

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Backpack 2 School benefits hundreds of families

By Natalie Mintz
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Aug. 5, the annual Backpack 2 School Bash at First United Methodist Church of Union County hosted hundreds of jubilant students for their last Saturday of summer break as kids excitedly picked up free school supplies for the new year that starts Wednesday, Aug. 9.

After receiving their supplies, the children played in bouncy houses, painted, and ate snow cones and cotton candy, with free lunch provided as well.

Now in its eighth year, the event is a collaboration between local churches,

businesses, organizations and individuals in the community. The goal is to provide school supplies to all Union County students in need, with no income requirements attached to receiving supplies.

This year, a whopping 456 students benefited from the free supplies, from little to teens.

At the event, each student received a list of what they will need for the upcoming school year. They then had the opportunity to walk through the gymnasium and pick out all of their own supplies.

Anything they might need was donated, including backpacks, notebooks, paper, binders, pencils, pencil sharpeners, pencil holders,

erasers, pens, colored pencils, crayons, scissors, glue, markers, folders, rulers, highlighters, note cards, baby wipes, and headphones.

One of the event's coordinators, Alexis Noe, highlighted the importance of letting kids choose things like the color of their backpacks or what type of notebooks they wanted to use.

"We wanted it to be a great experience for kids," she said. "We wanted them to experience the joy of back-to-school shopping."

Noe also pointed out how Backpack 2 School is a "huge community event," remarking on her gratitude for the "huge outpouring of love" *See Backpack 2 School, Page 6A*



The Backpack 2 School Bash is always a great time for students, who get to do their "back to school shopping" free thanks to the support of a generous community. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

EMC, TVA celebrate new EV chargers downtown

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In preparation for the impending electric vehicle future, Union County celebrated its newest EV charging stations with a ribbon-cutting event on Wednesday, Aug. 2, along with a symbolic "first charging" for the fastest EV chargers on the market.

The event was a year and a half in the making in the downtown parking area behind Blairsville City Hall and

was spurred by the increasing popularity of electric cars.

Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation and Seven States Power Corporation partnered with the Tennessee Valley Authority, Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, and the City of Blairsville to install the stations, which have already seen use.

According to the EMC, "This fast charger installation is part of the regional Fast Charge Network that will cover major

travel corridors across TVA's seven-state service area and will complement the broader efforts of the National Electric Highway Coalition, which seeks to enable long-distance EV travel by placing fast chargers along interstates and major highways throughout the United States."

"We moved quickly to participate in the Fast Charge Network because we want to make it easy for people to choose EVs so our community" *See Downtown Chargers, Page 6A*



Local stakeholders and representatives from TVA, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC and others during last week's ribbon-cutting celebration at the new EV rapid chargers downtown. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Blairsville DDA, Darren Harper part ways after decade of service to city

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Last week, the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority Board of Directors accepted the resignation of Executive Director Darren Harper after rejecting a list of conditions he was requesting in order to remain with the DDA.

Harper led the DDA for a decade at the time of his resignation, which came after years of feeling undervalued in this position.

He experienced an apparent breaking point after arguing with a city official over his delayed arrival on the square following a storm July 29 during the Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival, though he explained his delay stemmed from assisting a volunteer who had been injured in the storm down the street.

After that weekend, which proved stressful but successful due to the 2023 Music & Moonshine Festival being the "largest festival we've



Brandon Harper attended the Aug. 1 Blairsville DDA Board meeting to speak on behalf of his husband Darren, who was not present. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

held in the last 10 years," Harper decided it was time for things to change or he would be parting ways with the city and DDA.

"I began working for the city 10 years ago as a 20-hour-a-week employee, but always" *See Harper Departs DDA, Page 2A*

4-H BB Team makes it to national competition



The Union County 4-H BB Team Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County's BB Team is small, but its members are certainly capable of impressive accomplishments. July 6-9 saw 11 of them travel

to the Daisy National BB Gun Championship Match, and although they didn't place among the winners, it was still a feat getting there.

Daisy Outdoor Products, based in Rogers, Arkansas, is known for its BB guns.

Their air rifles are high-quality, and for that, they've become incredibly popular over the years, making them standard fare for competitive sports like Georgia 4-H Project SAFE Shooting Sports. *See 4-H BB Team, Page 2A*

Mobility program restores physical independence to wounded Veteran

News Special
North Georgia News

In partnership with the New York Yankees baseball team, Veterans service organization The Independence Fund presented U.S. Army Veteran Byron "Pete" Sutherland of Morganton, Georgia, with an all-terrain trackchair during the Yankees' Aug. 1 match-up against the Tampa Bay Rays.

The Independence Fund's hallmark program, the All-Terrain Trackchair Mobility Program, began in 2007 and continues to restore mobility and provide independence to those suffering the devastating effects of service-connected loss of mobility.

To date, The Independence Fund has provided nearly 2,700 chairs to wounded, injured, and ill Veterans.

"We count it a privilege to partner with organizations as respected and recognized as the Yankees," said The Independence Fund's CEO Sarah Verardo. "The team's incomparable support of our mission and America's heroes everywhere is making a true difference in the Veteran community across the country."

"It is remarkable to see a deserving Veteran like Pete" *See Veteran Sutherland, Page 2A*



Disabled Army Veteran Byron "Pete" Sutherland, a longtime Morganton resident, received an all-terrain trackchair during the Aug. 1 Yankees game in New York. Photo/Submitted



Vol. 114 No. 33
Arrests - 5C Legals - 4D
Church - 2B Obits - 4B
Classifieds - 3D Sports - 2C
Opinion - 4A

FOOTBALL
8/11 Scrimmage
@ Chestatee 7:30 PM

Maters & Music Festival Aug. 12 See page 6D
Georgia Mountain Fair Aug. 18-26 See page 1C
Purple Heart Day Information See page 6C



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Introducing FOUCL's Vice President, Ken Arrington

Friends of Union County Library's Vice President, Ken Arrington, has quite a story to tell about his thankfulness for libraries. It began when his mother, who was a teacher, took him to their local

library where he attended story time and received a library card at a young age.

Before moving here, Ken was living on an island in the Philippines. He says the lack of libraries was one of the



Advocating for Libraries, Literacy, and Lifelong Learning

reasons he decided to leave. He didn't know exactly where he would end up, but his sister was living near Blairsville, a place he had never visited and didn't know much about. He decided to surprise her, so he packed up his belongings and began the long trip to Atlanta. After almost 24 hours, he landed and looked for a Greyhound bus station, thinking he could take a bus to Blairsville. When he realized there was no bus to his destination, he took the MARTA train to the end of the line in North Springs and from there began to hitchhike, finally reaching the square in Blairsville. He wandered into Hole in the Wall and called his sister. "I'm here," he said. "What! You mean in Blairsville?" she said. "Yes, in the restaurant on the square." "Stay there. I'm coming to pick you up," she replied.

His sister also loved libraries and could often be found reading in a comfortable chair there, so naturally one of the first places his sister drove him to was Union County Public Library. Unfortunately, Sue died from a heart attack soon after Ken arrived; but he has stayed and feels a bond with her when he's at the library. He says he was more excited about getting his library card than he was about getting his

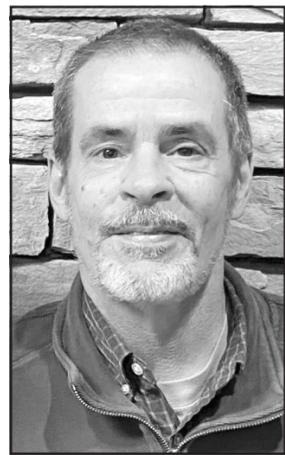
Georgia driver's license. His first impression of our library: "You gotta be kidding me! How do we have this in our small rural community?"

Ken is still discovering all the resources our library has to offer. He has used the computers and even checked out a Chrome Book to give it a try before purchasing one. He borrows DVDs, including the Yellowstone series which he recommends. He has become a Civil War reenactor and his book selections are often history related, including The Fox Fire books, Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War, and The Covenant of Blood Mountain: A Son's Revenge. Being originally from Baltimore, he also enjoys Edgar Allan Poe and H. L. Mencken; but Mark Twain is also a favorite. Other hobbies include fishing, guns (including his .69 caliber mus-

ket for reenactments), foraging for mushrooms, and playing horseshoes and Scrabble.

Whatever else Ken is doing, he is sure to be at the library every few weeks, if not more often. Friends of Union County Library encourage you to see what our library has to offer, too. With your PINES card (available at our library just by showing an official piece of mail with your name and local address on it), you can check out books from our library and most of the other libraries in Georgia! In addition, there are digital access options available to use from home including Libby's Kanopy which offers books, magazines, and movies.

Be sure to get your second important card by asking for a Friends of Union County Library membership form. For just \$10 a year, you can help financially support our library



Ken Arrington

and allow them to provide resources above and beyond what their regular budget would allow them to do. Owl-iver, our mascot, says "It's a wise investment in our community. Give a hoot - join us!"

4-H BB Team...from Page 1A

Among shotguns, archery and other choices, students can specialize in BB guns, and just like programs for livestock handling and civic communication, certain counties can participate nationally with shooting sports.

The entire team must compete in six to eight "shoots," or tournaments, across the state. From there, they have to place first, second or third in these more "local" competitions to become eligible to take part against kids from all over the country.

Georgia is known for its many BB teams, so there are plenty of chances to triumph. To put things into perspective, the Peach State has sent as many as 15 teams to Daisy Nationals. Many states normally send anywhere between five and 11 teams, and some only send one or two at the most.

This year, 57 teams total participated at Nationals, and 12 of them were from Georgia, with two out of the three finalist teams hailing from Pierce and Walton Counties.

But for Union County, 2023's big win came in January when seven members won Second Place at a Carroll County match. Six and a half months later, 11 members were on their way to Nationals, and while they didn't take home the biggest prizes, it meant a lot just to be able to attend.

The whole team functions as a family to support each other, and while scores are tallied individually, students who don't make the cut for larger competitions or who age out of the sport return to offer pointers.

Pyper Taylor, as the oldest of the group, took it

upon herself to watch over the younger members. The 2022-23 school year was her last, as BB participants grow out of the sport when they become sophomores.

"I've learned a lot of gun safety and leadership skills and am getting to watch these little ones come into it," Taylor said of her experience, casting a fond glance toward the youngest members of the team as she spoke.

Jaycee Hughes has been with the team for two years after Taylor convinced her to attend one of the meets with her.

"This one texted me and said, 'There's a meeting at 5:30 today. Show up,'" Hughes laughed. The rest, as the saying goes, was history. Hughes got so invested that she decided to do a presentation on BB guns for a 4-H public speaking project. For her passion, she earned First Place in the Target Sports category.

Meanwhile, 10-year-old Asa Lunsford got a perfect score of 100 during his first year of shooting competing against 16-year-olds at Nationals. Zach Leet, already in the Champion category in his fourth year, also shot a perfect score. Along the same lines, the youngest member of the team, Jada Taylor, shot a perfect score at state.

"The BB Team means making new friends, meeting new people, and learning how to keep putting 110% into things even when it's not going your way," Leet said.

"Out of 500 kids, (Lunsford) came in Second Place," noted BB Coach Curtis Stephens, pointing out how individual students can

compete against each other. Stephens' own son, Conner, is a member of the team and was the reason his parents both decided to become coaches.

Head Coach Mike Bottinelli got his first taste of BB shooting in 1998 when his oldest son joined the program for three years. In 2010, Bottinelli picked up the gun again and has been coaching BB-shooting ever since for a total of 13 years of experience.

"Shooting sports are great; it's more of a universal sport," Bottinelli said. "It's not just for athletic kids; you know, you don't have to be (athletic) to be successful at shooting sports."

"You can be any size, any shape. You don't have to be able to run a mile or do squats or anything like that, but you can be successful with shooting sports."

Added Taylor, "Don't be shy to try it the first time. You'll get it; it'll take a lot of practice, but you'll get it. You'll probably not have the best scores to start with, but you'll get there."

And sometimes, things just don't work out. The BB Team had 26 members at the beginning of the year, but as the spring season gradually progressed, several students left to participate in other sports.

Now, at 15 long-term shooters strong, the Union County BB Team continues to reach for the stars.

"This is a great bunch of young men and women," Stephens said with no small amount of pride.

Bottinelli agreed: "It's a lot of time, a lot of dedication, and these are the kids who stuck it out to the very end. They all seem to enjoy it, and I enjoy being with them."

Harper Departs DDA...from Page 1A

put in a full-time effort," Harper said on Facebook after learning that the DDA Board had accepted his resignation.

"Over the years, I went from 20 hours to 30 hours to 32 hours (with benefits, yay!) to 40 hours just a year or so ago," he continued. "I made roughly \$17 an hour. Out of 47 employees, I was the third lowest paid, with the mayor making just a little more than me."

"Those of you who know me know that I gave it my all. I still have love for the City of Blairsville and the people who work tirelessly to keep it the awesome place it is."

"I asked the city and DDA Board to raise my salary from \$36,500 to \$60,000 and to 'bridge' my time so that all the years I worked as part-time employee would allow me to

become vested. They declined. I'm OK with that."

"I want to work for folks who value my skill set, my creativity and my dedication. These aren't those kinda people. No hard feelings... ready to move on to a new phase in life so that I can enjoy the next adventure."

"Thank you to all that reached out and have shown support. You've made this gnome a very happy man indeed."

In the meeting where the DDA Board accepted Harper's resignation on Tuesday, Aug. 1, multiple people, including Harper's husband Brandon, the volunteer who was injured, and several DDA Board members, spoke in support of him and the tremendous service he has given the city.

Responding directly to an accusation that had been circulating around town that Harper was drunk at the time of the storm, causing his slightly delayed response to assisting square cleanup efforts, all of the speakers in the meeting remarked that he was not intoxicated that evening.

Harper has vehemently denied the accusation as well, saying it left him "heartbroken."

In a letter to Harper accepting his resignation on Aug. 1, DDA Board Chair Megan Kimsey said the DDA appreciated his "time and dedication to the position." The DDA will soon be starting the search to fill the now-vacant Executive Director role.

For his part, Harper noted, "It's the end of a decade. What a fun ride. On to new adventures."

Veteran Sutherland...from Page 1A

Sutherland receive the gift of physical independence with the assistance of our all-terrain trackchairs."

Sutherland joined the Army in 1994, earned a humanitarian service award for his participation in Operation Sea Signal at Guantanamo Bay Cuba, then left service in April 1996.

Following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Sutherland re-entered the Army in March 2002. On April 4, 2004, while on patrol in Iraq's Sadr City neighborhood to rescue soldiers who were pinned down and under heavy fire, Sutherland sustained career-ending injuries from gunshot wounds to both legs.

His injuries have resulted in permanent mobility disabilities that affect his daily life. Sutherland also sustained a brain injury and multiple spinal fractures with an unsuccessful spinal fusion in 2021, causing him loss of use and instability. He is active in many Veterans organizations that promote new and emerging technologies that

benefit disabled Veterans.

"Being able to get out of my home and live life the way it is meant to be lived will be a great advantage to my overall mental health," Sutherland said. "I live in the mountains of North Georgia, and this device will specifically help me navigate the extreme terrain located on my property and near my home."

"There are so many missed opportunities to visit waterfalls and hunt due to the varied rugged terrain in my area that this device would easily handle. I'm very grateful and humble for the consideration to become a part of this program and look forward to the many benefits this device will provide me in my life."

In addition to its Mobility program, The Independence Fund offers a comprehensive suite of programs specially designed to meet the needs of Veterans, their Caregivers, families, and the wartime Allies who fought alongside American forces overseas.

Founded in 2007, The Independence Fund, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is committed to serving the Warfighter Community by providing innovative programs and services to support the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual independence of our service members, combat Veterans, their caregivers, families, and those allies who served in combat alongside our troops, through innovative mobility and adaptive technologies and therapies for combat veterans; suicide prevention; caregiver and family support; and Veteran advocacy with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, other government agencies, federal and state legislators, and other partners.

The Independence Fund believes in fairness and equality for all veterans and families, irrespective of race, gender, religion and sexual orientation, and will continue to uphold these American values.

Backpack 2 School Bash...from Page 1A

from the community” with all the donated supplies and funds to purchase additional supplies for the bash.

Ferst Readers of Union County attended the bash to give out free books and sign families up for the book of the month club. The program sends out free books to kids every month until age 5, with the goal of promoting childhood literacy in low-income communities.

Alongside providing supplies for students who could not make the event, Union County Family Connection had a table set up so families could learn what resources the organization offers.

Family Connection offices are located on school campuses and work with teachers and families to “make sure students have their basic needs met,” explained local program coordinator Katy Jones. The resources range from providing clothing and food to health care and shelter.

Families could also register their children for Head Start and the local Girl Scout troop, and the Lions Club provided free vision screening for families as well during the bash.

Debbie Hunt was not

the only retired schoolteacher volunteering at the event.

“Once a teacher, always a teacher,” Hunt said, noting that she “tells her friends in other counties” about the event.

Another retired teacher, Scott Terry, said the bash was a good way of “helping students get ready for the school year.”

Many families expressed gratitude toward the organizers and volunteers, as the event “brings the love of the community altogether,” according to parent Karen Hicks.

“It’s a true blessing to see all these people come together,” Hicks said. She also commented on how nice it was for the kids to be able to play on the bounce houses that were provided.

Along with being grateful for the support, families enjoyed how the event was actually fun for their kids.

Amy Kuberek keeps foster children and comes to the event “every year.” She called it a “good pre-party” before the start of school.

And thanks to ongoing community support, parents and students can look forward to the return of the Backpack 2 School Bash at the start of the next school year.



Backpack 2 School was a total package for local families, offering kids a fun day out plus free school supplies for the new semester that starts this week. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Downtown Chargers...from Page 1A



Each rapid charger behind Blairsville City Hall can handle up to two vehicles at once. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

can enjoy the environmental and economic benefits of electric transportation,” said EMC General Manager Allan Glidewell.

Continuing, “Grant funding from TVA makes it possible to add fast chargers in our community by providing 80% of the project cost, and our local partner, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, recognized this opportunity and provided the required grant match for the project.”

Not only are such chargers allowing more people to travel, but the way they work gives folks time to get out and stretch their legs, potentially stopping into local businesses. This feature will benefit Downtown Blairsville particularly due to its myriad shops and restaurants.

“Over time, you’ll see convenience stores and other private developers and retail stores, restaurants and hotels (investing) in these charging stations at their properties,” District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch said. “While (customers are) charging this car for 20 or 30 minutes, they’re going to try to lure them into their restaurants and to their stores in downtown areas.”

Chari Buckner, TVA’s Interim Director of Customer Relations, emphasized this point and talked about other benefits of electric vehicles.

“They’re really helping to fuel the local economy,” Buckner said. “Their low-cost fuel and low-cost maintenance also help keep money in the

community because people aren’t having to spend as much money on their vehicles.”

While the prices of available vehicles may make drivers balk, the long-term costs of owning an electric car look promising. Drivers can save up to \$1,000 in fuel and maintenance charges. By contrast, consider that some vehicles can cost up to \$70 to fill up on gasoline. A quick charge to “top off” a battery costs \$15 and can get drivers at least 100 miles with energy left over.

“A lot of people have been reluctant to go into the EV market because of charging, but the EV market is really designed for home charging; these (stations) are for long haul (trips),” explained Seven States Power Corporation Technology Alignment Director B.J. Bernard, adding that most folks who purchase electric vehicles have chargers in their homes.

It’s estimated that increased electric vehicle usage reduces carbon emissions by about 1 million metric tons yearly, and it’s certainly a tempting thought to be able to leave home every day with what is essentially “a full tank,” but it’s going to take a while before EVs become a common sight.

“This is a great honor for TVA to be part of this,” said Buckner, an EV driver herself. “And I’m just thankful and (offer) congratulations to Blue Ridge Mountain EMC for having the vision and foresight to get this Fast Charge

Network.”

The Fast Charge Network was started nearly three years ago with the goal of providing electric charging stations every 50 miles along major highways in the TVA region, and Blairsville’s two rapid chargers are the first in North Georgia.

According to Buckner, there are 11 operational sites and 55 additional chargers commissioned and planned for the next couple years. And none too soon, as by 2028, it’s estimated there will be about 20,000 electric cars on the road.

“We wanted to be cutting-edge, we wanted to help the community grow its economic development opportunities and be positioned for what comes next,” said Erik Brinke, EMC’s Director of Administrative Services and External Affairs. “I think it’s a fantastic day for all of us, and I want you to know how much I appreciate you being here today.”

Furthermore, Brinke believes that the Fast Charge Network will create “sustainable economic development opportunities for our region.”

“For a little community, we’ve got a lot going on,” said Chamber President Steve Rowe, adding that he and many others in the community were thankful for the TVA, considering the federal agency “provided the majority of the funding” for the project.

“We’re just so appreciative and we understand the benefits of having this charger here,” Rowe said.

Upcoming Adult Art/Craft Classes at Artworks Artisan Center

Mountain Regional Arts and Crafts Guild is excited to announce a full schedule of adult classes for the remainder of 2023. We will be adding more classes on our website throughout the year. Classes will be held at ArtWorks Artisan Center, 243 Big Sky Drive, Hiawassee, GA.
 Aug. 19, 1 PM to 4 PM, Embroidered Holiday Cards, instructor Pam Coste.
 Aug. 26, 1 PM to 4 PM, Summer Hydrangeas: Acrylic Painting, instructor Barbara Keyes.
 Aug. 31, 1 PM to 4 PM,

Rug Hooking, Wool Flower Pin, instructor Linda Bell.
 Sept. 7, 1 PM to 4 PM, Wool Applique, instructor Linda Bell.
 Sept. 5 - 26, 10 AM to 12 PM, Hand Built Pottery, instructor Kari McCollough.
 Sept. 30, 1 PM to 4 PM, Learn to Twine a Mug Rug, instructor Joyce Clair.
 Oct. 5, 2 PM to 4 PM, Beginning Zentangle: Learn the Basics, instructor Kaye Teronde.
 Oct. 19, 2 PM to 4 PM, Zentangle: New Tangles, instructor Kaye Teronde.
 Oct. 24, 1 PM to 4 PM, Watercolor for Beginners: Fall Landscape, instructor Joyce Clair.
 Nov. 2, 2 PM to 4 PM, Zentangle: Zentangle in the Round, instructor Kaye Teronde.
 Nov. 11, 1 PM to 4 PM, Paint Holiday Trivets with Alco-

hol Inks, instructor Joyce Clair.
 Dec. 7, 1 PM to 4 PM, Watercolor for Beginners: Holiday Cards, instructor Joyce Clair.
 For more details about classes please visit our website www.mountainartscrafts.org and click on events and classes. You can call Artworks at 706-896-0932 or stop by the store at 243 Big Sky Drive to register for classes. Classes are small and fill quickly.
 Mountain Regional Arts and Crafts Guild brings regional makers of handmade crafts and original art together to collaboratively showcase and sell their work by sharing creative ideas and skills through networking and outreach programs.
 Mountain Regional Arts and Crafts Guild/Artworks Artisan Gallery is a 501 (c)3 non-profit charitable organization.

Happy Birthday, Edwin!
 Know that you are LOVED
 and highly celebrated :)