

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, April 12, 2023

E-911 honors dispatchers with appreciation week

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Every year in the second full week of April, the U.S. celebrates public safety telecommunications personnel, giving residents a great opportunity to reflect on the often-unsung heroes who coordinate emergency services and resources for people in their darkest hours.

This year, National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week runs April 9-15, during which time local 911 dispatchers will receive recognition both nationally and at the local level for the hard work they do as the "first" first responders in most emergencies.

Dispatchers serve a

variety of functions ranging from being the voice urging calm in people's most perilous moments, to being the invaluable resource connecting folks with the exact help they need as quickly as possible.

The job requires talented individuals working together in small teams of just two or three people handling all the emergency and non-emergency calls in the county, working radios, phone lines, and coordinating any number of services and local and state agencies to respond effectively.

It's a massive undertaking; in 2022 alone, local dispatchers fielded 13,485 emergency calls to the Union County E-911 Center, plus

nearly 40,000 non-emergency calls, of which 24,319 were inbound and 15,259 were outbound.

And people may not be aware, but 911 offers Telephone CPR for callers who feel comfortable performing the life-saving measures until medical help arrives. Since December, dispatchers have instructed 18 people right over the phone how to administer CPR.

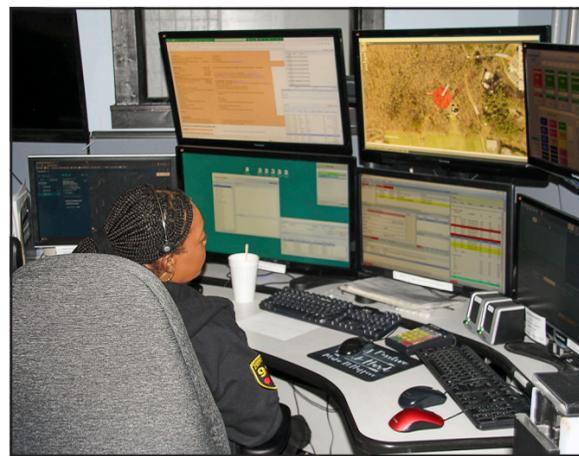
Mostly, it's a thankless job done by people who necessarily work behind the scenes, though from time-to-time the public still manages to find ways to express gratitude for dispatchers with small tokens of appreciation like bringing by food, sending

cards, or calling back to say thanks.

Of course, the local public safety community is more than just a community; it's a family, the members of which love each other as much as they love their jobs, which reinforces genuine bonds between first responders no matter the department or agency.

And it is in this spirit of familial togetherness that 911 Director David Dyer and 911 Lt. Millie Baxter will be holding an appreciation reception for dispatchers, complete with refreshments and plenty of gratitude, at the Communications Center this week.

See E-911 Appreciation, Page 2A



New Union County 911 Dispatcher Maggie Guerrier observing the multiple screens needed to perform the job, pictured here last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

UCHS Band continues streak of straight Superior Ratings at LGPE



The Union County High School Band during their "superior" performance at the annual Large Group Performance Evaluation on March 17. Photo/Facebook

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For the eighth year in a row, the members of the Union County High School Band came out on top with straight

Superior Ratings at their recent Large Group Performance Evaluation, proving themselves to be among the best of the best in the state.

Put on by the Georgia Music Educators Association, LGPE is an annual event each

March at which the skills of student instrumentalists are put to the test, not unlike end-of-year testing, but the scores have no effect on a student's overall grade.

"We pick three songs," UCHS Band Director Will

Stafford said. "There's a required music list that you have to choose from, so I try to go through and pick out quality music pieces from there that are (an) appropriate difficulty for our group, and I let the kids

See UCHS Band, Page 2A

Man missing for over a week found alive in creek

By Shawn Jarrard
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A Forsyth County man miraculously survived eight days in the mountain wilderness after his motorcycle crashed in a particularly remote area near Suches, leaving him injured and unable to seek help.

He was riding down a U.S. Forest Service Road Saturday, March 25, when he reportedly hit a mud puddle in the dirt roadway, causing his bike to fall on him and injure his leg, according to Union County Fire Sgt. Patrick Schmidt, who responded to rescue the man Sunday, April 2.

Following the crash, Harold "Kirk" Wintersteen, 69, crawled and slid about 100 yards down the mountain to a tributary of Logan Creek in the Cooper Creek Recreation Area. There, he hung a brightly colored safety vest in a tree to hopefully draw attention to his position.

Completely exposed to



Harold "Kirk" Wintersteen

the elements, which included several stormy days and temperatures that dipped below freezing overnight on March 29, Wintersteen subsisted on branch water alone for eight days while awaiting rescue, repeatedly refilling a water bottle he'd been carrying, Schmidt said.

He was last seen during an event at the Two Wheels See Missing Man Found, Page 2A

Commissioner Lamar Paris elected president of ATVG

News Special
North Georgia News

During the Fall meeting of the Association of Tennessee Valley Government's (ATVG) Board of Directors in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Lamar Paris, Sole Commissioner of Union County, Georgia, was elected President of the ATVG for calendar year 2023.

ATVG represents local governments in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. With nearly 1,000 local governments being served by TVA, the ATVG organization strives to advocate on behalf of its county membership.

A nonprofit 501(c)(4) corporation chartered in 1981, the ATVG's primary purpose is to improve communication and understanding between local county governments and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

ATVG further strives to advance the interests of the members at the national, regional and state levels.

The organization's Executive Director is Mike Arms of Knoxville, Tennessee, who uses a strong and collective



ATVG Executive Director Mike Arms congratulating new ATVG President Lamar Paris.

voice to work on a nonpartisan basis for solutions to critical issues that affect all parties.

Board members meet quarterly within the TVA region for educational sessions and to conduct the organization's business affairs.

TVA is recognized as a major economic driver within its communities through

being a provider of reliable, reasonably priced power, along with economic development initiatives for recreation and industrial activities. It is also understood that TVA must be an active environmental steward of natural resources.

The ATVG organization has TVA representatives at all See ATVG President, Page 2A

American Legion Post 121 hosts seminar for veterans

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Throughout the ages, veterans from all backgrounds and creeds have given their all in service to their country, and those living in the North Georgia Mountains are no different. On Thursday, March 30, it was time to give back.

American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121 hosted a

Veterans Benefits and Opportunities Seminar at the Union County Community Center in Blairsville, lasting from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

There are plenty of local outreach programs, but this event was the first of its kind where a veteran service organization gathered over a dozen speakers and groups to create a visible support network, complete with

visual presentations aimed at informing veterans.

"We're bringing people in that can talk about different benefits," explained Post 121 Sr. Vice Cmdr. Kathy Merritt, giving as an example Union County Tax Commissioner Lee Knight, who spoke about tax breaks that are available to veterans.

"Then, the other See Veterans Benefits, Page 6A



The success of American Legion Post 121's Veterans Benefit and Opportunities Seminar on March 30 exceeded the expectations of event organizers. Photo by Frank Uhler



Vol. 114 No. 16

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

SOCCER

STATE TOURNAMENT
4/13 Girls @ N Murray 6 PM
4/14 Boys @ N Murray 6 PM

Windstream Town Hall April 19

See page 2C

Derrick Whittle Blood Drive April 15

See page 4B

Allegheny Low Country Boil April 15

See page 2C



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UCHS Band...from Page 1A

have some influence on it.

"I usually pick one or two songs in each category, and then they get to vote on them from there, which has really helped their motivation, too, because they get a voice in what they play."

Songs are chosen in January, and students prepare by spending "countless hours" practicing their performances both at school and at home; Stafford estimates the average practice time outside of class is four hours weekly.

This, of course, is on top of Stafford going above and beyond when it comes to teaching.

"And then we also had a symphonic camp where I brought in a clinician – one of the best band directors in the country – to come and work with our band," Stafford said.

"That was like two days in a row of eight-hour days."

All that training gets put to the test at the event – this year on March 17 – where students are judged by professional music teachers with lofty records. In fact, Stafford himself has become one of those judges, having added a record of perfect scores among his students to his reputation.

"There's a head judge and two other judges," Stafford said of the evaluation, adding that while there is some wiggle room on the rubric, UCHS band students didn't need it. "We

could have gotten some Bs and still gotten a superior rating ... but they literally had a perfect score."

It was the same with the sight-reading portion requiring students to perform music unfamiliar to them to gauge their ability to properly read notation. Students have six minutes to look over the songs, during which time they cannot practice with instruments or receive instruction.

Stafford compares that aspect of band to learning how to read; musical notes are just a different kind of language. It's clear, then, that UCHS band

students have mastered their understanding and become fluent in the language of music.

It's never been about the scores, though, as Stafford enjoys teaching the kids about the passion that comes with understanding and making music. And there's clearly something to be said of the link between that concept and his students' consistent resounding success.

"There's a lot of work that really went into (LGPE)," concluded Stafford, who is already looking forward to next year's performances. "But it paid off, you know?"

E-911 Appreciation...from Page 1A

The local 911 family has been celebrating National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week since Dyer assumed his leadership role there in 2017, and while dispatchers are happy for the recognition, more importantly, they are thankful for the privilege of serving the public.

Dyer and Baxter are pleased with their roster of dispatchers, which consists of a veteran team that has worked together for years now. Indeed, there is very little turnover at E-911 due to the steadfast dedication of the employees and the tight-knit working environment.

The center has taken on a new addition, however, in part-timer Maggie Guerrier, who has been training for about three months and has proven to be a natural fit with her colleagues. She will be augmenting the demand at E-911 as the county continues to grow.

"You've got to want to do this job," Baxter said of the type of person who finds success "coordinating chaos" as a dispatcher, noting that passion is just as important as training for a position that is highly rewarding but also stressful.

For example, it can be hard not knowing the final

disposition of the people who call in, as once their part is done, dispatchers rarely hear how an emergency turns out.

Are the callers ultimately OK? Did they make it?

Still, dispatchers know they are helping people, and their passion and skills bring them back to the center shift after shift, which is why everyone should pause to consider and be grateful for their service this week.

"My dispatchers – I couldn't be prouder," Baxter said. "I would put them up against anybody in the state; they're that good at their jobs."

Missing Man Found...from Page 1A

of Suches motorcycle lodge. When he failed to turn up at home after leaving, the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office issued a missing person alert, and his friends organized a "Help Find Kirk" social media campaign to look for him.

The search for Wintersteen remained fruitless until April 2, when two bikers reportedly learned about the missing man at Two Wheels after speaking with someone familiar with the search.

These good Samaritans set out to find Wintersteen and came upon his bike off Forest Service Road 261, a small, rarely traveled dirt path roughly 11 miles from Wolf Pen Gap Road. While inspecting the scene, they heard yelling down the mountain and quickly contacted authorities.

The Union County Fire Department deployed its fully loaded Polaris 6x6 utility vehicle to retrieve Wintersteen, meeting with one of the bikers at Wolf Pen Gap Road to help

lead them to the scene while the other biker stayed with the injured man.

Sgt. Schmidt and Firefighter Adam Plott found Wintersteen lying halfway in the tributary "alert and able to talk to us," and they put him in a rescue stretcher and carried him roughly 30 yards up the creek to transport him in the Polaris, Schmidt said.

"At that point, we started removing some of his clothing, checking for major injuries, started an IV on him so we could give him medication," Schmidt said.

Due to the densely wooded, steep terrain, it took about an hour and a half to drive Wintersteen back out to Wolf Pen Gap Road and SR 180, where the firefighters met with a Union County Sheriff's Deputy who officially confirmed the identity of the man for other agencies.

Union General EMS drove Wintersteen to Northeast Georgia Health System for

emergency medical evaluation in Gainesville, where he is reportedly still receiving treatment for the ordeal he experienced, Schmidt said.

"I would consider this a miracle – the grace of God," Schmidt said, noting that several of the many people who had been searching for Wintersteen were "in shock that he was still alive."

"They said, 'I'll be honest with you – when we were riding these roads, we started looking for buzzards at this point to find his body,'" Schmidt continued. "They did not expect him to be alive."

Kristen Gailey Stevens, a friend of Wintersteen's, worked to expand the search effort via social media. When Wintersteen was found, she expressed gratitude for those who assisted.

"Praise God and the biking community and everyone else who searched!" she said in an April 2 Facebook post.

ATVG President...from Page 1A

their quarterly meetings, and some members always attend the annual TVA meetings. ATVG is encouraged to remain proactive in this role of cooperation.

"ATVG will continue to advocate policies for associated local governments and communities, including lake levels," Paris said. "Active parties recognize that there can be both support and opposition

to various TVA policies while fully understanding that it is through education on related issues that we all make better decisions."

The organization offers an Affiliate Membership, which is open to any corporate, state government, academic, and nonprofit organization that wants to support and be affiliated with ATVG.

Affiliate members participate fully in the activities of the Association. They are invited to attend meetings and to take an active role in implementing the "Program of Work."

The Association of Tennessee Valley Governments may be reached at P.O. Box 3578 Clarksville, Tennessee, 37043, or by telephone at 865-659-4745.

Fallen Union County Deputy to be honored at Semiannual Blood Drive Saturday, April 15th

Blood Assurance and the family of a fallen Union County sheriff's deputy will honor his life at an upcoming blood drive.

The semiannual Derrick Whittle Memorial Blood Drive is scheduled for Saturday, April 15, from 11 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center in Blairsville.

On September 15, 2011, Whittle, 38, was critically injured in a car crash while responding to an emergency call. He died three days later at Erlanger Hospital in Chattanooga.

Since the first blood drive in 2012, Blood Assurance has collected more than



Derrick Whittle

800 units of blood in Whittle's memory. Due to the overwhelming response from the

community, the event now takes place twice a year.

Donors can schedule an appointment online at www.bloodassurance.org/dwhittle, call 800-962-0628, or text BAGIVE to 999777. Walk-ins will also be accepted.

To be eligible to donate blood, you must be at least 17 years old (16 years old with parental consent), weigh 110 pounds or more and be in good health. Donors are asked to drink plenty of fluids – avoiding caffeine – and eat a meal that is rich in iron prior to donating.

All individuals who donate will receive a commemorative Super Donor t-shirt.



S.A.F.E. (Support in Abusive Family Emergencies) in conjunction with Community Connections 101 presents the annual

Fashion Show and Silent Auction

Saturday, April 29, 2023
at 2:00 pm

Doors will open at 1:15
to shop the silent auction items
Civic Center, Blairsville

For more information, contact:
safefundraising@gmail.com
Free Admission

Donations accepted through card, cash and check
All donations accepted go directly to safeservices.org
Crisis Line: 706-379-3000

Big-hearted 9-year-old gives back to community

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

There's being thoughtful, and then there's being 9-year-old Alyssa Wilson, whose inspiring, surprisingly mature decision to give to those in need has reminded folks of a particular Bible verse.

"Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven," states the King James Version of Matthew 18:4.

When she received \$62 for her ninth birthday, Alyssa knew exactly what she wanted to do with it. With giving on her mind, she decided to use all of that money to purchase food for the New Hope Fellowship Church Food Pantry.

"Every time I give things away, it just makes me feel happy," said Alyssa, who has donated toys and old clothing before to other organizations. "This is the first time we've taken (anything) here."

Courtney Wilson is incredibly proud of her daughter, and she finds it difficult to talk about her little girl's generous nature without

tearing up: "She's just always had a really big heart, just a giving spirit," her mother said, and she and the rest of the family have always encouraged her.

On March 25, Alyssa decided to come back to the pantry after having already dropped off her groceries; she wanted to take her gift a step further and assist in sorting the food into boxes. She also helped load them up into cars, vans and trucks for transport to hungry families.

Although too little to carry the hefty boxes filled with cans and jars of all kinds, Alyssa had some help in the form of a little red wagon the church has been using as a sort of outdoor filing cabinet.

After clearing out the papers, it became a delivery service. With each new vehicle that drove up, the pint-sized philanthropist loaded up and took off.

"Christmas is a-coming today," joked Larry Stover, a member of New Hope who volunteers at the Food Pantry, but he was very serious in his belief that Jesus organized the

chance meeting between the Wilsons and the church.

"We were going to take it to North Carolina, and we just happened to see (their) doors open," recalled Courtney, who just happened to be driving down Blue Ridge Highway past the church on March 21.

"(Alyssa's) got a precious heart – a big, huge heart," agreed New Hope church member Roberta Ford.

Dora Davenport was just one of those people who stopped by the pantry to pick up groceries. She, like Stover, firmly believes that Alyssa is a blessing, an angel sent from the Lord Himself.

"That's great; a lot of big people won't do that," Davenport noted. "We need more people coming up in the world like her."

And Alyssa hopes to do even more, saying she would like to volunteer or perform other miracles for the needy when she grows up, whether at the New Hope Food Pantry or elsewhere.

To drop off donations of any kind or pick up groceries at New Hope Fellowship's physical location, go to 1456



Local 9-year-old Alyssa Wilson, right, recently gave her own birthday money to help feed hungry residents. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Blue Ridge Highway. People may just find Alyssa herself and her little wagon up there.

The pantry is open every fourth Saturday of the month from 10 a.m. to noon. Direct

any questions to the church's phone number at 706-745-9864.

Veterans Benefits...from Page 1A

half ... we're talking about opportunities where the veterans themselves can give back to the community," she said.

Merritt estimates that anywhere between 70 to 90 veterans and their spouses attended the event, including speakers. She didn't expect all those interested parties to "come out of the woodwork" and attend the event but was no less thankful.

It took a lot of planning to put the seminar together, and while Post 121 offered various informational booths for guests to peruse on their own, Merritt was inspired to change things up after attending an event with guest speakers.

"I went to a Veterans' Benefit Seminar in Blue Ridge and thought, 'You know what, that's a great idea. We need to do something similar here,'" Merritt said. "So, I came back to my post and said, 'We need to do this.' And from there, we made this event happen."

And the event was a tremendous success. Veteran organizations and non-veteran organizations alike came out in full to support the American Legion-sponsored event. It served as a two-fold program largely centered around information, announcements and, of course, camaraderie.

No one doubts the need to support veterans, who are estimated to take their own lives at a rate of 22 per day. That's why the seminar included services like VA S.A.V.E. Training for mental health awareness and the PACT Act, which offers help to those suffering from toxic exposures.

On a local level, Tax Commissioner Knight spoke on tax breaks that certain disabled veterans are eligible for, while organizations like Union County Family Connection and the American Red Cross offered opportunities for vets to continue serving outside military settings.

Having grown up a "military brat" and recently retired from the United States



Blairsville VA Clinic Manager Ivelisse Miranda-Wilson was happy to speak with veterans at the American Legion event last month. Photo by Frank Uhler

Air Force, Merritt herself is learning to navigate a new world in civilian life, so she sympathizes with the plight of other veterans and understands their mindset.

She believes "veterans are people that signed up for service to their country, to their community."

"They might not be in the military anymore, but they want to still give back to their community," she said, and the fact that Merritt had a part in helping the American Legion set up the seminar is a testament to that.

Retired U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Roy Hamby was familiar with similar programs through the Georgia Department of Veterans Service, where he worked for 23 years leading the Blairsville office. He was reminded of some of them when he attended that Thursday's seminar.

"We had what we call a 'Supermarket of Benefits,' and there would be 40 tables there and each table would be a different agent," Hamby said. "And this is a mini-type thing

like that; it's called one-stop shopping."

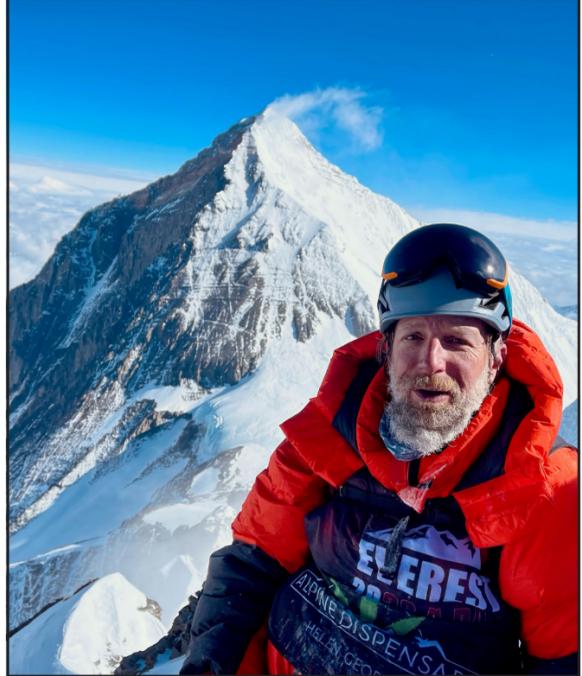
Indeed, several organizations helmed booths on the upper level of the Community Center, and each helped in some way, whether it was Georgia Mountain Health providing discreet addiction assistance and directions toward therapy, or United Community Bank preparing lunch for vets.

Hamby spoke for his brothers and sisters-in-arms when he noticed and appreciated all that effort.

"I would think that everybody has benefited from this, including me, because I've been retired since 2005, and there's been a lot of changes, and I picked up on some of those changes. So, everybody who came here cannot leave without having benefited in some way," he said. "(The American Legion) did a good job."

Post 121 plans to offer the Veterans Benefits and Opportunities Seminar again, so stay tuned for the announcement of future events.

Climbing Mt. Everest: One Man's Story at UC Library



Josh Garrison
Friends of Union County Library have sponsored travel programs in the past where attendees have been asked to share their travel tips and suggestions. This year we have invited Josh Garrison to Union County Public Library's Community Room (303 Hunt Martin Street, Blairsville). He

made it his goal to get to a destination not many attempt, and even fewer achieve. This program, Climbing Mt. Everest – One Man's Story, will begin at 4 PM on Thursday, April 25. Bring your questions and join us to hear about Josh's experience.

Here is Josh Garrison's

background and his motivation:

For everyone in the United States, September 11, 2001, was a day that changed their lives forever. For Josh Garrison this rang especially true, but whoever thought it would lead him to the top of the world. As a Purple Heart Combat Veteran, Josh served on dozens of deployments with the US Army and the CIA. After surviving 13 years of combat, Josh's life changed once again, now his new battle was with PTSD.

After years of limited success working on this with the VA, Josh stumbled across CBD and immediately saw the improvements in his PTSD. A very short time after this he opened Alpine Dispensary with hopes of being able to help his Veteran brothers and sisters in arms. Three years later that mission took Josh to the top of the world to raise awareness for the 22 Veteran suicides a day and to highlight the steps of how he overcame his PTSD.

This is a free program. Friends of Union County Library thank Josh Garrison for his service and for being willing to share his struggles and his achievements with us.