

# North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, May 31, 2023

## Women shine in Memorial Day observances

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On Saturday, May 27, Blairsville commemorated the country's fallen heroes along with the women who have fought to gain the same ground as their brothers in arms for the official annual Memorial Day observances.

This year's theme was "Honoring Our Women Heroes," but before the ceremony could begin, Downtown Blairsville became host to the Memorial Day Parade.

The annual event began at roughly 10 a.m., and both patriotic guests and shoppers at the Spring Arts, Crafts & Music Festival were able to watch as the parade wound its way around the Downtown Blairsville Square.

Local veteran Chuck

Honaker announced businesses and organizations as they passed by in floats and elaborately decorated vehicles.

This year's Parade Grand Marshal was not one person, but rather, a float containing several women who each held an involvement with the military. Whether part of active service, veterans, medics or auxiliary members, a trailer full of ladies led the parade on its path downtown.

"It was wonderful. The respect that we were given as we were riding along was amazing, and I felt like I was really making a difference in the community," said American Legion Auxiliary President of Unit 121 Nancy Kunz.

"All the women that were on there were having a good time," added Kathy Merritt, Post 121 Sr. Vice Commander and veteran of the U.S. Air

Force.

With the parade wrapped up, everyone split for a short time until the Memorial Day Ceremony commenced shortly after noon for an emotional tribute to the fallen and an official recognition of women who have served in the military since the country's founding.

Often, when people think of the involvement of women in war, the stereotypical image of the nurse or camp wife comes to mind. But Merritt, this year's honored speaker, returned to set the record straight.

In her speech, she acknowledged the changing roles of women when it came to supporting their families and their country.

"Women have served in the United States military or alongside since the beginning – since the very beginning – since the very beginning



The 2023 Grand Marshals for the Memorial Day Parade were "Our Women Heroes" to match the theme for this year's Memorial Day Ceremony. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Farmers Market opens for 2023 season Saturday

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Union County Farmers Market is returning for another season starting this Saturday, June 3, and alongside home-grown and handmade items, marketgoers can expect the return of live entertainment like bluegrass music and clogging.

According to Market Manager Patrick Fix, June 3 will also be Beef Cattle Field Day. Guests will have access to information on the beef industry and be able to enjoy free hamburgers while they shop for the first produce of the season or charming crafts.

Many of the farmers who sell their produce there haven't reported any major

losses to the market despite fears that a particularly cool spring would freeze incoming crops. Still, guests should know that they may not be able to find everything they're looking for right off the bat.

"That's the thing – our market up here in the mountain is seasonal," Fix said. "You start off with greens, and you

See Farmers Market, Page 3A



Union Countians will be able to get their weekly fill of fresh seasonal produce and any number of handmade goods at the Farmers Market starting this weekend. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2022

## MECHS graduates 22 seniors in local ceremony



Mountain Education Charter High School Class of 2023 Union Site Graduates

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Mountain Education Charter High School held its Union Site Graduation Ceremony on Tuesday, May 23, celebrating the accomplishments of the Class of 2023 inside the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

Featuring 22 students, the Class of 2023 is made up of students from both Towns and

Union counties.

Union County graduates include William Matthew Anderson, Keirra Reena Barnes, Zachary Terrell Barrett, Elijah Stephen Batura, Curtis James Beavers, Rylee Shae Blevins, Makayla Sky Bouchard, Gabriella Marie Campos, Lillian Rae Carpenter, Alexander James Clay, Makayla Brooke Davenport, James Dalton Dockery, Ashleigh Taylor Duffey, Faith Dianne Green, River Hughes, Autionna

Marie Lemott, Alexander James McClure, John Ronin Patterson and Zachary Lee Taylor.

Graduates Olivia Olivia Escamilla and Drew Walt Sofield are from Towns County, and Kinley Eva-Marie Long is from Fannin County.

This year's 6 p.m. ceremony saw 10 Honor Graduates, with Sofield receiving High Honors. Joining him as Honor Graduates were Batura, Barnes, Blevins. See MECHS Graduation, Page 6A

## Woman charged in alleged slashing of estranged husband

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

A Blairsville woman is facing multiple felony charges after repeatedly slashing her estranged husband with a knife, fighting with deputies, and violating her probation for a previous possession of methamphetamine conviction, according to Union County Sheriff's Office.

Juliea Mae Rich, 33, was taken into custody on Sunday, May 21, and charged with aggravated assault, five counts of obstructing law enforcement, and disorderly conduct. She bonded out of jail on Monday, May 22, only to be re-arrested for probation violation on Tuesday, May 23.

She remains in custody at the Union County Jail.

The alleged slashing incident occurred around midnight on Saturday, May

20, according to UCSO Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn.

Earlier in the day, Juliea had paid for her husband to take a taxi to the home where she was staying in the Enchanted Woods neighborhood off Murphy Highway. According to Osborn, the couple was under court order not to be around each other.

The two spent the afternoon and evening together, but the situation took a violent turn that night when an argument broke out and Juliea pulled a knife and began using it to cut her husband, Osborn said, noting that alcohol was involved.

After grabbing up most of his clothes, the husband fled the attack and began banging on neighbors' doors to find help, as Juliea had disabled his cellphone, Osborn said.

One of the neighbors called 911, and responding



Juliea Mae Rich

deputies found the bloody, shoeless man wandering in the area.

Deputies discovered blood on several nearby doors and at Juliea's residence, where they made contact with her.

See Rich Arrested, Page 3A

## Families enjoy 'reel fun' at Rec Dept. Fishing Rodeo

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

CHOESTOE – The Kids Fishing Rodeo sponsored by the Union County Recreation Department returned for another successful community event on Wednesday, May 24, at the Byron Herbert Reece Farm and Heritage Center on Wolf Creek.

Several hours beforehand, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources stocked the creek with 450 rainbow trout from area fish hatcheries in preparation for the rodeo – though around this time of year, they stock every two weeks.

"Everything went so good with last year that John Lee Thompson, who's the state trout director, let us do two this year," said Dustin Rogers of the Rec Department. "We had one back in April in Suches; we



Daddy-daughter duo Donny and Cora Duggar were excited to reel in a catch at the Kids Fishing Rodeo last week. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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# Fishing Rodeo...from Page 1A

wanted to do one for that side of the mountain and this side of the mountain, so this'll be the second annual (event)."

The rodeo can support up to 40 participants, though the Rec Department never turns away interested parties, especially since typical "rec" opportunities are not for everyone.

"I just had the idea that not every kid kicks a ball, hits a ball," Rogers said. "And we live here in the (most beautiful part of Georgia, and I thought, 'Man, we need to do some fishing stuff and some other outdoor activities.'"

Rogers believes his own love of the outdoors is rooted in fond memories of playing in creeks when he was "knee-high." By creating similar experiences for a new generation, Rogers is perpetuating the Rec Department's mission of getting people out and about – not just the youngsters, either – and showing them how to appreciate "God's country."

As the department's very own Outdoor Specialist, Rogers treats the affair as a big picnic and a community get-together. Indeed, hot dogs were on the grill by the time Rogers opened the event and gave the novice fishers the green light to go down to the creek; he lamented

not having more time to clean and serve the trout.

Near the pavilion, Noontootla Creek Farms set up a tent to introduce the concept of fly-fishing. Located in Blue Ridge, Noontootla has been around since 1954 and open for business since 2005. The locale offers a monitored taste of the outdoors with guided fly-fishing, quail-hunting, sporting-clay shooting, and farmhouse lodging.

"Most of the kids out on the water today are spin fishermen, and that's how they've been taught," said Emily Owenby, the fourth-generation owner of Noontootla. "So, we're just hoping to introduce a new technique to them and just get kids started on the water with fly-fishing."

In Owenby's words, spin-fishing is more about luring a fish with bobbers or other attractants. Fly-fishing, by contrast, uses dry flies and aquatic insects to entice fish with bait they would find in the wild.

And judging by the gaggle of little ones who decided to check out the tent before going fishing, a few learned about what fly-fishing entailed that day.

The Fishing Rodeo was designed to cater specifically to kids 15 and under, but parents were by far the ones maintaining a watch on the poles. Smaller children either watched closely as mom or dad reeled in a trout or chased each other up the bank.

Some, like Kyle Mahan, were interested in checking out what other kinds of life the stream supported. While his father hooked their sixth fish, Kyle was busy following his mother Jennifer to look for crawdads.

Meanwhile, an entire neighborhood of little girls set up together along the bank; when one caught "the smallest fish ever," her friend volunteered to take the animal home and raise it as a pet.

One boy, the son of Game Warden Matt Johnson, was tickled to help drag his first catch of the evening out of the water.

Heather Hughes had to pull her young son, Ohland Hughes, away from the bank a few times to make sure he didn't fall in the creek. The situation wasn't a new one;

they had been to the last Fishing Rodeo, in fact.

"They fish a lot," Hughes said of Ohland and the rest her family watching the creek intently. Lake Hughes' current personal record is reeling in a 5-pound trout, and while they unfortunately didn't take home such a catch that day, they still had fun.

"It's a good thing for the kids to get out and go do," said Dakota Wheeler, Rogers' half-brother. This year was the first time he and his family were able to go to the rodeo, but they were enjoying themselves thoroughly.

Allie Wheeler, for example, was proud to pose with her fish, which she said was the best part of the experience. Her younger brother, meanwhile, looked forward to "trout sushi."

Slowly but surely, folks started trickling back into the pavilion as the sun began to set. Chips, hot dogs and cool drinks were waiting for the families, along with much-welcomed benches and shade.

Special thanks go out to Sunrise Grocery, Foodland, John Thompson and Larry Garrett, Georgia DNR, Noontootla Creek Farms,



Young Kyle Mahan showing off quite a haul at the May 24 Fishing Rodeo sponsored by the Rec Department.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks and everyone else who had a hand in its organization and management.



## U.S. Forest Service Kid's Fishing Rodeo Saturday, June 3rd at Lake Winfield Scott

In celebration of National Fishing Week, the U. S. Forest Service will be sponsoring a kid's fishing rodeo at Lake Winfield Scott Recreation Area on Saturday, June 3, 2023. Co-sponsors include the Chattahoochee Forest National Fish Hatchery, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Trout Unlimited, and Home Depot.

Registration begins at 9 a.m. and is open to all kids, ages 16 and under. Participants must be accompanied by a par-

ent or guardian. There will be plenty of educational activities available as well as a craft project provided by The Home Depot. Lunch will be provided. All registered participants will be entered to win various raffle prizes which will be drawn after lunch.

Parking at Lake Winfield Scott Recreation Area will be free on Saturday, June 3 for the Kid's Fishing Rodeo. Lake Winfield Scott Recreation Area is also a handicapped accessible facility. In addition, the Geor-

gia Department of Natural Resources has made Saturday June 3, Free Fishing Day. Adults (Georgia residents) can fish without a license on Saturday after the rodeo.

Lake Winfield Scott will be closed to fishing on June 1 and June 2 in preparation for the kid's fishing rodeo. It will reopen at noon on June 3 after the rodeo.

For more information call the U.S. Forest Service office in Blairsville at 706-745-6928.

## Cancer Survivors, Caregivers Celebrate 28th Annual Relay For Life Event



This was year #28 for our community coming together to fight back against cancer! Thanks to so many small businesses, individuals, and organizations for sponsoring this year.

This year our celebration picnic for survivors began prior to the opening ceremony. Thanks again to Chik-fil-A of Blairsville and our volunteers serving at the colorful tables set for the entertainment. This year's Honorary Survivor Ambassadors were father and daughter Bobby Jackson and Lisa Mashburn. We were also honored by our 2023 Childhood Cancer Ambassador Deklin Jones and his family. The opening ceremony plans were adjusted because of the rain. Veteran Richard Holbraiten gave our invocation and led us in the Pledge of Allegiance to our American flag proudly waving over the Farmers Market.

Cathy George, active

volunteer for our leadership team (and Team Captain for America's Home Place team) sang our National Anthem. Following the recognition of our presenting sponsor Northeast Georgia Medical Center Cancer Services and our other levels we began the survivors laps followed by the team laps.

There are so many in our community that contributed to this fight by supporting cancer research, patient services, education and cancer advocacy. Our volunteers will be thanking each of those in the weeks to come.

For now we want to send our sincerest appreciation to each of the 12 teams and the many others including our churches, our schools, musicians, our restaurants, our friends and neighbors.

The best place for a celebration of life in Blairsville was at our Union County Farmers Market! The management and staff were very helpful along with the Boy Scout Troop 101 members and leaders of Blairsville as they set up banners, tables, chairs and made sure the facility was clean and ready.

Special thanks to our lo-

cal newspaper for their long time support and cooperation. The West Publishing family and staff are top notch.

It has been a very difficult couple of years due to Covid. There were also other difficulties that have made these years very memorable in the lives of our cancer thrivers, caregivers, and our volunteers. No matter how our physical bodies might have slowed down our HOPE is still active and showing that our community is caring for those touched by cancer.

We just have to add to our thanks that we all have been blessed by being here in Union County and this Tri State area where we are challenged to fight back against cancer. We are making a difference in the burdens that cancer brings to those who hear the word cancer.

The closing ceremony was also adjusted because of the rain. The beautiful bagpipe music and the lighted luminary bags lined the walkway as we joined our traditional circle of friendship to accept the challenge to continue supporting the American Cancer Society's mission.

## Reece Farm presents Curtis & Kim Jones, Mountain Gypsy Music! Friday, June 2, 1-3 p.m.

Reece Farm Presents Curtis & Kim Jones. Mountain Gypsy Music! Reece Farm & Heritage Center Pavilion, Friday June 2, 2023 1-3. Bring your lawn chairs to the pavilion to enjoy two hours of music! Free admission and donations are greatly appreciated! We invite you to come enjoy the exhibits at the farm before the concert.

Curtis Jones reins as the most highly respected flatpicking guitarist on the planet, expanding on the legacy forged by musicians such as John Coltrane, David Gilmour, Doc Watson and Tony Rice. Jones is often called by fans and critics alike, "The world's fastest and cleanest" acoustic guitarist, an extraordinary technique that he both teaches and brings to his contemporary guitar performances and productions. Speed is only a small part of what Curtis can do though. He efficiently plays 22 instruments and is self-taught on all! Through his pure guitar mastery, he has created a new style of Music- "Mountain Gypsy Music" allowing his abilities to weave in and out of Bluegrass, Jazz, Rock, Flamenco, and World Music. It is more original than anything that has been heard since Django Reinhardt!

Kim Jones is an artist, singer, and songwriter. Her vocal influences growing up were Wynonna Judd, Patty



Kim and Curtis Jones

Loveless, Janice Joplin, Bobbie Gentry, and Bonnie Raitt, and Stevie Nicks. Her Musical influences include Jaco Pastorius, Richard Wright, Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and McCoy Tyner. She sings and plays upright Bass with Curtis' Bluegrass band-Primal Roots, and performs with Curtis in their Mountain Gypsy Music duo. Kim has been singing her whole life but has only just begun to perform in front of Audiences within the past few years. Kim plays and sings with emotion and delta blues style soul. When asked about her goals through music, her response is "I just want to share it. It's in here, deep down inside, and I wanna let it out!"

Bring your lawn chairs!

Free admission, Donations welcome!

Byron Herbert Reece was a farmer and a writer, and his books are available in the gift shop. The farm is set up as a legacy to him & his family with exhibits, farm animals, local books and crafts. There is also a hiking trail from the farm to Vogel State Park.. The farm is also a beautiful venue for your special day with affordable rates. We now have trout stocked in Wolf creek (please follow all Georgia Fishing rules).

Farm exhibits are open Wednesday through Saturday 10 until 4; free admission. 8552 Gainesville Hwy., Blairsville, GA; 706-745-2034; FB: Reece Heritage Farm, www.reecefarm.org.

# Paris contracts for work crews, offers county updates in meeting

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris conducted a variety of business during his May regular meeting inside the Union County Courthouse, where he accepted agreements dealing with fire safety, the Senior Center and detainee work details.

One of the accepted agreements was with Convergent Technologies, LLC for annual fire alarm and sprinkler system testing and inspection in the courthouse. The agreement is \$2,831 per year for the next three years, effective June 1.

He also accepted an agreement with Legacy Link for the required Fiscal Year 2024 local share amount of \$105,000. The funds will go toward the operation of the Senior Center between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024. There was no cost increase from last year.

"The Senior Center serves ages 60+ in Union County with hot meals, transportation to and from the center as well as drug store and grocery shopping," per unioncountyga.gov. "We have exercise programs, quilting, crafts, games and other activities.

"Our Meals on Wheels program provides home delivered meals to qualified seniors, a hot meal is served at the center Monday through Friday at 11:30 a.m."

Continuing in the May 18 meeting, Paris was happy to accept an agreement with the Georgia Department of Corrections for the regular use of three detainee crews out of Colwell Probation Detention Center.

The agreement is for a year's worth of work details at a cost of \$49,316 per detail, or \$147,947 for all three crews.

"This is for the detainee crews that we use for maintenance throughout the county," Paris said. "Roads, golf course, buildings, facilities, picking up trash – anywhere you go, you'll see these crews.

"If all three details are not available to work – and we've had a problem lately of that being the case – the cost to the county is adjusted accordingly, per the agreement. So, we're only required to pay for the crews that we're able to use in the county.

"In the past, our contracts with the Detention Center have been for six detainee crews, but unfortunately, they do not have the staff and the crews to handle all of that, so the agreement (was adjusted for) a more reasonable number of crews that we can count on being available."

Paris then accepted a contract with Freeman Gas for propane services at \$1.377 per gallon over the next year. The price has gone down considerably from last year's

rate of \$1.89 per gallon.

"The cost has decreased by 51 cents per gallon, which is very unusual for anything we're doing right now to decrease," Paris said. "Union County Government receives a discounted rate for their propane pricing due to the volume of propane used by the county, which on average is 100,000 gallons per year."

Moving on, Paris accepted a \$1,187 grant from FM Global, a property insurance company, "to purchase fire prevention educational materials and accessories."

"In this case, it's banners and a sound system to take to the schools when (firefighters) go and do education for the kids on fire safety," Paris said. "We're proud of our Fire Department and that they do a lot of this kind of work."

"They're available, No. 1, for fire and accident protection for the county, but No. 2, they're all the time looking for something else they can do to be helpful in the community. I thank (Chief David Dyer) and all the staff for that."

Lastly, the commissioner announced a notice of award for a contract to Custom Truck & Body Works, Inc. for a new "rescue/quick attack fire apparatus" at a cost of \$172,415. This vehicle will be replacing the main rescue vehicle, Rescue 1, at Station No. 1.

"It has the capabilities of carrying water and a pump, which makes it a dual purpose," Paris said. "Not mixing this up with a fire engine, which obviously carries both, but this is a rescue vehicle that will be carrying both as well."

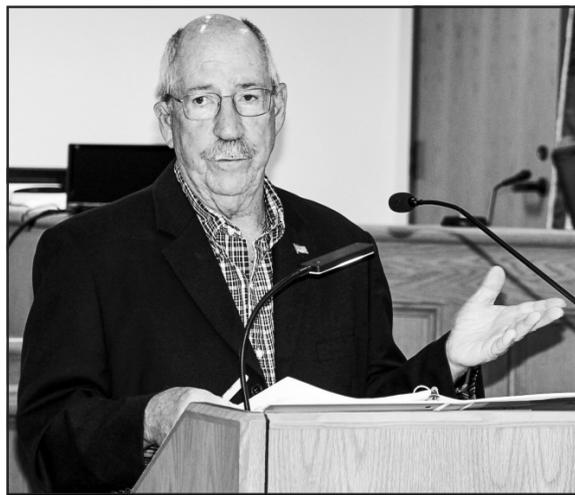
Added Paris, "This is just the box. The chassis will be an additional purchase around the cost of \$60,000. This is replacing the main rescue truck that is at Station 1 currently. The old one is being transferred to Station 13 as soon as it opens, and as soon as we get the other one and the chassis put together.

"It was about 55,000 to 60,000 miles when transferred. These trucks last about eight to 10 years. This is being paid for with SPLOST funds, so it allows us to still have a good rescue truck, but not a brand-new one, at Station 13."

County officials are aiming to have Fire Station No. 13 off Murphy Highway open later this summer, which will be a major benefit to people living in the north end of the county.

"This will be a full-time manned fire station and also contain enough space for a deputy to be stationed there and also for an ambulance to be stationed there if that is a need that we have in the future," Paris said. "And if not, then we'll have plenty of use for it just with the Fire Department."

"Since our county is such



Lamar Paris  
Sole Commissioner

a large geographical area, this station will also decrease fire and medical response times by about eight to 10 minutes. That's a big deal if you're laying there on the ground or in your bed and have a serious emergency."

Added Paris, "This decrease in response time will potentially be lifesaving to citizens, and it will also help our ISO rating, which is the rating that we get as a county from the (Insurance Services Office that will result in cheaper homeowner's insurance rates for some people in that area)."

Paris spent roughly the next hour offering his usual "Commissioner's Comments" updates on the goings-on of the county before adjourning the meeting and taking a couple of questions.

Among the more than a dozen topics he discussed, Paris noted that the Meeks Park Pool would open May 27; the Blairsville Scottish Festival was coming up June 10-11; the Short-Term Rental online licensing system was up and running; and that glass recycling was available at all three county garbage disposal sites.

The commissioner is looking into purchasing a glass-shredding machine to be able to recover costs of glass recycling, which the county makes nothing for and, in fact, incurs a cost to haul down to Atlanta. A shredding machine would make the glass sellable for construction purposes.

He noted that the hospital roundabout at Deep South Farm Road and Pat Haralson Drive was in the engineering phases and was expected to be bid for construction in about four months.

Looking ahead to the upcoming budget process, Paris said costs for property insurance are going up 30% this year due to national impacts from big storms in 2022, and he anticipates pay raises for county employees, primarily to remain competitive with neighboring municipalities.

## Rich Arrested...from Page 1A

She resisted arrest, kicking and attempting to trip escorting officers, and she remained uncooperative during the initial booking process at the jail, Osborn said.

Juliea sustained no

injuries in the incident, but her husband was transported to Union General Hospital for medical evaluation and treatment before being released later Sunday, Osborn said.

She has been charged

only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

The Sheriff's Office said that Juliea has a lengthy criminal history in addition to her most recent meth conviction.

## Farmers Market...from Page 1A

actually end with greens.

"There's going to be a few tomatoes on the market early. Of course, as it gets into July and August, you're going to have buckets of homegrown tomatoes and sweet corn."

Beans will probably hit the market earlier than tomatoes, and sometime around mid-to-late summer, potatoes will become available.

Fix suggests that the most diverse time to go to the market is August, when there's "a little bit of everything" around the middle of the season. Later in the year, true to Fix's word, autumn will herald collards and mustard greens.

As always, guests can also look forward to special events like the Tractor Parade and Car Shows, the latter of which will take place every first Saturday of the month after the market closes for the day. The

Tractor Parade, sponsored by Farm Bureau, will be held on Sept. 30.

"We're going to have more entertainment: cloggers, bluegrass bands, gospel singing – whatever," Fix said. "We're going to have a lot of that this year."

With a "full house" of vendors set up, crafts will also be available. Handmade soaps and candles, woodworking of all kinds, pottery and cutlery, quilting, knitted items, jewelry, and more will all be available to peruse once everything opens to the public.

As usual, the market runs Saturdays and Tuesdays, with a few differences. While the market goes 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the weekend and may host about 100 vendors, Tuesdays are on a much smaller scale, and guests can expect to see about seven vendors between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m.

Of course, there's the Union County Canning Plant located on market grounds opening later this summer. Guests will need to make appointments at least 24 hours in advance for one of two time slots, between 6 a.m. and 8:45 a.m. or 9 a.m. to 11:45 a.m.

Canners must bring their own jars, lids, bands and produce – much of which can be conveniently purchased fresh right there at the market on market days – and be ready to pay 30 cents for a pint or 40 cents per quart.

"It's got the makings of another big year," Fix said, expressing optimism that the community will show up once again in support of local business and agriculture. "It was a successful year last year, and (we're) looking forward to another successful year this year."

The Union County Farmers Market is located at 290 Farmers Market Way in Blairsville, just beyond ALDI Grocery Store. For more information, visit [ucfarmersmarket.com](http://ucfarmersmarket.com).

And the Canning Plant can be found adjacent to the market at 280 Farmers Market Way. People may call 706-439-6043 for questions about the market and cannery, or for just the latter, email [cannery@uniongov.com](mailto:cannery@uniongov.com).

# MECHS Graduation...from Page 1A

Bouchard, Lillian Rae Davenport, Makayla Brooke Davenport, Escamilla, Hughes and Green.

Once students took their seats onstage following the processional, Honor Student Elijah Batura administered the program's greeting, Pledge of Allegiance and National Anthem.

"I heard a quote recently from Nelson Mandela: 'I never lose. I only win or learn,'" said Batura, thanking MECHS staff for their dedication and help with learning. "To all of my fellow classmates, even though there may have been setbacks, we have learned, and we are all winning tonight."

Sofield then gave the High Honor Address after one of MECHS' principals, Brandon Bradburn, announced that Sofield had been recruited by Auburn University and plans on playing baseball for the Tigers. To cheers and applause, he took to the podium.

"My path to graduation was by no means an easy one or a straight one," Sofield said. "Between injury and mental hardship and being on the road for as long as I have, school's been tough to navigate, and I guarantee the majority of my fellow classmates' experiences have been similar.

everyone may have a different end goal, we all have one common goal. That common goal couldn't be reached without the hard work of the students that they put in every night, and certainly not without the level of unwavering love and care these teachers have for their students."

Sofield encouraged his class to continue setting goals "one step at a time," admitting that he wouldn't be standing before the audience that evening had it not been for the tremendous amount of support shown to him during his time at MECHS.

Of course, behind every successful student is a strong support system, and Principal Casey Jones took a moment to ask parents, grandparents, guardians, siblings, friends and others there in support of their graduates to stand. Applause and cheers filled the auditorium.

Graduation Coach Gina Young shared the graduates' plans, relating that two will attend college; 13 will attend technical college or trade school; three will enter or remain in the workforce; one – Faith Dianne Green – is joining the military; and two remain undecided about their future.

"Graduates, you have

reached a very important milestone in your life," Young said. "This is one of many accomplishments that can be lifechanging and sets a foundation for lifelong learning. I want to encourage you to set your sights on your next life goal and work hard at attaining that goal."

Next, Scholarship Coordinator Lesia Johnson revealed that the Class of 2023 had received, in total, \$15,000 in scholarships.

William Anderson received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship, the Blairsville Kiwanis Club Scholarship and a scholarship from North Georgia Technical College.

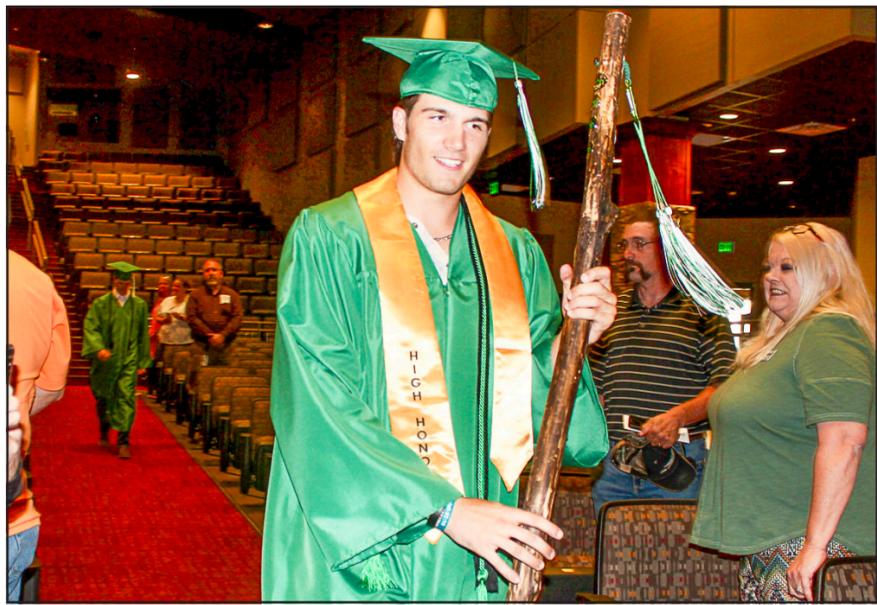
Elijah Batura received the Derrick Whittle Memorial Scholarship and the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship.

C.J. Beavers received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship.

Rylee Blevins received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship, along with a scholarship from the Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation.

Mikayla Bouchard received a scholarship from the United Community Bank.

Lillian Carpenter received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship.



MECHS Class of 2023 High Honor Graduate Drew Sofield leading his fellow seniors into their commencement exercises on May 23. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Ashley Duffey received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship, the Derrick Whittle Memorial Scholarship, and the Appalachian Shrine Club Scholarship.

Olivia Escamilla received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship and the Appalachian Shrine Club Scholarship.

Autionna Lemott received the Lions Club Scholarship and the Mountain Education Charter Scholarship.

Kinley Long received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship.

Drew Sofield received the Mountain Education Scholarship and a scholarship from Auburn University.

After the students collected their hard-earned

diplomas, they and their loved ones were invited to the Union County High School Cafeteria for a dinner of hot dogs and hamburgers with cake and homemade ice cream for dessert, and some fun with a photo booth with tons of hilarious props.

Congratulations to the Mountain Education Center's Class of 2023!

# Memorial Day 2023...from Page 1A



Union County Rec Department prepared a float for the annual Memorial Day Parade on Saturday, May 27. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

of our nature – and it wasn't always acknowledged or even allowed," Merritt said, sharing the stories of just a few extraordinary women who disguised themselves as men to fight, braved active warzones to tend to casualties, and acted as spies or translators.

It wasn't until 2013 that combat restrictions for women were lifted, but, in Merritt's words, "all this did was bring the policy up to reality. Women had been serving in combat roles since the Revolutionary War, although it was now allowed."

Before then, women were serving as fighter pilots, engineers, nurses, telephone operators, truck drivers and air traffic controllers. Merritt herself was destined to become a commander, having grown up in the military. After clawing her way up the chain of authority, she earned the respect of the men around her and secured the rank of Colonel.

"It is different for girls than it is for boys. It is different because you have that added layer of being one of the only females around, and that just brings a lot of extra challenges," Merritt said after the end of the program. "It's difficult and people need to

know it's real. "I mean, I didn't want to get up here and sell it like it's just all roses, because you need to know it's tough. But it's also great and very rewarding, and I wouldn't change a thing, but there are things that we have to deal with that dudes just don't have to deal with."

Now retired, Merritt considers the opportunity to speak at the ceremony an honor and a chance to revisit some of the best memories of her life.

"That was kind of cool," she admitted of the occasion, saying she was shocked that after just three years of living in the community, she was already asked to be part of such a big event.

"And to do it when they're doing a salute to women is really cool because girl power – you've got to have girl power," Merritt added.

"Girl power" is important, and hearing and seeing proper representation lifted the spirits of the younger generation, as seen during the parade.

"We were hollering 'girl power' to all the little girls as we were passing them by, and then they would realize and you could see in their faces, 'Those are all girls up there.' And you

could tell that they thought that was cool," said Merritt, smiling.

Of course, there's still a long way to go. Less than 1% of the American population joins the military, and of that 1%, only 16% are women. But for Merritt, Kunz and all the other ladies honored in the May 27 proceedings, the hope is that one day, the scale tips even.

2023's Memorial Day Ceremony closed with an emotional laying of a wreath, a final prayer courtesy of Chaplain Richard Hoibraten, and Amazing Grace played on the bagpipes.

A rifle salute fired off, too, and the ever-solemn Taps dirge rang out over the Union County War Memorial Veterans Park, ensuring that the fallen – both men and women – would not be forgotten.

People are invited to do what they can for veterans by looking into joining the American Legion or Auxiliary, the American Legion Riders, the Sons of the American Legion or any of the other veteran service organizations and auxiliaries.

After all, according to Kunz, "We're all out there to do the same thing and to care for and honor our veterans."



Part of the Memorial Day Ceremony is the laying of a wreath in honor of the men and women who died in service to their country, pictured here in War Memorial Park on May 27. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



The Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution manned a patriotic float during Saturday's parade. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks