

North Georgia News

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Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Residents honor Independence Day with fellowship

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Independence Day celebrations blasted over Meeks Park with a bang on July 4, drawing much of the county out to enjoy some summer fun on the country's 246th birthday.

There was a lot on offer for the public, both at the top of the park and at the lower Sorghum Field, with children and adults setting up volleyball nets, tossing footballs, and even chasing remote-controlled trucks.

A particularly popular area was near the creek, where many families set up chairs to escape the heat in the shade as they waited for the main event to begin after dark.

Local churches, including Antioch Baptist, Redeemer Baptist, New Union Baptist, First Baptist, Harmony

Grove Baptist, and Choestoe Baptist, showed up to hand out free hot dogs, popcorn, cotton candy and snow cones, and Full Throttle Ministries offered barbecue, coleslaw and banana pudding.

Antioch Pastor Justin Jarrett explained that each church chose something to provide, whether it be crafts, food or paying for the rental bouncy houses.

"The funniest thing is a lot of people come up with their wallets out because they expect to have to pay for it, but no – we want to do it for free as a way to give back to the community and love on them," Jarrett said. "We encourage people to come and take advantage of all the stuff that we're offering."

"This year, (Full Throttle) did about 800 plates' worth of barbecue. We have about 500 hot dogs' worth (and) 200-something pounds of ice for snow cones."

Adding to the joy and fun of the occasion was the reason for the celebration itself: remembering the importance of Independence Day and honoring the freedoms secured by Armed Forces members past, present and future.

Decked out in red, white and blue, a lot of people cited various reasons for observing the holiday, whether they grew up in military homes, served in a branch themselves, or wanted their children to have a chance to appreciate their nation.

For Cara Shields, going out for fireworks from Meeks served as a relief from a busy schedule, as the holiday symbolizes not only freedom for the United States, but also the personal freedom that comes with setting aside special time for enjoying loved ones.

"We actually all get to be together," remarked Shields, See Independence Day, Page 6A



The annual Meeks Park Fireworks Display is all about family and community togetherness. Pictured here: patriotic young Philbeck girls Amaya, Arya, Mila, Penelope and Kaylee. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Butternut Creek Festival a true arts and crafts show



A view from a past Butternut Creek Festival in Meeks Park, featuring plenty of shade to stave off the summer heat. Photo/Submitted

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The annual Butternut Creek Festival at Meeks Park, which will be held on Saturday and Sunday, July 16-17, is an arts & crafts festival of the highest caliber.

"This is what we call a juried craft show," said Helena Grossman, who serves as secretary of the High Country

Artisans, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that has organized the festival since 1997.

That means that an applicant must submit pictures of their work, their shop, and them making their craft to a panel of artisans and artists as a prerequisite to participation in the festival. The panel then votes on each vendor by secret ballot, Grossman said.

So, the vendors that are allowed to have a booth at the

Butternut Creek Festival are genuine artists and craftsmen, and they come from far and wide.

What makes this festival even more unique is that there is no admission fee, no parking fee, no shuttle fee and no entertainment fee. That's because the people who organize the festival are all volunteers, and the services are all paid for by various Union

See Butternut Creek Fest, Page 2A

Suches celebrates July 4th with family and fireworks

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

SUCHES – It was another fun-filled Independence Day in Suches last Monday, July 4, as hundreds of visitors arrived at the areas surrounding Woody Gap School and the Suches Community Center.

Spectators began filing in well before 7 p.m. to catch a glimpse of the annual fireworks display presented by Suches' Fire Station No. 5 in the field behind Woody Gap.

In years past, the Suches fireworks were one of North Georgia's best-kept secrets, however, the family-reunion vibe of the freedom celebration has resulted in a steady increase of newcomers each summer looking for an escape from the lights and traffic of Blairsville, Blue Ridge, Dahlonega and other nearby towns.

For Union County natives like Evan Hughes and his family, the festivities are a July tradition he is passing on



As usual, the Suches Fireworks lit off a fantastic display for visitors to the Valley Above the Clouds on Monday, July 4. Photo by Todd Forrest

to future generations. "We come every year," Hughes said. "We've been coming for about 10 or 12 years now, and we love it. "These (fireworks) have

a more relaxed, local feel, and everyone you see over here you pretty much know, and that's why we love it. My mom and dad have a house here in See Suches Fireworks, Page 6A

Firearms carry class back by popular demand July 19

News Special
North Georgia News

On Tuesday, July 19, Union County Sheriff Mack Mason and the Blairsville Police Department will jointly host a concealed carry/constitutional carry informational meeting from 6-8 p.m. at the School Fine Arts Center located at 926 Panther Overlook off the Glenn Gooch Bypass.

Leading the "FYI" carry class will be UCSCO Capt. Craig Davenport and Blairsville Police Lt. Rusty Walker.

Registration will not be required to attend the free seminar, and no tests or certificates will be given.

The free class is aimed at informing the public of their rights related to the legal carry of firearms on their person and in their vehicle. Also covered



UCSCO Capt. Craig Davenport and Blairsville Police Lt. Rusty Walker will lead a firearms carry class at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center July 19. Photo/Submitted

will be when and what legal levels of force can be used to protect oneself and family, as well as in a home and for property protection.

"Some of this instruction is exactly what we are required as law enforcement officers to take each year," Sheriff Mason

See Firearms Class, Page 2A

With July Fourth raffle win, Reeves to pay it forward



Father and son team Clayton and Dakota Reeves relaxing in a couple of chairs they won in the Chamber of Commerce Fourth of July Raffle, amid the rest of their \$4,700 haul. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Clayton Reeves didn't know until the patriotic festivities were over that he had won the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce's big Fourth of July raffle, which goes 100%

toward funding the community fireworks display each year.

Reeves had spent that evening at Meeks Park, handing out in the neighborhood of 800 plates of barbecue, coleslaw, and banana pudding to the masses as everyone celebrated the freedoms declared by the nation's Founding Fathers 246 years ago.

He was so busy that night that he never heard his name announced by Chamber President Steve Rowe, and as he was packing everything up to go home, he received a call – several calls, actually – but let them go unanswered until morning when he wasn't so exhausted.

See Reeves Raffle Win, Page 2A



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Butternut Creek Festival...from Page 1A

County departments.

Still, the High Country Artisans are able to fulfill their purpose for having the festival, which is to support art programs in Union County.

"We try and give as much as we can back to the community to support art programs," Grossman said. "The biggest winners of those donations are actually the school children.

"We support the art programs in the Woody Gap School, the (Union County) High School, the Elementary School and the Middle School, and each of them receives \$1,500 from us."

Grossman said they have no plans to expand the event because they want to keep it under the trees and by the creek at Meeks Park, where it's relatively cool.

Consequently, she said they turn away about half of the applicants because there isn't room for all that apply, though the High Country Artisans do allow for new vendors every year.

The Butternut Creek Festival has been the recipient of the Top 20 Events Award every year, which is a prestigious award given by the Southeast Tourism Society, Grossman said, adding that it must be

applied for each year.

There are 82 vendors scheduled for the festival this year, along with four nonprofit organizations. The Union County Recreation Department is responsible for scheduling the food vendors, and Country River Band coordinates all of the entertainment.

Grossman said there will be shuttles operating from the festival area all the way to the upper baseball fields. Once the lower parking areas fill up, visitors will be directed to the upper ball fields to park.

The event will go on rain or shine from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and 10

a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday. However, Grossman said the vendors are usually ready for business around 8:30 or 9 a.m. for especially early birds.

"Come out and have a good time. We appreciate the support," Grossman said, adding that the show should bring somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000 people into Blairsville this weekend.

Given the turnout for other events this year in Blairsville, that may be a conservative estimate, so head on out Saturday and Sunday to enjoy all that the Butternut Creek Festival has to offer in 2022.

Firearms Class...from Page 1A

said.

Concealed carry versus the newly enacted constitutional carry will also be explained.

Firearms and weapons are expressly prohibited inside the Fine Arts Center, as it is school property.

"I'm very interested in everyone in Union County that is a law-abiding citizen, not a convicted felon, having a firearm," Sheriff Mason said. "Know how to use it, protect yourself, and don't be a victim."

Questions will be

welcomed in the class, and the sheriff encourages residents to research relevant Georgia laws prior to attendance, such as OCGA 16-3-21 dealing with use of force in defense of persons, as well as OCGA 16-3-23 regarding use of force in defense of habitation.

Per OCGA 16-3-21, Mason explained that "a person is justified in using force that is intended or likely to cause death or great bodily harm only if he or she reasonably believes that such force is necessary to prevent death or great bodily

injury to himself or herself or a third party, or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony."

Union County Gun Club Board Members will be on site from 5-6 p.m. to answer questions about the club and the proposed target range, and they will be signing up new members as well. For more information on the club and how to join, visit UnionCountyGunClub.com.

Additionally, attendees will be able to meet with local representatives of the Georgia

Sport Shooting Association prior to the seminar from 5-6 p.m. For those interested in joining GSSA, individual memberships are \$15 and family memberships are \$50.

The Georgia Sport Shooting Association is the official NRA state association for Georgia. The mission of the GSSA is to promote and develop junior programs, women's programs and scholarship funds.

More information can be found at www.GeorgiaSportShootingAssociation.com.

Reeves Raffle Win...from Page 1A

Finally, when Chamber Director of Operations and Marketing Crystal Wagner got through on his cellphone the next day, he realized he had won the raffle of \$4,700 in summer supplies, furniture and gift cards.

"I'm shocked. I'm just in utter disbelief," Reeves said after coming into the chamber last week to pick up the hefty haul with his son, Dakota. As for how it all came to be, the Full Throttle Ministries pastor initially wasn't interested in entering the raffle.

"I bought the tickets – (Crystal) was down there, and I said, 'Oh, my Lord, here we go.' She said, 'You never know, you might win.'" So, Reeves relented and bought 10 tickets for \$100, but the price of entering is nothing compared to what he plans on doing with all the stuff he won.

"To me, that's an answered prayer. Not that I prayed to win, but I pray that God will always open those doors to me to minister tomorrow because

He's already given me today," noted Reeves. "And here's a whole bunch of opportunities to do that."

Those opportunities came in the form of donations and purchases from businesses like Alexander's Store, Walmart and LongHorn Steakhouse, all of whom the Chamber wishes to thank for their support.

"When I won, I said, 'Praise the Lord' . . . (and) cried when I got off the phone," Reeves said.

"He had me going," Wagner said, recalling how emotional the exciting news became.

"I'm sure there's some family that would love to go to that Splash Park. You won't see me out there," Reeves joked about one of the prizes he received, but he was very serious about donating the things he didn't have a use for.

While there is a chance that some items, like gift baskets or home décor, will go to the church's 2023 July Fourth raffle, Reeves said he has more plans to give away to certain individuals in need.

"Everybody gets in a position where they lose their way," said Reeves, referencing in particular those folks who may be down on their luck and in need of a friend, housing, or just basic supplies.

"Sometimes it's just a little bit of love (that) can completely alter all of their tomorrows, and that's the reason I minister. We met a lot of those out there Monday night," Reeves added, saying that many people, especially out-of-towners, didn't expect to find a public gathering with free food.

"That's why we do the fireworks, for this community and the communities outside the county line," Rowe said. "I think they could use a group of good people that like to get

out and fellowship with others. It's an opportunity to bring people together and celebrate. (Independence Day) is a very important day."

Rowe's goal is similar to Reeves' own views. For Full Throttle Ministries, public events are an opportunity to show how much they care for the community, whether it's by smoking barbecue or offering a hug or somebody to pray with.

Although Reeves said that it's sometimes difficult to "minister in (his) backyard" due to the familiarity of a small town with many churches, he knows how important it is to practice faith through kindness.

"Running up to somebody and slinging a Bible and screaming and hollering is the quickest way to lose somebody, because people have already got their guard up," Reeves said, expressing his desire to "be different and leave the money side out of it" when it comes to ministering.

Already, that doctrine has gotten him far.

"God's never let me down," said the pastor, whose ministry largely deals with providing free barbecue and fellowship to members of the community.

Reeves has done countless outreach events, including work in the past with a friend who crafts crosses by reshaping recycled horseshoes. Often, the shoes are given away in Full Throttle raffles, and sometimes, when Reeves sees a family photo on social media, he recognizes a homemade cross in the background.

"Man, that jacks me up," he said with a smile. "I pray over that stuff, and it ends up in somebody's home."

In this and similar ways, Reeves sees tangible proof of the good he's been able to do

in the Lord's name, but he's never been motivated by pride in himself:

"It's just a blessing to me. It's a God thing," Reeves said. "There's probably some family that's wondering why (they) can't do this or why (they) can't go there. I'll get to bless them with something coming up (using this raffle win). That'll be their God Thing."

But make no mistake, there are a few things Reeves wants to keep. During summer events much like the July Fourth fireworks and cookout, he'll pitch up his brand-new tent to keep his bald head from getting sunburnt, then later maybe cool down by going kayaking.

However, Reeves said that those items pale in comparison to the two rocking chairs that, at the time of pickup, sat on either side of the presentation of prizes. Just like seeing works of faith, the chairs did a lot to "jack up" Reeves' mood.

"These will go on my porch; they'll be great for a cup of coffee and early morning Bible study," Reeves said, promising to "write a whole bunch of sermons in this chair."

No matter where the raffle items and gift cards go when he pays them forward, Reeves expressed his appreciation to the chamber for hosting the Independence Day celebration, as it gave him the opportunity to serve the community with good food and, as it turns out, several other gifts.

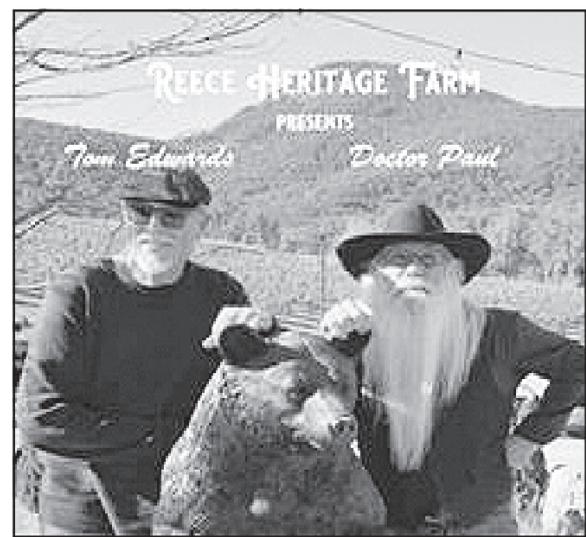
"You were meant to win," Wagner told Reeves after hearing about what he plans on doing to give back to his community.

"I love this community," Reeves confirmed. "I'm grateful to call this place home. Every place has got troubles, and every place has people, and everywhere you have people, you have all kinds of trouble stirred up, but I love it here."

Reece Heritage Farm presents Tom Edwards & Dr. Paul

Tom Edwards and Doctor Paul will be performing two hours of original & cover country music Friday July 15, 2022, 1 until 3 PM. Bring your lawn chairs! They will have their CDs for sale! Free admission, donation's greatly 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. Exhibits are open Wednesday through Saturday 10 AM until 4 PM. 8552 Gainesville Hwy., Blairsville, GA; 706-745-2034; FB: Reece Heritage Farm; www.reecefarm.org.



Tom Edwards & Dr. Paul

Union County Public Library Board meeting



The Union County Public Library Board will have its regularly scheduled quarterly meeting on Thurs-

day, July 14, 2022 at 5 p.m. at Union County Public Library.

The Towns County

Public Libraries Board will have its regularly scheduled quarterly meeting on Tuesday, July 19, 2022 at 9:30 a.m. at Hiawassee City Hall.

The Mountain Regional Library System Board will have its regularly scheduled quarterly meeting on Wednesday, July 27, 2022 at 10 a.m. at Mountain Regional Library.

Independence Day...from Page 1A



The Meeks Park Fireworks' stunning Independence Day grand finale, which could be heard around the county for miles.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

who was glad that the rain from earlier in the day hadn't returned. "The last few years we've been able to take the whole day off and be a family."

At the park's upper field, Larry Swanson, who repairs shoes by day, became a DJ that evening and presented a playlist of summertime-themed classics for the daylight hours. As night fell over Blairsville, Dr. Greg Waller and Kathryn Nelson gave their rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

New this year was the inclusion of a 5-foot-tall switch that was "flipped on" by a group of children to herald the beginning of the brilliant fireworks show. Blairsville-Union County Chamber of

Commerce President Steve Rowe introduced the little ones by first name: Tucker, Macy, Rainy, Kenley, Seth and Allie.

After a countdown from five, the kids "flipped" the fireworks on to officially begin the show, at which point Swanson traded out his casual playlist for a more patriotic one as a rainbow of explosions lit up the sky and boomed right over the heads of those watching from the park.

The show closed with an impressive barrage of rocket blasts that undoubtedly rumbled as deep in the chests of the watchers as the national pride that came from celebrating the founding of the United States. The smoke hadn't cleared from the ball fields by the time the light poles came back on, but neither had all of the chamber staff who helped organize the spectacular event.

"It was definitely a success," said Crystal Wagner, Director of Operations and Marketing. "Gosh, there were people lined up along (Georgia 515). They're over at Longhorn's; it's packed at North Georgia Tech. You can't beat this venue."

In addition to big crowds viewing the patriotic Meeks Park Fireworks from the park and North Georgia Technical

College, spectators watched from First United Methodist Church of Union County, which hosted its own family friendly event, as well as from the Walmart parking lot and beyond.

Happy Birthday, America, from everyone at the North Georgia News! And thank you to all the military service members who have made and continue to make this nation free.



Before the start of the fireworks after dark on July 4, Meeks Park was full of people from all over the region playing games and enjoying good old-fashioned family entertainment.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Suches Fireworks...from Page 1A

Suches, so we come down and spend a day or two. It's something we look forward to every year."

While other local fireworks displays cling to the small-town atmosphere, the Valley Above the Clouds pulls it off effortlessly, resembling a family get-together where loved ones eat fried chicken and potato salad in their lawn chairs.

And when the sun goes down at 2,800 feet above sea level on July 4, the usually serene ambiance of southern Union County's hills and hollows echoes with the sound of explosions as an array of colors light up the night sky.

"There is no better place to watch fireworks," said Dahlonega's Dana Carter, who made the short drive up Highway 60 with her family. "Other places have become so crowded that it's hard to find a place where you can see (the fireworks). Over here in Suches, there isn't a bad seat in the house, I guess you could say."

Music, concessions and a bouncy house were available behind Woody Gap School to help children pass the time before the main event. Others played cornhole, tossed a frisbee or lit sparklers for entertainment while waiting on the sun to sink behind Little Cedar Mountain.

Finally, at 9:25 p.m., emcee Larry Wood introduced his granddaughter Neely Webster to perform the national anthem, and then, at exactly 9:31, a red and white burst illuminated the puffy white clouds hidden by the setting sun.

The fireworks show lasted a little more than 30 minutes, with the grand finale bringing the crowd to its feet at 10:02 p.m.

The humble origins of Suches' Fourth of July celebration is an American



The Suches Fireworks display, headed up each Independence Day by Fire Station No. 5, never disappoints.
Photo by Todd Forrest



What's better than passing on the love of freedom to successive generations by partaking in communal celebrations like the Fourth of July event held every year in Suches?
Photo by Todd Forrest

success story in itself. As the legend goes, a few locals decided to set off fireworks at the General Store several decades ago.

As the summer shindig grew in popularity, the store owner drove to Copperhill, Tennessee, and returned with

over \$200 in fireworks.

Then, other local entrepreneurs began selling hamburgers and hot dogs to help raise money for additional fireworks, establishing a North Georgia Mountain tradition that is still getting passed down from generation to generation.



The field behind Woody Gap School is a popular set-up place to view the always popular Suches Fireworks.
Photo by Todd Forrest



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