

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Wednesday, July 20, 2022

Latest COVID-19 surge causing less severe illness

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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The United States appears to be in the middle of another COVID-19 wave spurred by the latest variant of the Omicron strain known as "BA.5," with many municipalities in central north Georgia experiencing an uptick in cases, including Union and Towns counties.

BA.5 is proving to be more capable of evading established immunity, be that from vaccination, prior infection or both.

Fortunately, the current surge is producing less severe illness and requiring many fewer hospitalizations than

previous surges, offering a view of what "living with COVID" might look like.

In the past, the number of COVID inpatients in the 45-bed Union General Hospital has swelled to as many as 56, with Chatuge Regional Hospital in Towns having to house COVID sick as well.

As of last week, more than a month into the latest surge, the maximum number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 at one time was just 11, and a couple of those were incidental positives, meaning COVID was not the primary reason for hospitalization but was discovered after admission.

And though the frequency

of emergency room visits for any number of medical emergencies has been breaking local records lately amid a growing population, still, the number of people being admitted for COVID has been far less than in past surges.

"The surge started around the beginning of June," Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett of Union General Health said last week. "That's when we first started seeing a few more admissions and an increase in ER COVID-related visits."

"We saw it start to taper off around the end of June, and then after the (Fourth of July) holiday - we're assuming that's what's bumped it back up again. Now, this week, we're

starting to see a little bit of an increase again for both Towns and Union counties."

Added Barnett, "We can certainly tell by presentation, prognosis, outcome, response to treatment - all of that - that this is a different variant than we saw with the really bad surges we had in the fall and winter."

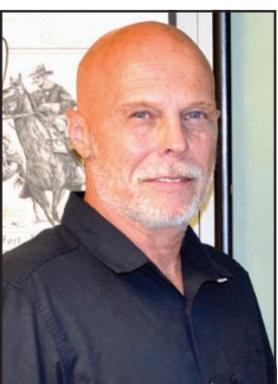
By press time, Union General was averaging about 10 ER visits per day related to COVID, and thankfully, "they are not all just extremely ill like they have been in the past."

"With this surge that we're experiencing right now, the oxygen demands and overall pulmonary status are

See COVID-19 Surge, Page 2A



Stovall seeks to make positive community change



By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Throughout life, humans make mistakes - that much is a given. And sometimes, those mistakes lead to legal ramifications if caught in a situation of breaking the law.

Depending on the degree and nature of an offense, sentencing that requires a "punishment fitting the crime," so to speak, can include but is not limited to time in jail, drug and DUI classes, vehicle and defensive driving courses, halfway housing, and often community service.

The latter is where Stuart Stovall comes in. Stovall is a service-minded combat veteran always looking for ways to give back and assist people in improving their lives.

After graduating from North Georgia College as a Distinguished Military Graduate in 1986, the Cleveland native was commissioned into the U.S. Army. Over the next two decades he served in several different capacities on active and reserve duty with two combat deployments.

Stovall began his civilian career as a Probation Officer with the Department of Corrections in 1990, serving

in four different circuits in North Georgia. Following 31 years of service there, he retired in August 2021 as the Chief of Felony Probation/Parole Supervision for the Enotah Judicial Circuit.

Now, he serves as the Community Service Supervisor for Union County, with an office inside the Pat Haralson Civic Center at 165 Wellborn Street in Blairsville, and he loves everything about his new job, which helps him to help others make positive differences in their community.

As the Chief Probation Officer for the Enotah Circuit, which includes Union County,

Stovall was very familiar with the area, so taking on his latest duties in this community has been a natural fit thanks to his work background and passion for aiding others.

And it doesn't hurt that his wife Carol, who is from here and described by Stovall as "the better part of me," inspired her husband to love Union County "and these beautiful mountains even more."

In his current role as Community Service Supervisor, he oversees court-ordered community service hours and helps various local organizations find general volunteer work around town, forging plenty

of positive relationships in the process.

One such organization is the Union County Farmers Market and Canning Plant. Former Market Manager and now part-time employee Mickey Cummings, along with new Manager Patrick Fix, both have enjoyed working side-by-side with Stovall and getting to know him in recent years.

"He is just a great person and very likeable," Cummings said. "He has helped me out with so many things personally and has played an indispensable role in helping us find the extra help we have needed

See Stuart Stovall, Page 6A

Home & Garden Show a 'must-see' for homeowners

From Staff Reports
North Georgia News

YOUNG HARRIS - The Northeast Georgia and Western North Carolina Home & Garden Show returns this

weekend to the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center, to run Saturday and Sunday, July 23-24.

From 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and 12-5 p.m. on Sunday, visitors will be able to

browse vendors specializing in all areas of home improvement and repair, essential services, and decoration for homes and gardens.

Dozens of booths will line
See Home Show, Page 2A



Many vendors choose to set up highly illustrative home improvement displays at the annual Home & Garden Show, returning this weekend at Foster Park in Young Harris.

Isaiah 117 House holds home site groundbreaking



Stakeholders of the Isaiah 117 House effort celebrated last week's groundbreaking by tossing some dirt at the site of the future facility.
Photo by Jeremy Foster

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On the morning of Thursday, July 14, an amazing blessing was bestowed upon

the community, and more importantly, innocent foster children, as a groundbreaking ceremony took place at the site of the upcoming Isaiah 117 House, which has a tentative completion date of Fall 2023.

Isaiah 117 House got its name from Isaiah Chapter 1, Verse 17, which calls on people to "defend the cause of the fatherless," and the organization focuses on providing a safe,
See Isaiah 117 House, Page 6A

Rice to serve 21 years behind bars for ag assault

'Local heroes' lauded for actions

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A Blairsville woman will spend more than 20 years behind bars after a Union County jury found her guilty last week of threatening, nearly two and a half years ago, to kill a woman working as a local bartender.

Rebecca "Becky" Rice, 49, was found guilty on all charges: two counts aggravated assault, four counts

possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony, and third-degree cruelty to children.

Family members of the victim in the case, Amanda O'Reilly, were grateful for the outcome. Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley said. O'Reilly tragically passed away last year while waiting for the trial to begin.

The assault in question occurred on Feb. 24, 2020,
See Rice Sentenced, Page 2A



Rebecca "Becky" Rice

Final defendant sentenced in McKinney murder case

By Shawn Jarrard
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After four and a half long years, the sixth and final defendant in the Justin McKinney murder case has been found guilty and sentenced.

On June 28, Hunter Nicholas Hill, who was just 15 when he and his friends plotted to kill McKinney of Morganton and steal pills from his residence in December 2018, was found guilty by a Fannin County jury of all 15 charges against him, including malice and felony murder.

According to reporting by The News Observer of Blue Ridge, Hill has been sentenced to serve life in prison plus 30 years.

Just prior to Hill's conviction, another of his co-conspirators, Dalton Levi Manuel, reached a negotiated plea deal on June 6 for a sentence of 40 years with 20 to serve. His plea included criminal attempt to commit murder and aggravated assault charges.

In May, a Fannin County jury found Stephan Blake
See Hill Sentenced, Page 3A



Hunter Nicholas Hill



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COVID-19 Surge...from Page 1A

not as severe as they were with the other surges,” Barnett said. “And we’re not seeing all the bilateral pneumonias and all that that we were seeing before.”

“We still occasionally have that, but most patients that we see in the ER, the vast majority are able to be treated and discharged with just a handful needing admission. And the length of stay is not nearly as long as it was with previous surges, either; where we would have some patients for 60 to 80 days, we’re not seeing that this time.”

Outbreaks in both the Union County Nursing Home and Chatuge Regional Nursing Home over the last month or so have been linked to the recent increase in community transmission, though those outbreaks appear to be contained.

To date, there have been two current-surge COVID deaths in the two counties, both having been nursing home residents who suffered from multiple comorbidities.

Barnett said that morale

in the Health System is holding up, with staff being encouraged by the lack of “severe illness and death that we have experienced before.”

“It does put everybody on edge when we start having a surge, though, because I think that they don’t know what to anticipate,” Barnett said. “So, it’s still tough on morale; they’ve got a little bit of trauma from all of the severe surges that we’ve had in the last couple of years.”

As to the timing of this wave of COVID-19, it remains unclear what exactly is contributing to yet another variant spreading among the masses, though seasonal influences and continuing evolution toward greater transmissibility are certainly factors to consider.

“I have no confidence that we will ever be entirely rid of COVID,” Barnett said. “I would love to say that I thought so, but I don’t believe that’s probably the case.”

“Anything that you read or hear from the scientists and folks that are studying all this, they seem to think that it’s going to become endemic and something that we have to deal with like regular flu.

“Now, what it’s going to look like once we’re through (the pandemic) – is it going to be similar to what we’re seeing now, that this is the type of illness it’ll cause and this severity of illness? I guess that’s yet to be seen.

“I hope that it settles down and we can anticipate, just like with the flu, when we will see surges rather than kind of being year-round, waiting and wondering when it’s coming. Oddly enough, we’ve seen flu almost year-round this year, so that’s different.”

Added Barnett, “We don’t normally see any flu this time of year or RSV – all those respiratory viruses you think of in the winter months, we have continued to see all of those on into early summer, which is just

really odd.”

In terms of COVID-19, Barnett is hopeful that the region has seen the peak of the present surge but noted that only time will tell.

Local disease management options have changed somewhat in recent months, with more outpatients being prescribed antivirals that have entered the market, though fewer inpatients are requiring the more intensive treatments used in previous surges.

COVID-19 vaccines are available at pharmacies and Health Departments around the area, and the Georgia Department of Public Health continues to offer free drive-thru testing Monday-Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at Union General Hospital in Blairsville (35 Hospital Road).

For more information and to monitor the prevalence of COVID in the community, visit <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-status-report>.

Rice Sentenced...from Page 1A

when Rice entered the old Copeland’s Burgers restaurant in Downtown Blairsville – now Lucky’s Taqueria & Cantina under different ownership – and pulled a loaded handgun on the woman behind the bar.

Rice’s trial lasted three days, starting with jury selection on July 11, 2022, and closing arguments occurring on July 13, with subsequent jury deliberations taking just under two hours.

Superior Court Chief Judge Raymond George issued Rice a 40-year sentence, with 21 to serve behind bars; 20 years for aggravated assault, and an additional 12 months to serve consecutively on the cruelty to children charge.

She will receive credit for time served and has been incarcerated at the Union County Jail since the day she committed her crime.

The case was initially delayed due to a statewide order that slowed the judicial system amid concerns over COVID-19 and in-person gatherings, with the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 occurring shortly after the offense.

More recently, however, delays came after Rice fired her state-appointed attorney from the Public Defender’s Office and asked for postponements to find other legal representation, according to Langley.

Rice then hired a private attorney to argue her case, but when she fired her new attorney in the weeks leading up to the trial start date, Judge George instructed her to either hire another attorney by the time of the trial or represent herself.

She chose the latter, Langley said, noting that such a move is rare in cases involving such serious charges.

“The victim in the case had been a waitress/bartender at Copeland’s,” Langley said. “What had apparently happened earlier in the day (on Feb. 24, 2020), Ms. O’Reilly had apparently told Ms. Rice that she’d had too much to drink and wasn’t going to serve her any more alcohol.

“Ms. Rice then left and later in the day returned to the restaurant, walked into the restaurant with three guns in her purse and one in her hand. The one in her hand was a 9mm firearm. She then pointed that, chambered a round, and told the victim that she was going to kill her.”

At that point, “two local heroes” stepped up to save not only O’Reilly’s life, but very likely the lives of other

people in the restaurant that day, Langley said.

“This says a lot about our community,” Langley said. “Two men jumped up from their meal; that was Ken Foley and Mike Madson. They both jumped up from where they were sitting and grabbed Rebecca Rice.

“Mike Madson grabbed the arm that had the gun in hand – he’s a big, strong guy – put her arm into the air so that the weapon was pointing toward the ceiling. And then he and Ken Foley proceeded to tackle Ms. Rice and gain control over her.”

Thankfully, the gun did not go off, but Rice “had pointed it at the victim, chambered a bullet, and said, ‘I’m going to kill you,’ with an expletive.”

“They deserve a lot of credit – they’re local heroes in my mind,” Langley said of Foley and Madson. “She came in with that semiautomatic but also brought (other) handguns in her purse, so I fear her intentions, she may have shot multiple people in that restaurant if she had not been stopped. We could have had a mass shooting.”

Rice also had an “AR-15-type rifle” inside the vehicle she drove to the restaurant, and she had brought her teenage daughter with her, with the child having entered the building and witnessed the assault, which is why the jury found Rice guilty of cruelty to children, Langley said.

A couple of circumstances in the trial made trying the case slightly more difficult than it would have been otherwise, even in a situation where security camera footage showed the incident in question, Langley said.

For starters, O’Reilly, the victim, passed away in May 2021 at the age of 34, so she was not able to appear in court.

“Therefore, to get the aggravated assault conviction, we had to prove that Ms. O’Reilly had been placed in fear without her being present to testify because she’s passed away,” Langley said. “But the video and the witnesses seeing her basically duck and flee demonstrated factually her fear.

“In addition, we had a taped 911 call where the victim was calling 911 that came into evidence, pleading for law enforcement to come help, and that demonstrated her fear.”

On the last day of trial, O’Reilly’s mother and brother

made “powerful” victim impact statements on her behalf, and regarding the sentencing, both the District Attorney’s Office and the Blairsville Police Department believe that justice has been served.

“The family were present for the trial and were quite thankful that a conviction was obtained, and a serious sentence was imposed,” Langley said.

As for her defense, Langley said Rice claimed to have been intoxicated and didn’t remember the incident, and “the defendant tried to convince the jury to consider this a minor matter, not a major felony offense, which made no logical sense to me based on the evidence presented.”

“But the court properly instructed the jury that intoxication is not a defense to criminal conduct if you’re voluntarily intoxicated,” Langley said.

Regarding next steps, Rice will have an opportunity to appeal the verdicts in the case, and in the meantime, she will soon be remanded to the custody of the state to begin her lengthy prison sentence.

Langley said he would like to thank the lead prosecuting attorney from his office, Assistant District Attorney Anna Guardino, as well as Assistant District Attorney Daniel Garrett, for navigating a “tricky” situation of safeguarding the rights of a non-attorney defendant who represented herself.

He also commended the efforts of local law enforcement and the “local heroes” who very likely prevented a shooting that day in February 2020.

“It speaks well of our community that citizens would step up and protect someone they don’t know, just being in a restaurant and acting immediately in a manner that placed themselves in danger to save others,” Langley said. “Therefore, I specifically want to thank Ken Foley and Mike Madson for their quick thinking and courageous actions.”

Judge George also called Foley and Madson heroes at the end of the trial, and Blairsville Police Chief Michael “Bear” Baxter agreed, saying that “those two gentlemen probably did save some lives that night by disarming and subduing Ms. Rice until we could get there.”

“I commend all the officers and witnesses for their testimony, and the Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney’s Office for just a great job on the case,” Baxter added.

Home Show...from Page 1A

the roughly 15,000-square-foot space inside the Conference Center facility at Foster Park, with each booth filled with advanced services and unique products for the local version of a show that’s been put on by Expo Management Inc. for more than 35 years.

During last year’s outing, Expo Management President Bill Anderson estimated that about 4,000 people made their way through the numerous displays over the two-day event, perfectly augmenting the many other H&G Shows held from Knoxville, Tennessee, to Naples, Florida.

As always, the goal of the expo is to bring home improvement businesses with quality products to an area with interested customers, in the process attracting people to the region who do not wish to travel to Atlanta or Knoxville for the products and services they need around the home.

“Your home is the greatest asset most people own. It’s really important to them to make their house comfortable,

pretty and enjoyable,” Anderson said.

And this year will feature no shortage of great companies focused on helping people improve their homes, with top to bottom services from roofing to foundations, gutter guards to hot tubs, yard art to kitchen wares, antiques to jewelry, furniture, snacks, solar panel installation, professional cleaning services and more.

Parking and admission

are free, so be sure to head over to 150 Foster Park Road in Young Harris this weekend to take care of all your home improvement needs.

For more information on the ever-popular Home & Garden Shows in North Georgia and Western North Carolina, including a schedule of next year’s shows in both Blairsville and Young Harris, visit <https://expomanagementinc.com/>.

Free Boating Safety Classes Canceled



The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary in Towns County, GA has been teaching the DNR

boating safety courses annually in your county during the spring and summer months March thru August. We have taught this summer in April, May and June but will cancel the last two in July and August.

We will resume the courses at the next availability as early as next spring.

We thank all those who contributed time, resources and/or attended the classes that made our efforts worthwhile.

We enjoy teaching safe boating classes and look forward to teaching again in the near future.

We will post new schedules to the local papers as we have done so in the past.

Always stay safe on the water no matter what vessel you are in and don’t forget those life jackets, they will save lives when used properly!

Hill Sentenced...from Page 1A



Dalton Levi Manuel



Kevin Jack Chamaty



Michael Chase Havard



Lakota Ricky Cloer



Stephan Blake Dickey

Dickey guilty of malice murder and other crimes, and he was sentenced to life in prison plus 40 years.

Three other defendants in the case previously pleaded guilty to aggravated assault in relation to the shooting – Lakota Ricky Cloer in January 2019, Michael Chase Havard in August 2020 and Kevin Jack Chamaty in October 2020.

The case has garnered much attention regionally in recent years, not only for the high-profile nature of the crime, but also because of the ages of those involved. Hill, Manuel and Dickey were 15, Cloer was 16, and Havard and Chamaty were 20 when the shooting occurred.

According to reporting by The News Observer, Appalachian Judicial Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge

Brenda Weaver said that, while overseeing the trial, “I felt like I was on a series on TV, not in Fannin County, not in Blue Ridge, Georgia.”

Surviving the Dec. 4, 2018, shooting was Anna Franklin, who was present at McKinney’s residence that night.

In a statement issued to The News Observer, Appalachian Judicial Circuit District Attorney B. Alison Sosebee stated:

“I would like to thank the law enforcement agencies involved in the investigation and prosecution of this case, in particular the Fannin County Sheriff’s Office and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

“This case has taken a considerable amount of time and resources of the District

Attorney’s Office, and the dedication of the DA office staff is greatly appreciated.

“The facts and circumstances surrounding this case are tragic and the sentencing by the court is appropriate. This will hopefully help to provide closure to the victims and their families.”

Reece Heritage Farm presents The Wilderness Pickers!

Reece Heritage Farm presents The Wilderness Pickers! Two hours of original & cover songs from the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s with this nine-member acoustic band, is sure to get your toes tapping! They will be performing Saturday, July 30, 2022 from 1 until 3 p.m.

Bring your lawn chairs to the pavilion and enjoy music! Free! Donations welcome! Come early to enjoy the exhibits, museum and gift shop!

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 Wilderness Pickers

Exhibits are open Wednesday through Saturday 10 a.m. until 4 p.m., free admission.

Please keep us in mind for your affordable wedding and events!

FB: Reece Heritage Farm; Keep informed: www.receefarm.org; bhrrfarm@union-gov.com; Blairsville Chamber and the North Georgia News; 8552 Gainesville Hwy., Blairsville GA; 706-745-2034.

Avoid the back to school rush: Get your children’s Immunizations and Health Screenings early



District 2 Public Health encourages you to plan early for back-to-school immunizations and health screenings. Ensure your children are ready to begin the upcoming school year by getting them up-to-date on their school health requirements. Beat the rush, and get your children in today for their routine vaccines and health screenings!

“Certain age groups have specific requirements for their back to school immuni-

zations,” says Leyna Mashburn, District 2 Immunization Coordinator. “It is important to check with your medical provider early to determine what, if any, vaccines are needed for your child.”

Last year, the state of Georgia added a new meningitis vaccine requirement for 11th graders. If you are unsure of Georgia’s school requirements, now is the time to check with your children’s doctor, school, or the local health department to determine what is needed.

Some health departments will partner with local schools and organizations for back-to-school events in July and August. Even in counties having these special events,

you may still visit your local health department during regular business hours for routine immunizations and health screens.

For those who are uninsured or anyone with insurance that does not cover vaccines, the cost for children’s vaccines is \$21 per vaccine. Medicaid and some private insurances are accepted. Contact your county health department for more information about your specific insurance plan.

For a list of back-to-school health events available in your county and for health department hours and locations visit phdistrict2.org. To learn more about Georgia’s school health requirements, visit the Georgia DPH website. NT/Jul20/22/CA

UCS Union County School System New Student Registration for the 2022-2023 School Year

New and transferring students in Pre-K through twelfth grade (K-12) may be registered for the upcoming school year at Union County Elementary School, 165 Elementary Way, Blairsville, GA 30512. Parents will need to contact the registrar at 706-835-4321 or registrar@ucschools.org to schedule enrollment.

The summer enrollment office hours will vary from week to week and will be by appointment only. Please don’t wait until school starts to register. The first day of school is Friday, August 12th. Waiting until the end of July or beginning of August to call to enroll your student may cause your child to delay their first day of school.

In order to expedite the registration process, please print the “Enrollment Packet” from the school system’s website at www.ucschools.org. A printed copy of the packet can also be picked up at the Elementary School office by appointment. The packet will need to be completed and the required documents indicated below will need to be presented. Your child will not be enrolled until the school has ALL of the required documents.

Documents you must bring when enrolling a student:

Age Verification: The school system requires evidence of the student’s date of birth and accepts as evidence a birth certificate or an alternate document from the prioritized list in the

state enrollment rule.

Social Security Number: The school system complies with the provisions of O.C.G.A. §20-2-150, which requires a person enrolling a student to provide a copy of the student’s social security number or to sign a form stating that the person does not wish to provide the social security number.

Immunization Certificate: The school system requires proof of immunization as required by O.C.G.A. §20-2-771, which includes an exemption for religious grounds and provisions for a temporary waiver.

A Georgia Department of Public Health Form 3231 marked “Complete” for the appropriate grade level shall be considered proof of immunization.

Out of State Immunization Records will need to be transferred to a GA DPH Form 3231 by the Union County Health Department PRIOR to registration. The Union County Health Department is located at 175 Chase Drive, Blairsville, GA; 706-745-6292.

Certificate of Vision, Hearing, Dental, and Nutrition Screening (Form 3300): This can be obtained from your child’s doctor or from the Union County Health Department, and is required for students who are enrolling in a Georgia school for the first time.

Proof of Union County Residency (2 different documents) Examples include: Current (within 2 months old) lease

agreement, vehicle registration form, mortgage documents, property tax notice, homeowner’s or renter’s insurance bill, utility bills, etc. A cellphone bill, driver’s license, or bank statement are not acceptable.

Withdrawal Form/Report Card from the student’s most recent former school.

Returning Enrollment Packets and Documents: There are two ways to get the enrollment packet and documents to the registrar: 1. Scan and email them to registrar@ucschools.org; 2. Call the registrar at 706-835-4321 and schedule an appointment to bring them to the Union County Elementary School in person

Documentation for Homeless Students: Homeless students, as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act, shall be enrolled immediately with full participation in school activities, regardless of whether all of the above can be provided at the time of enrollment. The designated employee responsible for care of homeless students shall assist the person enrolling the homeless student or the unaccompanied youth in acquiring the necessary documents for enrollment in accordance with the requirements of the state enrollment rule and the McKinney-Vento Act.

Please feel free to contact the Enrollment Office by phone at 706-835-4321 or by email at registrar@ucschools.org if you have any questions regarding student registration. NT/Jul20/22/CA

Isaiah 117 House...from Page 1A

welcoming environment to ease a child's transition into foster care during the traumatic "removal day" process.

Due to the sensitive nature of the Isaiah 117 House mission to assist children in navigating foster care placement, the newspaper will not be disclosing the home's location in Union County.

In pursuance of that mission, the land for the facility, which was generously donated by an anonymous party, will serve a grand purpose once the local Isaiah 117 House is up and running, with children from Union, Towns and Fannin counties to benefit.

Additionally, the facility, now two years in the making, will act as a storage location to stock up on necessary items such as food, socks, diapers, formulas and other things that may be needed by children as they move on to foster homes.

The transition home would not be possible without the generous support of area businesses, individuals, organizations and churches, including numerous volunteers, who have helped and continue to help with fundraising to build the home.

In the leadup to the groundbreaking ceremony, Harmony Grove Baptist Pastor Scotty Jarrard said the nonprofit aimed to accomplish three things: "reduce trauma of the child on the day of placement; be a helping hand to our case workers; and, lastly, help our foster families as well."

"Foster care is one of the hardest things that someone can do, and a lot of times when the foster family gets a call that a child needs placement, they normally have between 30 minutes to one hour to get prepared, so this house will be a transition home to help with the process and any material things needed," Jarrard said.

The ceremony began with opening remarks by Union County Program Coordinator for Isaiah 117 House Kathryn Nelson, who said she felt called by God to lead the effort to bring the much-needed facility to aid children going through removal from their family homes.

"Children have always captured a special place in my heart," Nelson said, noting their innocence and the heartbreaking reality that they sometimes have to go through difficult situations like foster placement.



Isaiah 117 House of Blairsville Program Coordinator Kathryn Nelson, who has spearheaded the local effort, speaking onstage during the July 14 groundbreaking ceremony.

Photo by Jeremy Foster

But those situations will be made easier thanks to this endeavor, which Nelson called a testament to God's faithfulness in bringing together so many people and organizations to make the groundbreaking and subsequent home build a reality.

"So, thank you," she said to those gathered. "Every one of you has played a vital role in making today possible. As we move forward with the construction process, may we watch for (God's) strength as we change the way foster care begins."

Speaking next was Yvette Hansen, the Social Services Specialist Case Manager for Union and Towns County Division of Family & Children Services.

"Taking a child from a home is very hard," Hansen said. "It's hard for the case worker, even though they have to put on a straight face; it's hard on the families, the parents or parent or whoever the caregiver is at that time; and definitely the children."

"Sometimes, they only have just a few moments to get their favorite toy or a blanket and maybe some clothes, and we always want them to take something from home so they don't feel totally alone during this transition."

"Sometimes, it's not so easy to find placement for them. We've had to sit with them, whether in a hospital or in our office, because there's no placement for them at that given time. We've had to take on shifts between us because it's taken that long sometimes."

Added Hansen, "This (facility) is going to be so amazing ... I am so grateful that we're going to have it in our county ... This is really

going to help for us to be able to either find, whether it's a family member who is willing, even if they're out of state, or just a foster home."

Hansen then introduced Kenneth Johnson, who has 23 years of home building experience and will serve as the general contractor for the upcoming construction of Union County Isaiah 117 House, in partnership with Mountain Life Builders.

Johnson said he felt blessed to be involved with such a worthwhile project and that he's sure this home will be one of his most memorable of the more 1,500 he has built over two decades in home construction.

Next up, Isaiah 117 House Cofounder and Development Director Corey Paulson of Elizabethton, Tennessee, announced that the Union County facility marked the 23rd groundbreaking in the nation since the idea for the nonprofit sparked to life in 2014.

"We're ready to break ground on this project that will change the lives and change the story for kids in Union County and Towns County and wherever they might come from," Paulson said. "So, we thank you all for being here, and thank you for your support; we're so grateful."

In closing, little sisters Lydia and Angel Stafford adorably sang "Jesus Loves the Little Children," and Pastor Jarrard led a prayer before project stakeholders and community leaders, with shovels in hand, posed for pictures of the groundbreaking's official "dirt turning."

For more information and regular updates, follow the "Isaiah 117 House Union County GA" Facebook page.

Blairsville Community Park Bridge Project progressing

Thanks to Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and our City Council, and many business and citizen volunteers, the Rotary Club of Union County's Community Park Project is moving closer to the completion of Phase 1.

A foot bridge across the small stream in the Park was essential and the College and Career Academy Construction Classes, led by Instructor Charley Cattanach, designed and built the needed bridge.

A team of city and school employees moved the bridge to the park behind City Hall and installed it across the stream. Now the mulch pathways can be finished, providing access to shaded picnic tables from the Square, the Merchants Walk area, and City parking lots.

If you look closely you can see that one couple is already enjoying their lunch at a table in the park's shade.

Watch for more developments as the Rotary Club and volunteers continue to enhance the park.



Park team moving the bridge



The Bridge in Place with picnickers behind it

Stuart Stovall...from Page 1A



Union County Community Service Supervisor Stuart Stovall, right, in conversation with Farmers Market employee Mickey Cummings at the Canning Plant last week.

Photo by Jeremy Foster

to get many of our projects here finished, including the blacksmith shop, fixing up the cabin and the sorghum barn (on the Farmers Market homestead).

"He never minds putting in the hard work himself, either. I am glad I know him, and you could not ask for a better person to be on your team."

Fix completely agreed, saying that he highly respects Stovall's values first and foremost because "he is a patriot and former military."

"Getting to know Stuart has been a great pleasure, and I am glad we have a friend like him in our community," Fix said.

Angie Deyton is the Probation Office Supervisor here in Union County, and even though she has been working directly across the hall from Stovall for only about a year, she has worked with him in the state probation system for nearly 19 years.

"Stuart is great at what he does," Deyton said. "With his background and experience, it was an easy decision for him to be picked for his position."

"He treats everybody as an employee or just a friend whether they are under a sentence or not; he treats everybody just like human

beings and has so much compassion for people. And you cannot teach those kinds of qualities."

In his own time recently, Stovall combined his passion for service with his military background for a 10-day trip to the Ukraine to provide medical mission support for refugee relief through the "Prescription For a Hurting World Ministries."

"That was just another thing that I do to try and give back to humanity," he said. "There were thousands of refugees there that needed help, and it was an amazing experience to help provide even one thing for these people that do not have homes anymore."

Continued Stovall, "My focus with jobs has never been on making big money, but rather ones that are service-oriented where I feel I made a difference in people's lives. I have tried to approach this in a way where people do not feel threatened if they are here under court requirements."

"I would much rather people look at this not as a court-ordered requirement or that they have to do it, but where they can find a way to enjoy it and have pride for fixing up the community. I have always tried to help take

that bad stigma away from people and never present them as someone who is in trouble, rather than just someone who is here and wants to help.

"For me, the main thing I enjoy the most about my job is working with these folks and connecting them with things they can be successful at and with people who can provide them with the most positive mentoring."

"I try to get to know everyone personally when I meet them as we work through this program, so I can identify what they like to do and their strengths and talents and try to put them in that kind of position. I try to replace the negativity of punishment with the positivity of contributing to the community."

"There have been numerous times someone has done so well here at their court-ordered job that they have been offered a job and hired in those particular areas later on. So, when I see people completely change themselves and their attitudes toward service to the community, I feel successful."

"When someone tells me that I helped guide them on the right track, then that lets me know that I am doing what God wants me to do, and that is very meaningful to me."