

North Georgia News

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Class of 2021 says 'goodbye' to Union County High

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The 179 members of the Union County High School Class of 2021 finished their secondary educational experiences on Friday, May 21, on the field at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Student speakers led the commencement exercises, addressing educators, family members and classmates with reflections on their adventures thus far, right at the tail end of their journey as Panthers.

Seniors Allison Colwell and Kaston Stephill spoke on some of the steps they had taken to make it to graduation, touching on the good times but also some of the hardships

they had experienced along the way.

"On our first real day of school in kindergarten, we were afraid of what was to come, similar to many of us after tonight," Colwell said. "In class, we learned that there was little to be afraid of. Mother Nature had a plan for us; we would never leave Union County because she wouldn't allow us to have any school field trips.

"For example, in second grade, we missed out on the zoo field trip; in fourth grade, the CNN Center; in eighth grade, the Appalachian Trail Hike and our annual trip to the State Capitol. To end our fantastic no-field-trip track record, COVID-19 canceled our plans for any school field trips for a year and

a half." Fortunately, COVID-19 did not cancel their senior year, as students were able to enjoy a full year of mostly normal experiences with mitigations like masks and quarantines in place.

In her salutatorian speech, Hannah Patton thanked those who had helped her reach a point in her life to be able to attend Clemson University for structural engineering in the fall.

"As I was writing this speech, I was able to reflect upon just how much each of these people has meant to me over the course of my life and education," Patton said. "With that in mind, it suddenly hit

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The Class of 2021 turned their tassels at the direction of High School Principal C.T. Hussion on Friday, May 21. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Woody Gap seniors graduate with traditional ceremony



Woody Gap School graduated seniors Grant Disser, Wes Ponder and Austin Crocker the morning of Saturday, May 22. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

SUCHES - Woody Gap School closed out its 80th year by saying goodbye to senior students Austin Crocker, Valedictorian Wes Ponder on Saturday, May 22, during the Class of 2021's graduation exercises at the school gymnasium.

Following an invocation by Crocker, Disser provided welcoming remarks, opening with a thank you to the administration, the Board of Education, school faculty, and everyone working behind the scenes to ready the gymnasium for the final farewell of Woody Gap's Class of 2021.

Among those mentioned were Mike Coker, Dr. James Edmondson, Amy McCombs,

Kim Perren and Doug Roberts, with special recognitions to senior class advisor Robert Hill, the day's guest speaker Bud Braddock, and retiring Woody Gap educators Sheila Tritt-Collins and Althea Cantrell.

Principal Carol Knight stepped to the podium to acknowledge the graduating seniors' parents before attempting to dispel a few

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Union Countians invited to May 29 Memorial Day event

By Allison Youngblood
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, May 29, the Memorial Day Ceremony held annually in the Union County War Memorial Veterans' Park will make its patriotic return after organizers canceled the 2020 event over COVID-19.

The ceremony will begin at 10 a.m., and everyone is invited to honor those who paid the ultimate price for their country. Attendees wanting to sit will need to bring a chair or blanket, and people are being asked to observe COVID best practices like social distancing. Face masks will not be required.

After all the uncertainty of 2020, Janice Walters-Taylor, who chairs the Memorial Day Ceremony and Parade Committee, said she was

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Union County War Memorial Veterans' Park was dedicated on Nov. 11, 1995. As is customary, the park will host the Memorial Day Ceremony, this year on May 29. Photo by Allison Youngblood

Sheriff asks for reduced speed limit at GA 515, K Creek Road

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union County Sheriff Mack Mason is tired of the high frequency of accidents that occur at the intersection of Georgia 515 and Kiutuestia Creek Road, and he believes there's an adequate solution to reduce crashes at that traffic signal: bring the speed limit down to 55 mph there.

To address this issue, the sheriff convened a meeting earlier this month in the Union County Commissioner's Office,

inviting stakeholders he feels confident can help to resolve his safety concerns.

Attending the May 11 meeting were Georgia Department of Transportation officials, the Sheriff's Office, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch and District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter.

At 65 mph, the speed limit under that light is the highest of any traffic signal in the county, right in the area that many residents use daily to enter and exit the

busy Blairsville Walmart. A speed reduction there could, in Mason's eyes, prevent accidents at that intersection.

According to the National Safety Council, speeding is a major factor in traffic deaths and injuries, resulting in, for example, 26% of traffic fatalities in 2019, or 25 deaths per day that possibly could have been avoided with reduced speeds.

"Excessive speeding reduces the amount of time the driver has to react in a

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Sheriff Mack Mason asked State Sen. Steve Gooch, State Rep. Stan Gunter and others to meet with him at the Commissioner's Office to discuss safety improvements at Georgia 515 and K Creek Road. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Relay For Life raises \$30,000 for cancer research, awareness



Children participated in the 2021 return of Union County Relay For Life, pictured here during the Survivor and Team Parades portion of the May 22 event. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The 27th Annual Union County Relay For Life returned to the Farmers Market on Saturday, May 22, taking on last year's "Roar" theme after the 2020 outing had to be canceled due to COVID-19.

In 2021, the effort managed to raise around \$30,000, and group volunteers are incredibly grateful for the level of donations during such a difficult past year.

"Considering the year everybody has had with COVID, the donations have been steady," Organizer Allyson McGraw said. "Volunteers didn't get to do as much as they wanted, but a few teams got to do some things that didn't require face-to-face and stuff like that."

"One of the biggest points I want to get across is that the American Cancer Society and other cancer-related organizations have really been concerned about the effect COVID has had,

because a lot of folks have been too afraid to go to the doctor or didn't follow up on their tests and screenings."

Locally, COVID also made it harder to knit together all the pieces for the event, as technology was utilized to a greater extent than ever before in preparing for the big day.

"It was a little challenging getting it all together," McGraw said. "A few of us are not really tech savvy. We have some

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Church van strikes 3-year-old in Sunday evening accident

By Shawn Jarrard
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A 3-year-old girl had to be life-flighted to a nearby trauma center after being hit by a church van May 23, according to authorities.

The accident occurred

on Fieldview Road off Georgia 325 around 5 p.m. Sunday. The little girl was conscious during medical transport, though her condition was not known by press time Monday.

Georgia State Patrol worked the accident. Also responding to the scene were

first responders with the Union County Sheriff's Office, Union County Fire Department, Union General EMS, and Air Life Georgia.

This story will be updated as more information becomes available.

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MEMORIAL DAY

REMEMBER & HONOR

With Respect from the Staff of
North Georgia News and
West Printing Company

Memorial Day...from Page 1A

determined to see the successful observance of Memorial Day to honor veterans and their families this year.

Unfortunately, there will not be a parade in 2021, though Walters-Taylor encourages the public to participate by attending the solemn ceremony commemorating veterans and fallen soldiers.

The ceremony will open with a performance by the Appalachian St. Andrew's Pipes and Drums followed by introductions and a performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" by Keith Bragg.

Boy Scouts of America Troop 101 of Blairsville will bring a memorial wreath for presentation alongside local veteran service organization commanders, and musical pieces will accompany the raising of the national, state and Armed Forces branch flags.

Walters-Taylor will serve as the keynote speaker herself, and she plans to honor war veterans and recognize the fallen, Prisoners of War, those Missing in Action, as well as Gold Star and White Star families.

Gold Star families are those who have lost a family member in combat, while White Star families have lost veteran family members to suicide.

An Army veteran and local leader in the American Legion Auxiliary Unit 121, Walters-Taylor takes her job seriously in "assisting veterans in any way, shape or form," which she considers to be "an honor and an obligation and a

privilege."

A native of Syracuse, New York, Walters-Taylor attended the New England Aeronautical Institute in New Hampshire before joining the U.S. Army. There, she served as a helicopter crew chief under General Staff in Germany, where she earned the rank of staff sergeant.

After leaving the Army, Walters-Taylor attended college at Florida International University before she and her husband moved to Blairsville, Georgia, in 1993.

"As a veteran, I've always been admiring of veterans' organizations," said Walters-Taylor, adding that she joined the American Legion

Auxiliary about three years ago and served as president until recently.

Last year, she joined an organization called valorclinic.org, "a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to improving access to quality of health care and shelter of veterans."

And only two months ago, Walters-Taylor was handed the responsibility of the Memorial Day weekend events. She is proud to have spearheaded this honorable project in service to veterans and their families.

Also during the commemorative event, there will be an award presentation for the American Legion

Auxiliary's First Annual Poppy Poster Contest featuring school-aged children from grades second through 12th. The winner of the contest was second-grader Eve Micancin.

The North Georgia Honor Guard will assist with the presentation of the memorial wreaths, will fire a rifle volley and play Taps. Rev. Richard Hoibraten, a Navy Seabee Veteran, will wrap up the ceremony with a benediction.

Walters-Taylor asks that anyone with questions about the ceremony contact her by calling 706-745-1854 or sending an email to valorclinicgeorgia@gmail.com. There is no inclement weather contingency for this event.

Relay For Life...from Page 1A

younger ones that are, but this community being a lot of older people has made us struggle with figuring it all out."

Guest speaker and cancer survivor Pastor Marty Duncan of Fellowship of the Hills Church spoke on the importance of supporting those facing cancer.

"If you are continuing to go through this journey of cancer tonight, I am here with you and praying for you," Duncan said. "As we all know, cancer comes in so many forms. It comes in all kinds of varieties. It has no respect for person, race, gender, status, political agenda or anything."

"Either it comes to us personally, or it comes to us by someone we love, or we see it as a caregiver when we take care of them. Sadly, many folks will spend their life worried about tomorrow, going through a time of anxiety."

Duncan encouraged those gathered not to worry about what is to come and to instead put their trust in God.

"First and foremost, don't think about tomorrow," Duncan said. "The word of God says that we are not even promised the next breath. So here is what I want to challenge you to do - I want to challenge you with the victory in the moment."

"I want you to understand that right now is a precious time. Right now is the blessing that you have, and don't let anyone steal that from you. Don't let cancer steal that from you."

Also speaking at the event, Pastor Scotty Jarrard of Harmony



Volunteers lit 300 luminary bags in honor of cancer victims Saturday night at the Farmers Market.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Grove Baptist Church told the story of his grandmother and how advancements in medical research have been changing cancer patients' lives today.

"In 1961, my mom was 16 years old," Jarrard said. "During that time, my mom had to watch my grandmother go through a very, very hard time. My grandmother had been diagnosed with a form of breast cancer that she didn't realize she had for quite a while. Unfortunately, in 1961, my grandmother lost that battle."

"What gets me today is the form of cancer my grandmother had is one that is treated very easily today. I know a lot of times we come together and wonder why we are doing this. Over the years, since 1983, Relay For Life has raised over \$7 billion to help with cancer prevention. That is amazing."

After a prayer from Jarrard, the group lit and walked through the 300 luminary bags set out to memorialize and honor those who had lost their battles with cancer, and already, the volunteers with Relay For Life are excited for the 2022 edition of the event.

"The last time we were even together as a group was on Jan. 16, 2020," McGraw said. "That was our kickoff for 2020, and we were excited we didn't get snowed on then. We had no idea what we were in for."

"We are back at it again. We are going to continue fighting. The American Cancer Society has challenged volunteers and their staff to pick up the fight again because COVID caused a lot of problems for us in 2020."

For more information on the American Cancer Society, visit Cancer.org.

Speed Limit...from Page 1A

dangerous situation to avoid a crash," per the National Safety Council, "(as well as) increases vehicle stopping distance and reduces the ability of road safety structures such as guardrails, impact attenuators, crash cushions, median dividers, and concrete barriers to protect vehicle occupants in a crash."

Reaction time is a critical component during an emergency stop that can take up to several seconds for a driver to register the need to stop and begin braking, which is why speed is such an important variable when it comes to minimizing damage in a crash.

Accounting for driver reaction time and braking distance, the total stopping distance at 55 mph is 265 feet versus 344 feet at 65 mph, per the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, so lowering the speed limit 10 mph at this intersection could have a big mitigation effect.

And Mason said speeding is increasingly becoming a problem in Union County, with the Sheriff's Office concentrating its efforts on pulling over speeders going well in excess of 20 to 30 mph or more in that area and others of the county.

To underscore his point, Mason said that, since transitioning to being a dedicated traffic enforcement officer a year ago, Lt. Leon James has written about 1,200 speeding tickets countywide, many for drivers traveling from up to 80-90 mph, and even some in excess of 100 mph.

The magnitude of the problem is compounded by the fact that counties are getting less help than in years past from the Georgia State Patrol, which has a serious shortage in manpower.

Here in Union, 2021 is already outpacing 2020 in terms of motor vehicle accidents, with 274 through April of this year compared to last year's 257 over the same time period in 2020, which saw a total of 901 accidents, a slight decrease from 973 in 2019.

This trend is likely to get worse as people continue flocking to the area away from cities, Mason said.

The number of potentially avoidable accidents at K Creek Road and Georgia 515 has held mostly steady in recent years, with 8 in 2018, 7 in 2019, a dip

to 4 in 2020, but already, the county has experienced at least 4 crashes through the beginning of May in 2021.

Given the likelihood that many of these accidents might possibly be avoided with reduced speeds, Sheriff Mason is asking the powers that be, namely the Department of Transportation with assistance from state legislators, to make a simple change in the speed limit at that light.

Currently, the speed limit on Georgia 515 switches from 55 to 65 mph a fifth of a mile west of Meeks Park. Mason is proposing that this speed limit increase be moved about 1.7 miles west to Ware Chevrolet, which would decrease the limit at the K Creek Road intersection to 55 mph.

He feels this would improve the safety of the intersection, though other issues exist there as well, including yellow-only turn signals, a hill and curve limiting sight distance for 515 westbound traffic, and a sharply angled offset lookback for motorists turning either left or right from K Creek Road onto Georgia 515.

Resulting from the meeting, GDOT District 1 Supervisor Jason Dykes committed to commissioning a traffic study at the light to see if changing the speed limit is warranted.

As part of the study, GDOT will be examining sight distance and the number of turning movements at the intersection to "look and see who's turning left and who's going straight, and kind of get an idea of the volume of traffic."

"The last time we counted it was in December of '17, so that likely has changed since then," Dykes said. "So, we can look at and see what the current traffic counts are going through there."

Added Dykes, "Right now, we have a plan to upgrade the intersection to add what we call 'protective left-turn phases,' where you'll have a green arrow instead of just a flashing yellow (for west and southbound traffic)."

Another potential solution would be a recessed right turn lane from 515 onto K Creek Road to give motorists greater sight distance when turning from K Creek Road onto 515, though GDOT does

not yet have a timeline on the work it will be doing at that intersection.

Following the May 11 meeting at the courthouse, Sheriff Mason took GDOT officials and Rep. Gunter down to K Creek Road at 515 to give them an idea of what it was like going through there at 65 mph.

"Unfortunately, many people approach a traffic light that is green with one thing in mind," Mason said. "Instead of slowing down and paying attention and preparing to stop should the light turn red, they gas it in order to clear the light to avoid having to stop."

"With the position I hold as sheriff and the many years of experience I have in traffic enforcement and accident investigation, I feel it is my solemn duty to try, once again, to help minimize what I and others see as a serious problem."

"I want to prevent serious injuries and loss of life. Ever since this four-lane in question has been built, changes have been made. Sadly enough, it is usually only after the tragic loss of life or lives. This could be a simple fix to help prevent this - lower the speed limit."

Separately, GDOT has committed to installing a "Restricted Crossing U-Turn" at the intersection of Georgia 515 and 325 at Nottely Dam Road, like the one installed in front of Walmart.

Essentially, the RCUT will require people who would normally turn left from 325 to instead turn right onto 515 and make a U-turn down the road.

The RCUT will feature construction of a new U-turn to the west of the intersection allowing people to more safely turn to the east, with the project expected to be completed this summer.

"We went through and studied the intersection, looked at the crashes, and felt like most of the crashes could have been prevented by those left turns coming off of Nottely Dam Road," Dykes said.

In the latest legislative session of the Georgia General Assembly, state lawmakers, including Gunter and Gooch, dedicated the 515/325 intersection to the memory of Sydnie Grace Jones, who died in January from injuries she sustained in a crash there.

UCHS Graduation...from Page 1A

me that, through each of these individuals, I have been blessed to see life's greatest lesson: anything that is meant to stand must have a firm foundation underneath.

"From a young age, I have always been fascinated with the way that things were built and put together. My mom says that often she would find me stacking Lincoln Logs or building forts, Legos, or popsicle stick houses."

Continuing, "I have learned over the last four years that my foundation is composed of many things. My foundation is first and most importantly Jesus Christ. My foundation is counting change in my granddaddy's lap as a little girl.

"It is playing ball in the backyard with dad, and it is listening to papa's Sunday morning sermons. My foundation is Union County softball fields and the youth room at church."

In closing, Patton encouraged her classmates to consider their foundations and to take those things with them in their next steps in life.

Valedictorian Hannah Todd likewise thanked all those involved in her life and asked that her classmates look optimistically toward the future as they move beyond the walls and halls of Union County High.

"Class of 2021, tonight marks the end of an era," Todd said. "This is the beginning of the rest of your life, of our lives. As Dr. Seuss famously says, 'You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself in any direction you choose. You are



Seniors Jordan Pemberton and Katie Baumeister welcomed guests to the Class of 2021 commencement exercises on a fine spring evening last Friday. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

on your own, and you know what you know. You are the one who will decide where to go."

"We have bonded together, learned together, won together, and lost together, but this is a new chapter in our lives. One in which we won't be together every day at school or in our extracurricular activities or just in our everyday lives."

Acknowledging that the unknowns of the future may be stressful for graduates, Todd urged her classmates to make considered choices and to actively pursue becoming the people that they wish to be.

"We are on our own to make independent decisions that will impact our life paths," Todd said. "This change is not always a welcoming idea, but as Einstein said, 'A ship is always safe at the shore, but that is not what it is built for.'

"Dealing with discomfort and uncomfortable situations is an essential part of our growth, because discomfort and difficulties are one side of the climb while opportunities for change, good change, is simply the other side."

Also in the ceremony, Katie Baumeister and Jordan Pemberton offered welcoming comments; the UCHS Ensemble Choir performed the National Anthem and Alma Mater; Reid Baumeister delivered closing remarks; and school administrators conferred diplomas.

Following the commencement exercises, graduates gathered at the end of the field to watch their Senior Video and enjoy a fireworks show before throwing their caps in the air and saying goodbye to one another.

Woody Gap...from Page 1A



Woody Gap Principal Carol Knight offered "Recognition of Parents" remarks during the Class of 2021 Graduation Program in the school gym. Photo by Todd Forrest

myths surrounding the youths of today.

"The kids these days," Knight said, asking the audience how often they had heard the derisive expression. "I'm sure your parents had the same opinion of you and your friends when you were growing up, and your grandparents had the same opinion of your parents and their friends growing up, and so on and so on.

"But the facts show that this generation is actually the best behaved in modern times, making better choices than their parents or grandparents. I will go so far as to declare that these three young men will represent the next 'greatest generation.'

"Like the men and women who came of age during the World War II era, these young people learned that life is not always easy, fair or within their control. They have dealt with the disruptions of the pandemic and have strived in spite of it.

"Congratulations to the Class of 2021. May future generations follow your lead."

Flanked by his enlarged black-and-white high school photo from the '50s, Keynote Speaker Braddock took center stage to offer a few words of wisdom, along with a C-note apiece to the three seniors.

Originally from Brunswick, Braddock graduated high school in 1957 and went on to marry Pat Lunsford, a

1958 Woody Gap grad. After graduating from the University of Georgia, Braddock began a lifelong career with the U.S. Forest Service, eventually retiring to Suches in 1997.

Braddock encouraged the senior class to become involved in the community and to save money for retirement from Day One. On a personal level, he urged them to start a family tree and to pick the brains of their clan's older members.

"My dad died in a boating accident, and I was never able to ask him the questions that I now wish I could have asked," Braddock said.

Additionally, he lent credence to the mantra that people should dress for success, saying, "I can assure you that managers who hire people have in mind the kind of person they want working for them."

Braddock then took a moment to speak man-to-man to the three seniors.

"You need to talk to (your future wife) about whether or not they want to have children, where they want to live, and whose career will be the dominant one," Braddock said. "You also need to realize that you don't just marry the girl, you marry her whole family."

In closing, Braddock and his wife provided each senior with \$100. Approaching the graduates one-by-one, a roar of applause erupted throughout

the gym as he reached into his wallet to furnish the Class of 2021 with his surprise offering.

School Superintendent John Hill presented the seniors with their diplomas, and a viewing of the senior video and the annual Candlelight Service followed.

In a darkened gym, each senior lit an individual candle before lighting a second candle held by members of the Woody Gap Class of 2022 in a symbolic "passing of the torch."

"Each of these seniors has been through a lot, and they each have a plan for what they want to do in life, and we're proud of each one of them," Knight told the North Georgia News after the hats flew into the air and guests gathered on the gym floor to congratulate the newest flock of Falcons alumni.

"It was a blessing to return to a more-normal graduation; last year we had to hold it in the parking lot, and that is something that will always stand out," she said. "The staff has done everything that needed to be done this year to keep our kids safe and learning."

"We owe a big thank you to the leadership of Union County Schools, the School Board and the superintendent for making very wise choices during the school year."

2021 Derrick Whittle Memorial Scholarship Recipients



The Derrick Whittle Memorial Scholarship in 2021 has been awarding scholarships in his memory since 2012, and have awarded a total of 50 from 2012 through 2021. The names of this year's recipient's are: Hannah Todd, Mollie Berry, Katie Baumeister, and Ashley Watkins. Our best wishes and continued success are extended to these students. N(May26Z11)CA