically you don’t have to stop, at 45 mph, it takes you 1 minute and 20 seconds to negotiate that,” Mason said. “At 35 mph, it’s only 1 minute and 43 seconds. So, you’re looking at 23 seconds difference there. “But the moral of the story is, the faster you are going, the harder it is to stop that vehicle,” he said, adding that he had previously attempted – to no avail – to reach the Georgia

Department of Transportation about lowering the speed limit on the state highway. In the interest of public safety regarding the ever-increasing level of traffic on Union County roads, Mason is asking the city to help him contact the relevant authorities like GDOT about slowing down traffic on this busy stretch. As the county sheriff, Mason said he was not giving “this sermon” to be able to go out and write people tickets for speeding. “That’s not my concern,” Mason said, noting that any

traffic tickets written within an incorporated city such as Blairsville must go through that city’s court. “Saving lives is what’s concerning to me,” he said. “During work time, you’re just taking your life into your own hands going down this (highway),” especially with drivers attempting to cross a turn lane into oncoming lanes of traffic. Chief Baxter concurred with the sheriff’s assessment, and City Council members committed to assisting in the effort. Mayor Conley will also be drafting a letter to GDOT officials about the matter. In other news, the council approved the installation of two crime intervention traffic cameras at \$5,700 for the first year and \$5,000 in year two, with a multi-year contract resolution expected in January 2024.

Known as Flock Safety cameras, the equipment will be set up at two locations around town to scan passing license plates to alert police of any vehicles associated with crimes. The same system helped catch a Blairsville burglary suspect in another county recently, Baxter said. “These are license plate readers, which we’ve had in the past,” Baxter said, noting that the department once owned a car-mounted reader. “Blue Ridge has had (these cameras) for about a month; they caught two stolen vehicles with them.”



Blairsville City Councilwoman Kayla Hemphill in her March 14 regular meeting at City Hall. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Baxter said other nearby communities are using the solar-powered cameras to great effect, and he described the system as a relatively new and important “crime prevention tool” that also keeps traffic counts on monitored roadways. Next, the City Council awarded a \$245,540 SPOST-funded road project to Colwell Construction. The project consists of milling, resurfacing and striping Cleveland Street from Veterans Memorial Drive south to the city limit. “(Union County Government) is bidding that for us – we’ll actually be paying Union County for the work,” Conley said. The county will continue paving from the city

limit to Shoe Factory Road. The project was supposed to be undertaken last October by another company but faced delays, and because Colwell Construction is doing roadwork for the county in 2023, Colwell will be completing the city’s Cleveland Street project. Also in the meeting, Granddaddy Mimm’s Distilling Co. received approval to host an evening 5K at the Butternut Creek Golf Course for the upcoming Second Annual Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival to expand with something that appeals “to visitors and residents alike.” The Blairsville City Council meets the second Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall.

Band of Steel Gala...from Page 1A

prizes, audience members took part in a 50/50 raffle that ended up raising \$375 total. For other altruistic souls, cards with QR codes to donate directly to the band were left on the tables, and anyone who donated in any fashion got to take home one of the gorgeous bouquets of white flowers decorating the tables at the end of the night if they felt so inclined. Some songs were recognizable from last year’s performance and garnered a few familiar reactions, like how the band’s cover of Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” inspired several couples to get up and slow dance. Other songs were new, like an impressive steel pan adaptation of “Feel Good Inc” by Gorillaz. Roberts himself said he couldn’t resist playing “Heartbreaker” by Pat Benatar.

Between songs, Roberts shared the history of the steel pan. A common misconception is that the instrument is known as a “steel drum,” and many believe it to have originated in Jamaica. In reality, steel pans were invented in Trinidad-Tobago by Elliott Anthony “Ellie” Mannette, who passed away in 2018. As it just so happens, the Woody Gap Band of Steel owns Mannette’s last pan. During the season of Carnival, folks from all over the island would gather in the city, playing drums as they descended from the mountains. The government in response put a ban on African instruments and facets of culture in hopes to eliminate the celebration. Instead, the Carnival crowd improvised and played on buckets, frying pans, trashcan lids, oil drums, and even flowerpots and biscuit tins. In short, the unique sound caught on, and the steel pan evolved through the years with careful honing of the instrument to become what it is today. The Band of Steel would have made Mannette proud, and they did just that and more with their Union County audience that Saturday. With Woody Gap being



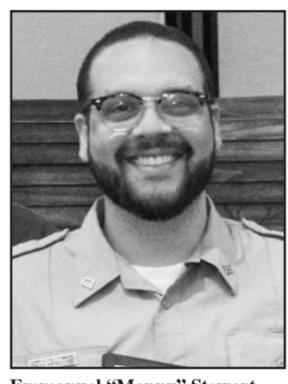
Several couples had a terrific time dancing to the soothing sounds of the Woody Gap Band of Steel in the Community Center earlier this month. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

one of the smallest public schools in the state, Roberts has students of different age groups participating in the band. Most of the group is from high school, but one pannist in particular stood out. Sixth-Grader Madison Pierce kept up perfectly with her older bandmates, even going above and beyond to perform a solo of Jimmy Buffett’s “Volcano,” which many in the crowd recognized and sang along to. “It’s really fun,” Pierce said of the opportunity to be a part of the Band of Steel, now able to tuck her “fourth or fifth” concert into her resume. She’s grown to love being a pannist and plans on pursuing the instrument well after graduation. And then there was ninth-grader Ryan Marsh, who chose to perform a solo that Roberts described as “being the most difficult he could find.” Professor Liam Teague of the Northern Illinois University School of Music composed “Cell-O-Vibes,” a notoriously difficult college-level tune meant to “show off (the) lyrical and technical possibilities (of the cello steel pan).” Marsh rocked it, wowing the audience with rising and falling notes laid out with surprisingly gentle percussion.

In terms of the audience, one could hear a pin drop during his performance, but as soon as the song came to its conclusion, the room filled with applause, whistles and cheers. The amazing reception, along with audience participation that included a conga line during Lord Kitchener and Harry Belafonte’s “Jump in the Line” of “Beetlejuice” fame, made for a lively, fun night for all involved. “I don’t know (how much the fundraiser made) until we get all the bills,” explained Roberts, nevertheless honored with the vast show of support. “It takes so much to put it on. Every bit helps, but we do it for the kids and the community outreach.” Lastly, Roberts made a special mention of Lydia Leek of A Touch of Gray, thanking her for decorating and helping to set up the event. Her website can be reached at www.atouchofgrayevents.com. For more Band of Steel talent, mark those calendars for the Pan Rocks Concert, taking place on May 13 at 6:30 p.m. at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center. Not only will Woody Gap’s students play, but world-renowned pannist Tracy Thornton will perform alongside them.

Vogel State Park Employee receives Customer Service Award

Several Georgia State Park and Historic Site employees were honored recently during a Rangers Conference held at Unicoi State Park. Around 140 assistant managers, interpretive rangers, administrative staff and maintenance rangers participated in training activities, team building and sharing ideas. The conference included an awards ceremony celebrating the efforts of those who make more than 60 sites outstanding destinations for Georgia’s citizens and visitors. Learn more at GaStateParks.org/awards.



Emmanuel “Manny” Stewart most beloved campgrounds, so guests often expressed frustration over cancellations. Stewart was always understanding and courteous while helping them find alternate dates or locations. His outstanding customer service serves as an example of how to best deal with challenging situations.

This February, Stewart was promoted to manager of Crooked River State Park in St. Marys.

Spring Market & Craft Fair

The Union County Schools Agriscience Center will be sponsoring a Spring Market and Craft Fair on Saturday, April 1, 2023 from 9 AM to 3 PM, at 22 Lovell Drive, Blairsville, GA. This event is in support of the many local crafters, vendors and small businesses in the North Georgia mountains. The market will feature jewelry, woodworking, home decor, candles, sweet treats, on-site painting, food trucks and much more! Admission is \$1 with a portion benefitting Isaiah 117. Join us for fun and support your local crafters.

Over the past year, Vogel has been involved in a complex campground renovation that has impacted more than 1,000 reservations. Vogel is one of Georgia’s