



"Land of Lakes, Mountains, Scenic Beauty and Friendly People"

75¢

North Georgia News

4 Sections 20 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, July 5, 2023

American Legion tourney raises money for veterans

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

For over 100 years, The American Legion has supported veterans, service members and communities around the nation. And on Friday, June 23, Blairsville's Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 and Auxiliary continued that mission with a highly successful golf tournament.

Billed as "Putting with Patriots," the tournament featured 22 teams competing across 18 business-sponsored holes at the Butternut Creek Golf Course. Organizers had hoped to raise at least \$10,000 in profit from the event and were happy to report they had exceeded expectations.

Proceeds will go to

support the Legion alongside local veterans in need of assistance – financial or otherwise. For instance, the Legion helps qualifying vets cover utility bills, but they also pay for suicide counseling and fund wheelchair ramps and other projects at veterans' homes.

Tournament funds raised came by way of overwhelming community generosity, to include team entry fees as well as over 75 sponsors who donated money plus prizes, food and other resources to the cause. And a raffle of multiple donated hot-ticket items did well also.

"This allows us to have money available so if a veteran comes to us and needs something, we are able to

provide it and not turn them away," said Auxiliary President Nancy Kunz, who put the tournament together with much help from members of both the Auxiliary and Legion Post.

Kunz was a natural leader for the effort, possessing plenty of patriotism on top of experience organizing a golf tournament for Union GOP last year.

"This really exploded, and the community has really come together to support us in a tremendous way," Kunz said, noting that the level of backing for the tournament truly showcases how much respect residents, businesses and civic leaders have for military veterans and service members.

Added Kunz, "I just want

to thank this community. From the city officials to the county officials, all the businesses – just everyone in Union County that has absolutely been so welcoming and said, 'Of course we'll help you.'"

Team compositions varied greatly, ranging from country-loving local businesses – many of which doubled their commitments by being hole sponsors – to school employees and even veterans playing to support other veterans. The bottom line: the tourney was widely supported.

The top Men's and Women's teams were awarded cash prizes, with gift baskets provided by local shops to the players who had the "Longest Drive" and were "Closest to See Putting with Patriots, Page 2A



American Legion Post 121 and Auxiliary signed up 88 patriotic golfers to assist in their fundraiser tournament last month. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Fiddlers Convention makes triumphant return in 2023

By Natalie Mintz
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, June 24, the Georgia State Fiddlers Convention returned to the North Georgia Mountains after a three-year hiatus following COVID-19, bringing musicians from all over the Southeast and beyond to the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

Playing dulcimers, banjos and dobros, fiddles, mandolins and guitars, dozens of talented musicians competed in 12 categories for the opportunity to win titles, prize money and bragging rights, and for one particularly brilliant competitor, a chance to be crowned Fiddle King or Queen.

This year, 14-year-old Noah Goebel was crowned Fiddle King in the bluegrass-style contest.



Noah Goebel of Kentucky won the big title of Fiddle King at the 2023 Georgia State Fiddlers Convention on June 24. Photo/Facebook

Goebel began playing around five years ago in his hometown of Elkton, Kentucky. He was introduced to Dan Kelly, who played for country stars like Alan Jackson and Faith Hill, and began taking

private lessons. Now, Goebel enjoys the opportunity to travel "almost every weekend" and plays both solo and with a band. The night before the convention was

See Fiddlers Convention, Page 6A

Wellborns return to roots for sibling's memorial service

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For the first time since 1987, the Wellborn family gathered in Blairsville – a town that is as significant to them as

their name is to the history of Union County – to once again say goodbye to one of their own.

Thirty-six years ago, the Wellborn siblings laid their parents, Billy Bryan Wellborn

and Dorothy "Dot" Moore Wellborn, to rest in the New Blairsville Cemetery. On June 24 at 10 a.m., the same was done for their brother and firstborn Wellborn son, Stephen

See Wellborn Family, Page 6A



Members of the Wellborn family posing like they did in a photo that ran in the Dec. 2, 1987, edition of the North Georgia News highlighting a past memorial service for Billy and Dot Wellborn. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Whiskers Project celebrates 20 years of caring for cats



Whiskers Project volunteers and supporters had a great time breaking bread and boogying down inside the Community Center for their recent anniversary. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

See Whiskers Project, Page 3A

Owners of troubled youth retreat arrested for child cruelty

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

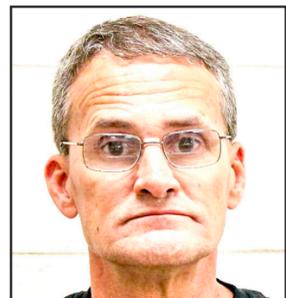
The owners of Respite Retreat, a Christian-based ministry that reportedly helps troubled youth with various behavioral and emotional problems stemming from past trauma, have been arrested for cruelty to children, according to the Union County Sheriff's Office.

Christine "Christy" Marie Owen, 53, has been charged with first degree cruelty to children for allegedly beating her adopted daughter under the age of 12, plus three counts of cruelty to children in the second degree, all felonies.

One of the latter counts pertains to the infliction of mental anguish on a second child who was under the ministry's care, UCSO Capt.



Christine Marie Owen



Keith Alan Owen

Daren "Bear" Osborn said, noting that he could not go into greater detail at this time.

Her husband Keith Alan Owen, 57, has been charged with being party to the beating, a felony. Osborn said that while he did not participate in the alleged physical abuse, he was present when it happened and did not stop the child from being

"severely beaten." The girl originally came to the Owens as a foster child about seven years ago before they adopted her, and she has been temporarily placed back into foster care with the Division of Family & Children Services, Osborn said.

Respite Retreat operates See Child Cruelty, Page 2A



Vol. 114 No. 28
Arrests - 2C Legals - 3D
Church - 3C Obituaries - 5C
Classifieds - 2D Sports - 2B
Opinion - 4A

VFW Recognizes Gormans of Quilts of Valor

See page 4B

Quilts of Valor Recipient David Morningstar

See page 4D

2023 Courthouse Friday Night Concert Schedule

See page 6C

United Community Bank. MORTGAGE SERVICES

It's the perfect time to buy your dream home.
Call Us To Get Started Today.

Kitty Mauzy
706-439-2185
BLAIRSVILLE MAIN OFFICE
NMLS# 512515

Kim Walker
706-439-2164
BLAIRSVILLE MAIN OFFICE
NMLS# 1205994

Member FDIC. NMLS# 421841 | ucbi.com/mortgage

Putting with Patriots...from Page 1A

the Pin.”
Tournament winners in the Men’s Division were Jimmy Nichols, Jason Busbee, Levi Kendrick and Toby Swartz. Also for the men, “Longest Drive” went to Bob Martin, while “Closest to the Pin” was awarded to Kolby Brooks.
Winners of the Women’s Division were Jinna Wheeler, Karen Mussoline, Cynthia Panter and Cynthia Moorehead, with “Longest Drive” going to Jinna Wheeler and “Closest to the Pin” to Subrina Abernathy.
Vietnam Veteran Gerry Ruud, who retired from the U.S. Army in 1987 after 20 years of service, formed a team of friends for the tournament, joined by Steve McMann, Dean Smith and Dean Nelson.
As a veteran, it was important for Ruud to play as a way to serve other veterans in the community. He’s also been a member of Butternut Creek Golf Course for about a decade, so being in the tourney was his way of combining his love of country with his love of the sport.
“The American Legion is a good veteran support group, so I knew our entry fees were going to a good cause,” Ruud said. “It was an easy decision. I have three really good golfing buddies, and for the four of us to play in the tournament was pure enjoyment.
“We didn’t play to win, we just played because it was a good cause and we enjoy golf. It was a really good time, I really enjoyed it, and the people that put it on and ran the tournament did a great job.”
C.T. Hussion of Union County Schools was proud to participate as a representative

of the school district, counting among his team members Georgia School Superintendent Richard Woods.
Woods recalled fondly his trip here in May 2022 to recognize Union County High as a Georgia Military Flagship School for going above and beyond “to support our military families.” In so doing, he was honoring the patriotic nature of the area, and he was pleased to be able to return to play in the tournament and support the local Legion.
“We have to be appreciative,” Woods said. “Veterans have sacrificed a good portion of their lives to serve our country, to make sure that we have the freedoms we were given. Like the old adage, ‘freedom’s never free.’”
District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter also played that day. Gunter is a Blairsville resident and a longtime golfing enthusiast, and he was very pleased to be able to support such a cause in both his House district and at his home course.
“Our veterans have sacrificed a lot for us, and we need to take care of them the best we can,” Gunter said. “This helps raise money for things that are of interest to the veterans, and I’ll do whatever I can to help them.”
Added Gunter, “It’s a great sacrifice for (the local Legion), because it takes a lot of time and effort to organize a golf tournament, and to also organize one that’s successful and makes money for the cause

that you’re putting it on for. I commend all these people’s heart for service.”
Likewise, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris laced up his golf shoes for a day on the Butternut Creek Golf Course, which, as a county-owned facility, provided a discounted rate for use of the course in its ongoing resolve to help local organizations.
“It’s awesome to see all the support and everybody excited about this,” Paris said. “I spoke to a couple of gentlemen from Atlanta that said every time we have a tournament at Butternut Creek, they come up here because it’s one of the best courses they get to play, and they love to come.
“So, we’re excited that not only local people but people all around the area are here to support our veteran’s group and the projects that they’re working on. I couldn’t be more excited.”
Membership in The



L-R: Post 121 Auxiliary Member Renee Lambert, Auxiliary Member Teresa Fisher, Auxiliary President Nancy Kunz, Navy Veteran Connie Bergstrom, and Auxiliary Member Erika L. Kunz at the June 23 “Putting with Patriots” golf tournament. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

American Legion requires military experience, but joining the Auxiliary can be accomplished through immediate family relation to a Legion member. For more information on the local group, visit <https://legionpost121.org/>



Vietnam Veteran Gerry Ruud, left, and fellow patriot Steve McMann just before hitting the green in perfect weather for the American Legion golf tournament June 23. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Child Cruelty...from Page 1A

on a 4.5-acre farm at 1252 Old Gumlog Road. On their website, the Owens describe the goal of their venture as being “to minister to families dealing with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), Autism and other emotional disturbances.”
The Sheriff’s Office and DFCS have had concerns about abuse at Respite Retreat “for some time,” but until recently, they did not have enough evidence to bring charges, Osborn said.
On June 8, the Sheriff’s Office received a call from the local DFCS office with a credible abuse complaint made by someone familiar with the family, Osborn said.
The alleged beating took place the day before, and when UCSO Inv. Rachel Mann

responded to the farm, she found evidence that the girl had been physically abused, Osborn said.
Christy Owen was arrested on June 8 and bonded out after two days. Upon further investigation, she was arrested again on June 21 on her additional charges. Keith Owen was also arrested June 21. Again, Christy bonded out after two days, as did her husband.
The Owens have a history of taking in troubled youth. As previously reported in a 2019 feature article on Respite Retreat, between 2001 and 2006, the Owens worked with the state to serve as the only therapeutic foster parents in a 17-county radius around Union County.
They used their experience with foster children

to launch Respite Retreat in Blairsville in 2014, with a declared focus on helping children and parents deal with behavioral issues together via “mini family-bonding ‘camps,’ week-long ‘intensives’ with reputable attachment experts, therapeutic/motivational respite for children of the families we serve, training respite providers/teachers/pastors/therapists, and (in the future) a therapeutic equine program.”
The case remains under investigation, with additional potential charges pending, Osborn said.
“If we have any other victims out there, please contact Inv. Rachel Mann at the Sheriff’s Office by calling 706-439-6066,” Osborn said.
The above individuals are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Grassroots Efforts Leads to Towns County WUI Success

The following is an excerpt of an article that I wrote for the International Association of Fire Chief’s “On Scene” newsletter.
November, March, and April are the most dangerous months for wildfires here in North Georgia. Leaves are on the ground and with the high winds and low humidity we are living in a tinder box and just one spark away from disaster. Wildland fire in our own backyards is something most of us think will never happen, but it only takes one match, hot ashes dumped in the yard or a bonfire that we were sure was out to bring a disaster right under our porch and into our living room.
Grassroots leadership for the Ready, Set, Go! (RSG) Program, Fire Adapted Communities (FAC) and Firewise (FW) is key to successful wildland-fire education. The Towns County Firewise program started in 2008 during an 800-acre fire on Cedar Knob Mountain. After that fire, local, state, and federal agencies began working with community members to get them involved at a grassroots level. They did this by telling the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) story. Those who started RSG & FAC in Towns County soon realized that they were the only ones pushing the issue and if they quit pushing, the momentum would roll to a stop and no one would notice, so they gave ownership of the programs to the citizens they were trying to protect, thus keep the programs moving forward.
In 2013, the Towns County FAC Citizens Coalition took ownership of RSG and FAC programs and developed the grassroots network and leadership to keep these programs growing. The coalition consists of six citizens and three agency representatives, all dedicated to wildland-fire safety and education. Supporting the coalition is an ex-

officio group providing technical expertise, resources and funds when needed. As control of Towns’ RSG and FAC programs passed to the coalition, the development team took the lessons learned in Towns to jumpstart new Fire-Adapted Communities in surrounding areas using FAC, RSG, and FW through peer-to-peer contacts. Union, Rabun, White, and Gilmer counties are now in the process of building citizen groups and develop coalitions to start the education process to make communities become better prepared for wildfires.
Most everyone in North Georgia lives in the wildland-urban interface (WUI – living in or near forests), creating a major risk for residents from wildfire, and the most important component of wildfire preparedness here is Ready, Set, And Go which is the evacuation plan that is key to surviving a wildfire. It shows us how to be aware of conditions and be Ready; have our important items at hand or Set; and to Go when the call comes to leave so we can get out of the way of first responders coming in to protect our homes. If a wildland fire approaches and the residents and emergency responders don’t have a plan in place to get out of harm’s way, then all other FAC components become useless.
The RSG Program ties in well to the existing Towns County Firewise program because many of our mountain communities have narrow roads and usually just one entrance. Ingress and egress are critical issues here and a large-scale evacuation is almost impossible, making Ready, Set, and Go extremely important to our residents and emergency responders.
Between the 2008 fire and spring 2013, Towns had only three Firewise Communities, but since the Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D Council received the FAC grant in



mid-2013, twenty-one more communities have been added to the list of communities in Towns County (#1 in Georgia) that are better prepared for emergencies. The Towns model has now spread across 24 counties in north Georgia and covers 48 counties across the Appalachian Mountains in western North Carolina, southwestern Virginia, and northwestern South Carolina. This project is the Appalachian RC&D FAC Coalition was developed by a request from the Region 8 US Forest Service forester to take the Towns model and duplicate it in the Appalachian region. It consists of 7 RC&D Councils in the region who live and work in the areas they serve to develop Fire Adapted Communities. Grant funds were combined with matching funds to pay for salaries, travel and needed supplies and to have personnel attend training on new RSG/FAC methods and to share what was learned during the development process.
A successful wildland-fire safety and education program isn’t easy to start because we all tend to ignore risks near our homes until smoke and embers are blowing over the ridge—and then it’s too late. A program such as this must have its own spark and must be properly fueled; and once ignited, it will spread on its own through the grassroots channels. Help us fuel this fire. Be Firewise! Your life may depend on it!
For more information on FW, FAC, or RSG! Contact Chest-Chat RC&D at www.info.ccrd@gmail.com www.chestchattred.org or www.pcfac.org.

Wellborn Family ...from Page 1A



The ashes of Mark Wellborn were inurned in the Wellborn Columbarium that Saturday, with his brother Ken Wellborn and nephew Michael Dufrene honoring his memory here.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

“Mark” Wellborn.

The local Wellborn family legacy really began in 1810 with the birth of Johnson Powell Wellborn. He led the life of a humble farmer until age 25, whereupon he became a member of the Georgia House of Representatives, representing Union County.

Specifically, Johnson focused on his hometown

of Blairsville, and for his dedication, earned the title “Founder of Blairsville.”

After his death in 1863, Johnson was buried in the Old Blairsville Cemetery and received the high honors of having a mountain named after him as well as a street. Wellborn Mountain stands at 2,440 feet in elevation, and Wellborn Street is located in

Blairsville.

Johnson Wellborn’s grandson, Benjamin “Frank” Wellborn, relocated to Texas in 1918 to chase the oil boom, seeing no way to make a living in Georgia. Frank’s son was Billy Wellborn, and that branch of the family remained in Texas until Billy’s high school graduation just before the start of World War II.

As for the recently departed, Mark Wellborn, “He was a special needs child that was never treated as such,” according to his brother, Ken Wellborn.

Mark’s life began on Sept. 6, 1952, and he passed away on June 9, 2023. His ashes were inurned in the Wellborn Columbarium inside the New Blairsville Cemetery on Blue Ridge Street.

“Go Rest High on That Mountain” by Vince Gill marked the beginning of a ceremony the Wellborns viewed as a celebration of life rather than a graveside service or funeral in the June 24 memorial. It was there that stories of Mark were shared among the family, painting a picture of a colorful individual.

“It’s a beautiful day to send Mark off, even though we already know he’s in the loving hands of our parents up in Heaven,” said Mark’s “kid brother” Ken. “And that alone gives us a sense of happiness. He’s gone home to not only be with the Lord, but our parents.”

Mark lived with his sister, Joanne Jolin, and her family in Orlando, Florida, for much of his life, and for that, nephew Michael Dufrene regarded him much like an older brother. Dufrene was 8 when Mark moved in, and the two shared a bunk bed when he was small.

“Every story I have is basically the story of my life,” said Dufrene, adding that he “never knew a time without (Mark),” considering that so many holidays and important life milestones were attended by his uncle. In fact, Dufrene believes the way he saw the world was forever impacted by Uncle Mark.

Mark Wellborn’s sunny disposition and strong sense of humor were cherished by the family, and his outgoing personality meant that he “never met a stranger.” Among other hobbies, Mark collected model planes and enjoyed fishing, and there were many stories about his fondness for mowing the lawn.

Close family friend and neighbor Johnny Mauney

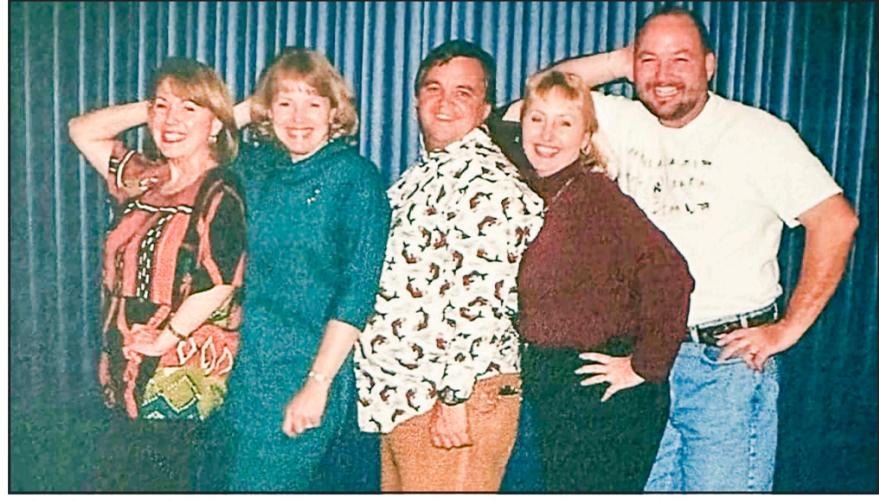
recalled a time when he gently joked with Mark one evening after a particularly lengthy mowing session.

“I kept kidding him, I said, ‘Mark, I’m going to go out there tomorrow and I’m going to cut that grass.’ And he said, ‘No you’re not, Johnny; no you’re not. That’s my yard, that’s my lawnmower,’” Mauney shared. At 11 that night, he awoke to the sound of a roaring lawnmower – Mark was cutting the grass.

But despite the joy that came with remembering Mark as he was, there was no doubt that the loss was still a massive blow to his family and friends.

“I loved him like a brother,” Mauney added tearfully. “We love this family.”

A celebratory reception followed at the Odom Springs Vineyards’ Winery, but before then, Ken enclosed his older brother’s niche in the columbarium. It will be a couple months before the outer etching is completed, but Mark’s memory will remain with his family for all time.



A family photo of Wellborn siblings Brenda, Trish, Mark, Joanne and Ken. Photo/Facebook

Fiddlers Convention...from Page 1A



For many families, bluegrass is a way of life, and judging by the turnout of participants for the return of the Georgia State Fiddlers Convention to North Georgia, the Appalachian tradition is here to stay.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

held, he had the opportunity to play at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville.

“As long as I’m playing, I’m happy,” the young man said that evening, adding that he enjoys the “social aspect” of these kinds of conventions as well.

Goebel, who also plays mandolin, plans to “make a career” out of his love of music, and the newspaper wishes him well on his journey.

The last Fiddlers Convention took place at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds in 2019. When it was decided that the fairgrounds would no longer host the convention, organizers set out to find a new location and make sure the historic competition could continue.

Now, Martha Cunningham, who helped organize the event, is focused on the importance of “moving forward” with the convention.

“There’s still a big interest in this kind of competition,” she explained. Like Goebel, many of the contestants started playing and competing young, and the convention gives them a chance to be noticed. Former contestants, for instance, have gone on to tour with country artists.

The Georgia State Fiddlers Convention has been around for 50 years, explained perennial emcee Barry Palmer. However, conventions like it have been going on all over the country since the 1800s.

Like Cunningham, Palmer pointed out how many younger people have taken an interest in playing bluegrass music, which is integral to keeping the tradition alive.

“The people who play here will be the next stars of country music, or will be playing with the next stars of country music,” he said.

Palmer also described the importance of letting young people come together to learn from each other, something that can always be seen – and

heard – backstage.

Taking a break from playing, Ben Collins discussed how the music is “in your blood.” For him, this rings particularly true.

Collins was introduced to bluegrass by his musician father, and now he brings his own four children to bluegrass festivals and conventions. His son, Carson, has been playing since he was around 6 and competed this year.

Similarly, the Lindbloms have made bluegrass a family tradition. Lucy Lindblom explained how she and her siblings became interested in the style of music and introduced it to their parents. Now, they all travel and play together full-time.

Another competitor, Elizabeth Coleman, started out on classical violin but was encouraged by her husband to start learning the fiddle. Today, she and her children compete, though she said her daughters

are better than she is at the fiddle.

Judging the competition were bluegrass heavyweights who have been involved in the industry for years, both professionally and in competition: Red Henry, Allen Shadd, Sharon Bounds and Bill Cunningham. Their considerable backgrounds can be found at <https://georgiastatefiddlersconvention.org/>.

Of course, the convention relies on tax-deductible donations from the community to keep going. To support the Georgia State Fiddlers Convention, please make checks payable to the GA State Fiddlers Convention and mail to P.O. Box 370 Hiawassee, GA 30546.

For a full list of winners, check out the Georgia State Fiddlers Convention on Facebook or email marthacunningham7@gmail.com.

