

North Georgia News

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State lawmakers approve growing of medical marijuana, pass 'Heartbeat Bill'

By Shawn Jarrard
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April 2 was the last day of the Georgia General Assembly's 2019 Legislative Session, and many people have been wondering what state lawmakers accomplished this year.

Let's take a look at a few of the big ticket items that passed.

The state House and Senate were able to reach a compromise to pass HB 324, or "Georgia's Hope Act," on the final day of the session.

Gov. Brian Kemp is expected to sign the bill, which will effectively legalize

the regulated cultivation of marijuana by a limited number of licensed companies and universities for use by patients on the Low THC Oil Registry.

Proponents of the bill say it would solve a major problem facing registered low THC oil patients who rely on the oil for various medical purposes, including seizures, Parkinson's disease, autism spectrum disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and more.

It's currently legal to possess low THC oil in Georgia, but it's not legal to make it, buy it or ship it across state lines — though all that will change once Kemp signs the bill into law.

Critics of the bill,

including the Georgia Sheriffs' Association and, more locally, Union County Sheriff Mack Mason, believe that the new law will pave the way for legalized recreational marijuana use in Georgia.

Legalizing recreational use would result in a number of problems for the state, according to the sheriffs, including gateway drug use, increased health problems in communities, and more accidents from people driving and working while high.

Another big bill that made its way out of the General Assembly this year is the "Fetal Heartbeat Bill."

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Georgia lawmakers celebrating the end of Sine Die, the 40th and last day of the 2019 Legislative Session, on April 2. Photo/Georgia House of Representatives

Rathburn to be 'ambassador for the arts' as Poet Laureate of Georgia

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Young Harris College Professor of English and Creative Writing Dr. Chelsea Rathburn now serves as the Poet Laureate of Georgia, having been named by Gov. Brian Kemp in March.

"It feels terrific to be the Poet Laureate," said Rathburn. "The Poet Laureateship is an honorary position, so it is not a paid position, but what the Poet Laureate essentially is, is an ambassador for the arts."

Rathburn will work with the Georgia Council for the Arts on such initiatives as the Poet Laureate's Prize, a high school writing competition started by former Poet Laureate Judson Mitcham. She will also use her position as an ambassador to work on new literary initiatives.

"The idea of the Poet

Laureate is to kind of extend the reach of poetry," said Rathburn. "A lot of people think that poetry is something that is really scary, or they read it in high school and they didn't like it."

"So, the Poet Laureateship sort of brings poetry to more people and tries to increase awareness and excitement about it."

Becoming a Poet Laureate has been a secret passion of the Southern native throughout her career.

"Even when I was in college, I saw the national Poet Laureate and thought it would be so cool to be the top poet," said Rathburn. "So, I was really excited to be nominated for the state Poet Laureate."

The position requires large amounts of traveling across the state and other parts of the country to talk with students and other Councils



Young Harris College Professor Chelsea Rathburn was recently named Poet Laureate of Georgia by Gov. Brian Kemp. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

for the Arts about the craft of poetry.

Alongside Bettie Sellers, the Creative Writing Program there.

"I designed the major and launched the major back in 2013," said Rathburn. "There was a long history of some really terrific creative writers teaching here."

"We had Dr. Steve Harvey, Janice Moore, Bettie Sellers, who was state Poet Laureate. So, there was a long tradition of creative writing at Young Harris, but it wasn't until I was hired that we developed the formal major."

Rathburn hopes that the Poet Laureateship will bring more attention to the college and help it to grow by showing how great the programs are.

"I think that being Poet Laureate is great for us," said Rathburn. "I already believe — truly believe — that in terms of the curriculum here, we have the strongest Creative Writing Program in Georgia. And we

see that at the Agnes Scott Contest, where our students are finalists there and they go on and do really great things."

"The Poet Laureateship position is all about writing poetry and spreading writing throughout the state. But it also makes me proud that, since I'll be moving around the state, more people will hear about Young Harris more than they would otherwise. And that's exciting for me, because I'm proud of our program and I like to go out and be able to talk about it."

Rathburn released her most recent collection of poetry earlier this year, "Still Life with Mother and Knife," which addresses themes surrounding postpartum depression and the entrance into motherhood.

"My new book is largely about childhood and

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Joshua's Warriors hold inaugural '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s Sock Hop

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The inaugural '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s Sock Hop by Joshua's Warriors turned out to be a great deal of fun for all who attended on Saturday, April 6, at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center.

Kurt Hilbish, speaker coordinator and Master of Ceremonies for Joshua's Warriors, was excited to bring in his equipment and do what he used to do in Florida before moving to the North Georgia Mountains — be the DJ.

Hilbish played a variety of tunes that got everyone hopping, like "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown" by Jim Croce, some Patsy Cline, some Bob Seger and some old-time rock 'n'

roll. Hilbish also took requests. Slow dances, fast dances, line dances — Hilbish played it all.

Many people who attended dressed up like The Fonz and other characters from the old hit show "Happy Days." Some of the ladies wore sequined outfits that sparkled in the dark.

Most of those who attended the dance were over 40, maybe even over 60, but there were some kids there who had never heard of Chuck Berry or the Beatles or the Bee Gees, let alone any of their music.

But they sure got into the dancing! And that was, absolutely, great fun to watch, as were the line dances, which are all but forgotten today.

"If this first one's any indication, I think they say

that things only get better with time," said Joshua's Warriors President Chuck Honaker. "We've learned a lot from this one. We've learned what's working, what's not working, and probably, we'll end up making it at least an annual event."

Honaker said Joshua's Warriors is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and is a member of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

"We couldn't have asked for a better first time," said Jay Fopma, VP of Joshua's Warriors and who, along with Hilbish, was the driving force behind making the Sock Hop a reality. "This definitely will not be the last one."

Joshua's Warriors is a

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Joshua and Tonya Babatz dancing with their kids at the April 6 '50s, '60s and '70s dance sponsored by Joshua's Warriors. Photo by Mark Smith

Chief Dyer: 'We are always working' to prepare for disaster situations

By Shawn Jarrard
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David Dyer knows better than anyone that when disaster strikes and lives are on the line, preparation can make all the difference in the world.

That's why — as Union County Emergency Management Agency Director, Fire Chief and E-911 Director — he goes above and beyond to prepare his first responders for any number of disaster situations through regular training.

The local EMA is required by the state to conduct annual training exercises, which generally range from tabletop roleplaying to full-scale events featuring coordination between all first responder agencies to simulate emergencies in the community.

Dyer said the state mandates each county perform two such exercises each year, though here in Union County, Dyer shoots for four.

The most recent exercise took place in February at the Union County Emergency Operations Center, or EOC, at EMA Headquarters inside Fire Station No. 1, and the chief was pleased as usual with the way his crew performed.

"Everybody did great," said Dyer. "We always learn from every exercise we do, that there's something we could tweak and make better, and that's what we're always looking for."

"We set up our objectives, that we want to test this and this, and if we meet all those, we still find some little something that we could do a little bit better, and that's what we're always working toward."

"The biggest thing I want everybody to know is that we are working on this all the time so that we can better respond."

Due to all the rain that moved through the county over the winter, Dyer and Deputy EMA Directors Richard Jones and Brent Long decided to center February's functional

exercise on a flooding event.

During the exercise, Dyer and his team, including EMA & Fire Administrative Assistant Jeannie Harris Matheson, tried out a new EOC setup and implemented new procedures for the EOC's Information Center.

The main objectives were to test communications between E-911 Dispatch and the EOC, and to work in new schema for organizing and prioritizing information relayed in emergency events.

"Dispatch takes on all of the 911 calls, and they get hammered," Dyer said. "When it gets to a certain level that they can't handle those calls anymore, and it gets to be more than they can do, we open up the EOC."

"We assist them in smaller tasks, like contacting different folks (to help them coordinate the response effort). So, we tested 911 getting calls and then them getting that information to us."

Also in the exercise, first



Union County EMA & Fire Administrative Assistant Jeannie Harris Matheson monitoring the Information Center during a recent EOC training exercise. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

responders utilized a new EOC room layout designed to more quickly disseminate important information about emergency events.

They did this by organizing different kinds of

information on a series of white boards using categories like Timeline, Situation, Weather, Objective, Resources, Tasks and Communications.

For each category, EOC personnel listed the latest

information from the flooding exercise, a practice Dyer said will help keep folks up to speed with real-time information that is also readily accessible by those coming on shift to relieve

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SOCCER

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Union County Recreation Department

Annual Easter Egg Hunt

April 13th 11 a.m.

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Byron Herbert

Reece Farm

Opening Day

April 17th

10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

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