

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, April 15, 2020

Residents adjust to new normal amid 'shelter in place' DPH confirms first local COVID-19 death

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

In recent weeks, Blairsville and her neighbors have taken on the character of a dystopian novel or TV show, as more and more people forgo old social norms and begin to wear facial coverings in public to slow the spread of COVID-19. Bandanas and cloth napkins have been repurposed to cover noses and mouths. Actual face masks have also been deployed, from the real deal variety stitched by hand or using old-fashioned sewing

machines. The latest health trend hasn't taken with everyone. But at the Post Office, grocery stores, gas stations, restaurants – just about anywhere around town that hasn't closed – a growing number of people are starting to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's newest recommendation that even healthy people wear some form of facial covering in public. This most recent re-writing of the collective understanding of normal life in Georgia and across the U.S. comes on the heels of Union County's first confirmed case

and subsequent death from COVID-19, both of which were reported last week by the state's Department of Public Health. Infections have yet to peak in Georgia, per expert health models, and people around the country continue to fall ill, with more than half a million Americans already testing positive for the potentially deadly disease, though the actual transmission figures are certainly much higher. Furthermore, many thousands of U.S. citizens have perished from the novel coronavirus, which has proven to be particularly lethal to the

immunocompromised and elderly; like so many others, the Union County fatality occurred in a 79-year-old man with underlying health conditions. With no COVID-19 treatments or vaccines available by press time, exposure avoidance remains the best way for people to protect themselves against the disease, with the CDC advising the following: Wash hands frequently and use hand sanitizer; avoid face touching; apply social distancing with 6 feet between non-cohabitants; stay home as much as possible, especially



Many residents visiting the Blairsville Post Office on Friday responsibly followed the CDC's guidance on wearing facial coverings in public during the pandemic. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Seniors yearn for lost opportunities while schooling at home

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Online classes and home realities for school districts all across the state and nation, with students having to adapt to

learning from a distance for the remainder of the year. And with the school year rapidly coming to a close, the seniors at Union County High and Woody Gap School are fast approaching something much more permanent: adulthood.

Unfortunately, due to concerns over COVID-19 and Georgia's ongoing public health state of emergency, this year's seniors won't be able to experience many of the moments that serve as rites of passage in every high schooler's life. "It was a little sad when we got the news we weren't going back (to school)," Union County senior Andelin Hill said. "I really wanted to go to prom this year because I haven't been since I was a freshman. If I had known I wouldn't have a senior prom, I would've gone as a junior."

"But my main thing is missing our graduation. I was looking forward to getting together one last time out on the football field before we all split up. The last day we were in school, one of my friends said, 'This will be the last time I see you for a while.'"

"It didn't sink in right away, but then we got the news about school (campuses closing), and after we were out for two weeks, I didn't think we would go back at all."

Woody Gap senior Levi Etheridge said he wished he



With campuses closed for the remainder of the year, the Panther mascot of Union County Schools took to social media last week to tell kids they were missed. Photo/Facebook

See Seniors, Page 2A

Hospitals remain committed to safe medical care for all patients



Union General Hospital's Labor & Delivery Department working hard last week to support patients, community and staff. Photo/Facebook

numbers because we have seen an increase in our testing capacities," Union General Health System Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said. "We have seen that even in our own hospitals." As of press time, Union County had suffered a single COVID-19 fatality in a 79-year-old male with an underlying health condition, according to the Georgia Department of

Public Health. However, Hospital Administrator Leslie Daniel said the Health System had yet to have a patient pass away from COVID-19, so the person must have been located at a hospital outside Towns and Union counties. Given that many Georgia counties are now seeing daily case increases – one of Chatuge

Public Health. However, Hospital Administrator Leslie Daniel said the Health System had yet to have a patient pass away from COVID-19, so the person must have been located at a hospital outside Towns and Union counties. Given that many Georgia counties are now seeing daily case increases – one of Chatuge

See Hospitals, Page 2A

Secretary of State postpones primary election until June 9

News Special
North Georgia News

Citing state law, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger announced on April 9 that he was postponing the Statewide General Primary/Presidential Preference Primary Election until June 9.

Raffensperger's decision came after Gov. Brian Kemp extended the current public health state of emergency until May 13. Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan and Speaker of the House David Ralston concurred in the governor's extension of the state of emergency.

"Due to the governor's extension of the state of emergency through a time period that includes almost every day of in-person voting for an election on May 19, and



This Blairsville resident dropped off his absentee ballot application outside the Union County Courthouse on Good Friday, when the courthouse was closed. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

after careful consideration, I am now comfortably exercising the authority vested in me by

Georgia law to postpone the primary election until June

See Primary Election, Page 3A

Towns County hospital employee tests positive for COVID-19

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

HIWASEE – Union General Health System announced Friday that one of its employees at Chatuge Regional Hospital in Towns County had tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

"The employee last worked at Chatuge on Thursday, April 2," the Health System said. "The employee had no symptoms while working (that) week. The employee was instructed to isolate and distance from other people per the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines upon being tested."

Furthermore, Union General said it notified the Towns County Public Health Department at the time of the



Chatuge Regional Hospital in Hiawassee Photo by Todd Forrest

test, "and a positive result was returned on Thursday, April 9. The employee will not return to work until clear of COVID-19 infection per the CDC guidelines."

The Health System said it is working to notify all individuals who had contact with the employee to give them instructions on self-monitoring

See Chatuge Regional, Page 2A

Gowder, Heaton sentencing delayed again to May over virus



By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

Due to ongoing concerns about the novel coronavirus, federal sentencing for former hospital CEO Mike Gowder

and Blairsville-based physician James Heaton has been rescheduled once again, this time to May 28.

Both men were originally scheduled to be sentenced for

their prescription drug crimes on March 25, though that hearing was postponed for the same reason to April 21, and now, to the end of May. They remain free on bond.

The co-defendants were convicted on Oct. 24, 2019, when a jury of their peers found them guilty of more than 100 counts apiece in the federal prescription drug case.

Their convictions were the culmination of an extensive multi-agency investigation that began in 2015 and resulted in their February 2016 arrests in Union County.

Former Emergency Room Director David Gowder – Mike's brother – was originally a co-defendant in the case. He pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story on March 15, 2019, to prescribing oxycodone to a patient without a legitimate medical purpose.

He remains free on bond awaiting sentencing, which was previously set for March 23, though it, too, was postponed due to the pandemic. A new hearing date had not been set by press time.

For one reason or another, the nearly five-year-old case

has been plagued with multiple delays.

After being arrested in 2016, the men were indicted on state charges by a Union County grand jury in 2017 – David Gowder in April, and Mike Gowder and Heaton in July. They were then named as co-defendants in a federal indictment unsealed in April 2018.

Following David's guilty plea, Mike and Heaton were re-indicted March 19, 2019, as co-defendants. Their trial was set for April, but new evidence introduced by federal prosecutors

shortly before the trial resulted in a reschedule to Oct. 8.

It was delayed again because one of Heaton's attorneys was defending another client in a high-profile murder case in DeKalb County. Jury selection finally began Oct. 15, 2019, followed by seven days of testimony that concluded in Oct. 24 guilty verdicts.

Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley has said his office would make a decision regarding prosecuting the state's charges based on the outcome of the federal trial and sentencing.

Vol. 111 No. 16 Inside

4 Sections 20 Pages Arrests 2C

Weather Church 3C

Thurs: Sunny Hi 65 Lo 39 Classifieds 2D

Fri: Cloudy Hi 70 Lo 46 Opinion 4A

Sat: Showers Hi 65 Lo 45 Obitis 5C

April 16th
County
Meeting
Canceled

See page 3B

While Our Lobby Is Closed, We Are Still Here For You...
Offering All Services...
Use our convenient drop box for no-contact service
North Georgia News
and West Printing Company
We Are Closed On Wednesdays, But Available By Email

COVID-19
Scam
Alert

See page 2B