

New Principals...from Page 1A

Searching for interior candidates was ideal, as each of the applicants was already accustomed to working as a dedicated member of a larger team effort by all the schools to ensure optimal learning for children at every level.

Donaldson is transitioning from her role as High School Assistant Principal. A Union County native, she has 21 years of experience working in the local school system, serving in roles as varied as substitute to math teacher, as well as Alternative Education Program administrator.

Education is a calling for Donaldson that has led her to pursue leadership positions. Having spent the last four years in High School administration, she is ready for the challenge of being Middle School principal and establishing strong new relationships with her staff and students there.

"Shane and Mrs. Stafford have both done a tremendous job with helping the Middle School grow, and I just want to continue with that and keep it rolling and growing," Donaldson said. "I look forward to helping the kids get to high school."

Womack has spent the last six of his 18 years in

education at Union County Middle. Before teaching, the Colquitt County native enlisted in the U.S. Marines, where he became a Persian Gulf War combat veteran, and he followed his passion for teaching after serving his country.

He began his career in education as a paraprofessional in Moultrie, quickly moving into teaching high school science. Womack also taught middle school technology and Georgia studies classes before transitioning to a hybrid teaching-administration position there.

His wife Janene, also a teacher, is from this area, so when the local middle school assistant administrator job became available six years ago, the couple decided to move to Blairsville. Now, he's excited for the chance to be leading the Primary School.

"The change I'm making is vastly different than middle school," Womack said. "My big focus is going to be building those relationships with the teachers, the students and the families, and working on culture and climate and making it the best experience that it can be for everybody."

Womack published a fiction book in 2018 called "Full Circle," which can be found in the school library. He has two children, David, who graduated Union County

High in 2019 and is now in the Marines, and Reese, who is 24 years old and enjoying being a teacher herself.

Pat is married to Keith Donaldson, and their oldest child Will graduated UCHS in 2016, while their daughter Edie is a local senior set to graduate in May. Their youngest daughter Lillie is 10 and in the third grade, and she'll get to see her mother as principal in a few years.

Both educators have met with their respective new staff members and can't wait to get to know even more of the children and families in the community.

Furthermore, each is excited to embrace the challenges and opportunities afforded them in their new roles, with Womack anxious to guide children in learning to read, write and perform basic math skills, and Donaldson eager to oversee students' progress toward becoming young adults.

Donaldson and Womack have multiple degrees related to education and were among four internal candidates who applied for the open principal positions, each having to undergo a rigorous interview by a panel of fellow educators with input from the School Governance Team.

Ultimately, the two, who consider themselves servant-leaders, impressed the panel

and received the promotions, and Superintendent John Hill said that, while they have big shoes to fill, he has full confidence in their abilities to lead their respective schools starting next year.

"All four candidates were very qualified and had inside leadership experience, so it truthfully was a hard decision," Hill said. "The other two candidates were very strong; it was a tough decision, but we feel like we recommended the right candidates."

Hill said Womack was chosen for the Primary School because he likes working with younger kids and having fun, while Donaldson's 17 years with the sixth through 12th-grade AEP program tipped the scales in favor of her leadership at UCMS overseeing kids' transitions to High School.

As far as replacing the assistant principal positions soon to be vacated by Donaldson and Womack, the school system will start the interviewing process for internal candidates this week.

In terms of COVID, the school system has enjoyed much success keeping classes safely in session during the pandemic, and Donaldson and Womack said the schools will be ready for whatever COVID challenges may come in the fall.

Teacher Bonuses...from Page 1A

one-time bonus to all qualifying employees from every school district in the state.

According to the Georgia Board of Education, the purpose of the bonus is to support staff and stronger recruitment and retention while at the same time offering a gesture of gratitude for work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response, the Union County Board of Education held a called meeting last Thursday at the Board Office to approve the "Governor's Employee Retention Stipend."

The stipend allocations are as follows: \$1,000 for full-time employees as of Dec. 31; \$500 for 49% employees as of Dec. 31; \$500 for full-time employees as of Jan. 1; and \$250 for 49% employees as of Jan. 1.

Superintendent John Hill said his office called the meeting to approve the stipend so that employees could expect their one-time bonuses to be distributed before spring break, which begins next week.

Hill commends all school staff for the hard work and dedication they committed during

the pandemic that started over a year ago.

"First of all, we are really appreciative of the governor for providing us with this opportunity," Hill said. "Our staff, essentially in 72 hours last year, had to flip the way they taught school and provide meals and serve students to an in-home model."

"Our Technology Department, our School Police Department, our teachers, our paraprofessionals and administrators – everybody worked very hard to get us an online learning platform and to be able to serve the kids at home."

Thankfully, the school system was able to develop a hybrid model allowing students to return to in-person classes four days a week this school year, and staff members have maintained their hard work to keep schools open for face-to-face learning.

While the systemwide implementation of new COVID precautions has challenged the schools this year, Union County never gave up hope and continued to strive for #SuccessForAll and

safety during the pandemic.

In continuing to stay open successfully and safely even when other systems decided to close for COVID, the Union County School District has effectively become a model for how to conduct classes during pandemic conditions.

"This year, our teachers and staff have continued to do that work," Hill said. "Our school nutrition has provided meal pickups for our students, and our teachers have taught people both face to face and online at the same time."

"They have worked double duty now for a continuous 12 months. We are very proud of all of our staff, our custodians, counselors, paraprofessionals, administrators, Maintenance Department, Police Department. All of them have worked really hard."

"Every employee here has gone above and beyond and never complained. We are very thankful to be able to provide this for our employees."

Vaccine Eligibility...from Page 1A

a questionnaire requiring people to provide a variety of information, including demographic details, medical history, COVID-19 history and contact details.

Local pharmacies like Walgreens, Ingles and Walmart are also carrying the vaccine, appointments for which can be scheduled via each company's website.

Kemp announced in a March 23 press conference that 74% of Georgia seniors had received at least one dose of the vaccine as of last week, which is an important number to keep an eye on, as people aged 65 and up have accounted for four in five U.S. COVID deaths.

"As far as vaccine eligibility, Dr. (Kathleen) Toomey and I have been clear from the beginning that when supply was limited, we would prioritize the most vulnerable, and that's exactly what we have done," Kemp said. "Today, three quarters of our seniors have significant protection against COVID-19."

"We were also consistent that, as supply increased and we vaccinated more and more high-risk Georgians, the state would move to expand eligibility. This week, Georgia received over 450,000 vaccines. That includes both first and second doses. While we do not have a specific number yet, we have been told to expect an increase in both Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson next week."

"Due to the uneven demand Public Health officials and private providers are experiencing in different regions of the state, the Department of Public Health directed approximately 70% of this week's total vaccine allotment to the North Georgia and Metro Atlanta areas to put more supply where demand is highest."

Dr. Toomey serves as the commissioner of the Georgia Department of Public Health, and she gave an update on the state's COVID-19 outlook in the March 23 presser, relaying that "our numbers are still

looking very, very good."

"Positivity has averaged for the last seven days 5.4%, and we hope that that can continue to stay low and will get lower," Toomey said. "Hospitalizations and deaths are down to about 40% over the last 14 days, which is very, very good statistic."

She encouraged everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated and stressed that all three of the emergency-use authorized vaccines – Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson – were "safe and effective."

"They will be our key to allowing us to open Georgia as a state and enjoy those freedoms we so are missing at this time," Dr. Toomey said, advising further that people should continue to follow COVID best practices like wearing masks in public and avoiding large gatherings.

Kemp said last week he and Toomey would be looking at removing remaining restrictions on businesses and other entities, many of which have been in place effectively since his initial March 14, 2020, executive order declaring a Public Health State of Emergency for COVID-19.

The governor has renewed the Public Health State of Emergency 12 times since then, with the current executive order set to expire after April 6 unless extended.

Among the remaining provisions are "shelter in place" requirements for people with chronic illnesses; mandated COVID-19 mitigation measures in businesses and other organizations; restrictions like distancing in movie theaters and capacity limits at live venues; and more.

"Hard working Georgians can't endure another year like the last," Kemp said Friday. "Next week, we'll roll out our plan to loosen the remaining COVID restrictions in the state. Georgians know the right thing to do. We are open. We have been open, and we're ready to welcome you to

the Peach State."

Fortunately, the regional COVID situation is as good as Kemp and Toomey describe at the state-level, such that both the Union County and Chatuge Regional Nursing Homes have re-opened for visitors following updated guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Both nursing homes opened for visitation (Thursday) with visitors scheduled in one-hour increments," Union General Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said. "They will hold visitation several times per week."

"The families are socially distanced in a common room unless the resident has a private room. There were many happy tears today from residents, families, and even staff after a long year of restricted visitation."

Also on the home front, Synergy Health of Hiawassee was happy to capitalize right away on expanded eligibility by hosting a vaccine clinic for about 180 people at Young Harris College on March 25, featuring some staff but mostly students.

Dr. Samuel "Le" Church was thrilled to see the level of participation for the clinic, which was pulled together and announced quickly, and he looks forward to additional public health partnerships with the college and potentially other institutions down the road.

He asks that people who are getting vaccinated reach out to their family, friends and neighbors about receiving one also, as Dr. Church believes "word of mouth" advertising is a good way to increase vaccine uptake.

Synergy Health was going to be slowing down its vaccination efforts prior to Kemp's announcement last week, but now that eligibility has opened up, vaccine administration has gotten more efficient, so people may continue to sign up for Synergy vaccination at ngvax.com.