

North Georgia News

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Blairsville native Rich to join Class of 2020 Racing Hall of Fame

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County native Mike Rich will take his rightful place in Dawsonville later this year when the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame posthumously enshrines the former NASCAR tire changer as a part of its 2020 class.

This November marks 30 years since Rich was tragically struck and killed at the Atlanta International Raceway – now the Atlanta Motor Speedway – while changing the right rear tire on Bill Elliott's No. 14 Ford.

In the wake of Rich's passing, NASCAR implemented numerous safety measures to protect drivers on and around pit road.

"While Mike wasn't around the sport of auto racing for as long as others in the Hall of Fame, his short career made a huge impact on all forms of auto racing," the Georgia

Racing Hall of Fame told the North Georgia News. "We are very proud to add Mike Rich's name to the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame.

"Because of his tragic death, the way pitstops from NASCAR to F1 and all the way down to the weekend warriors were changed for the better. At the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame, we wish to preserve the life and legacy of those before us that have allowed us to enjoy the sport we love so much."

With only 28 laps remaining in the 1990 NASCAR Winston Cup season, Rich was moments away from exiting the high stakes, pressure-packed environment of pit road to spend another quiet offseason in his hometown of Blairsville.

That's when the growing sport of stock car racing received another black eye during the closing stages of the Atlanta Journal 500, NASCAR's championship-crowning event, just one year

removed from driver Grant Adcock's fatal accident in the 1989 Atlanta race.

While changing the right rear tire on Elliott's Coors Thunderbird, the 32-year-old Rich was struck by Ricky Rudd's car, which spun out when his brakes locked up on pit road.

The accident occurred under caution on lap 300 of the 328-lap season finale, when Elliott, the race leader at the time, made one last pitstop for tires and fuel. As Elliott entered his stall near the end of pit road, Rich and his Melling Racing teammates jumped over the wall and went to work.

Tragically for Rich, who was exposed while changing the tire, he didn't see Rudd lose control of his 3,500-pound Chevy Lumina before ultimately crashing into the back of Elliott.

After he was briefly pinned under Rudd's car, Rich was airlifted to Atlanta's

Georgia Baptist Medical Center. Resuscitated at the hospital after going into cardiac arrest, only to succumb a few hours later to what Georgia Baptist trauma surgeon David Lake called "unsurvivable injuries."

Watching from the grandstands was Rich's wife, Teresa Kelley, who was unable to attend most races due to the hectic NASCAR schedule. Throughout the 10-month race season, Rich would usually depart Blairsville on Thursday or Friday, and depending on the location, crew members would carpool or fly privately from Dawsonville with Elliott.

But on that Sunday afternoon in November 1990, Kelley was thankful she knew the track. Instantly, she knew this wasn't your typical run-of-the-mill racing accident and urgently left her seat to remain by Rich's side during his final hours.

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Mike Rich, former pit crew member for NASCAR legend Bill Elliott, will be posthumously honored by the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame for his legacy and love of the sport.

Photo courtesy of Teresa Kelley

Former ER director Gowder to serve 18 months following guilty plea

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

GAINESVILLE – Former Union General Hospital emergency room director David Gowder has been sentenced to 18 months in federal confinement with a \$5,000 fine.

In the sentencing hearing on Wednesday, June 10, at the federal courthouse in Gainesville, U.S. District Judge Richard Story included a two-year period of supervision to follow Gowder's release from prison.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons will notify Gowder when and where he is to report to begin his period of incarceration. Story said he would recommend a location near North Georgia.

Gowder pleaded guilty to a single count of prescribing oxycodone to a patient for no medical reason in March 2019, after which he surrendered his Georgia medical license and began awaiting sentencing.

The former doctor was originally indicted on more than 50 federal charges stemming from a multi-jurisdictional investigation dating back to 2015.



David Gowder

His wife, daughters, sons-in-law and several close friends attended the June 10 hearing to offer their support.

Andy Williams, former president of United Community Bank in Blairsville, told Judge Story that Gowder was a good and decent man who blamed no one but himself for his addiction, and that he had aggressively sought and obtained help.

"He has lost \$2 million in salary, he has lost credibility among his peers and the community, and he has lost the ability to practice,"

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Black Lives Matter solidarity protests see passionate support in Blairsville, Young Harris

By Shawn Jarrard
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Grassroots solidarity protests for the Black Lives Matter movement are sprouting up all over the country, even in areas where few racial minorities live.

Here in Union County, the population is 96.7 percent white according to census data, with only 0.9 percent of the population being represented by black people. And it's a similar story in surrounding mountain counties.

But that hasn't stopped local folks from organizing protests across the region in support of black lives here and everywhere. From Gilmer County through to Rabun in North Georgia, including the big protest in Murphy, North Carolina, people have been coming together in recent weeks to peacefully proclaim that black lives matter.

In Blairsville, resident Samantha Frost spearheaded the peaceful protest that took place Sunday, June 14, outside the Union County Courthouse. It was a good evening for an outdoor gathering, as an intense rain moved briefly through the area beforehand, ushering in cooler temps and cloud cover.

Frost said the community support apparent in the Murphy



Local protesters at the Black Lives Matter solidarity event in Blairsville held an 8 minute and 46 second moment of silence in honor of George Floyd and many others Sunday.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

protest is what inspired her to team up with others from the "murphy blm peaceful protest" Facebook group to organize an event in Blairsville focused on honoring the memories of the dead.

Central to the protest was a large group of "name holders," or protesters holding signs featuring individual names of black Americans killed by police. Following an inclusive

prayer, the name holders gathered around the speaking stage to begin a moment of silence.

The moment of silence lasted 8 minutes and 46 seconds, which was the amount of time that Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd, resulting in Floyd's death and Chauvin's subsequent arrest for murder.

Floyd's May 25 killing served as the catalyst for

nationwide protests, including the ones that have taken place much closer to home in areas where police brutality is a foreign concept, like here in Blairsville.

The law enforcement presence was clearly felt at the Union County protest, with organizers thanking police for being there to keep the peace, including Blairsville Police

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Community tries to make sense of coronavirus, state of the nation

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With the recent development of riots in major American cities occurring alongside peaceful protests in the wake of George Floyd's death in police custody, some area residents are beginning to see concerns shift during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While everyone agrees with the rights of peaceful protestors, there appears to be equal agreement that the totally separate riots are more destructive to the nation than beneficial.

"I don't understand the rioting," said Sean Maynard on the Downtown Blairsville Square Friday. "I think people are crazy for looting these buildings, and I think there really needs to be a consequence to those actions."

"I've seen the people saying to abolish the police, and they need to learn and see what happens when you destroy somebody else's hard work or steal something. Stealing and burning buildings isn't a way to mourn or whatever they say. "The protesting is fine



Business in Downtown Blairsville has picked up over the last month and a half, with many in the public continuing to wear facial coverings as they carry about their lives.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

– protesting is a fundamental right in this country. I don't think any sane person is trying to stop any protests, but we are concerned about the riots. If I were a protestor, I would be more mad at those rioters than anything, because they are taking the attention away from the actual protests."

Still other people seem

more concerned about the virus and that it may come back since people are getting out more due to the summer weather.

"I worry that COVID is still around," said Tiffany Perry at Walmart Saturday. "I feel like we might see a second wave coming soon because of everything that is going on."

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Julia Barnett wins school board seat in sole contested local race

9th Congressional contests headed for Aug. 11 runoff

By Shawn Jarrard
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The June 9 Presidential Preference Primary, General Primary, and Nonpartisan General Elections experienced their fair share of problems in other parts of the state, such as reported long lines, equipment issues and ballot shortages, but things went smoothly at all 11 local precincts.

"I'm bragging on the Election Board, the Board of Registrars – any and everybody that had anything to do with the election," Union County Elections Superintendent Libby Stevens said. "Poll workers were tremendous; they did an outstanding job."

This year's election season has been particularly challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a massive uptick in absentee voting by mail, which required much of the Registrar's Office in terms of processing in recent weeks, and the Elections Board had to count over 5,000 absentee ballots on June 9.

Fortunately, this round

of elections is over, with a Runoff Election – to include three weeks of early voting – scheduled Aug. 11 for both Republican and Democratic candidates participating in 9th Congressional District contests.

The sole locally contested race in last week's General Primary for school board. Two Union County Board of Education seats were up for grabs in 2020, though incumbent Janna Akins ran unopposed for County Board of Education District 1.

For County Board of Education District 3, Republican: Barnett received 62.47 percent of the vote with 3,547 votes to defeat Dale Spivey, who received 2,131 votes.

No Democrats qualified to run for school board, so Barnett will head into the General Election unchallenged.

The eight other local offices up for election featured incumbents who ran unopposed: Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Sheriff Mack Mason, Tax Commissioner Lee Knight,



Julia Barnett

Superior Court Clerk Judy Odom, Surveyor Jason Hobate, Coroner Benny Erwin, Probate Judge Dwain Brackett and Magistrate Judge Cary Cox.

Brackett and Cox won their nonpartisan elections unopposed and will be sworn back into office in 2021.

Paris, Mason, Knight, Odom, Henson, Erwin, Akins and Barnett are each heading into the Nov. 3 General Election without a party challenger.

So, unless Independent

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