

North Georgia News

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First day of school filled with smiling young faces

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County Schools went back into session on Tuesday, Aug. 16, and despite the chaotic nature of the Thursday, Aug. 11, shooting of a maintenance vehicle outside the Primary School, students and teachers were excited to return.

In fact, there was hardly any mention of the shooting in the bustling hallways of the school system that first day.

Middle School Principal Pat Donaldson, for example, was pleased with how excited the kids were, and said, "We're happy to be back and ready to have a good year."

One of the biggest aspects

of coming back to the 2022-23 school year turned out to be the revised car rider traffic pattern, which was met with mixed but majority positive reviews. New this year is the dedicated Middle School access road coming up from Georgia 515 next to Waffle House.

Traffic concerns aside, Coach Neil Setzer, keeping an eye on excited athletes, said, "Everybody's aware of where we are (and) who we are, and what we need to do is come together." He connected his message to the shirts that he and other staff members wore on the first day.

"Union United" was the message printed above stars and stripes on the shirts, meant to inspire as much as reassure. The design was the "brainchild"

of Dr. Paula Davenport, who retired recently as Assistant Superintendent.

The shirts rolled out on Sunday, Aug. 14, when multiple churches and school officials came together for a prayer meet to bless the new year and steel spirits against fear.

"There's nothing like being back in school," continued Setzer, voicing the opinion of many other educators and staff eager to fall back into the routine. "It does an old man good."

Speaking of Union County sports, cross country will have some new stumping, that is, running grounds this year. With a student body more populous than ever before, more space was needed, and since

See *First Day of School*, Page 6A



Union County Primary School students were excited for their first day back from summer break, which was Tuesday, Aug. 16. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Heritage Festival to return over Labor Day Weekend

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Following a two-year hiatus due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Union County Historical Society is bringing back an important local tradition: the Heritage Festival.

Taking place as usual on the historic grounds of the 1906 Grapelle Butt Mock House in Downtown Blairsville, the Heritage Festival will run two days over Labor Day Weekend, Sept. 3-4, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on both Saturday and Sunday.

As the name suggests, the Heritage Festival honors the cultural roots of the North Georgia Mountains, showcasing for modern people the older ways of the area's progenitors. And as to know where they've been to know where they're going.

The festival puts history first by celebrating the old-time mountain customs of Union County on the grounds of the Mountain Life Museum, which, in addition to the Butt Mock House, features the



The 1906 Grapelle Butt Mock House, a beautiful country home with a recently completed annex, will serve as the venue for the Heritage Festival Labor Day Weekend. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

1861 John Payne Cabin, the Duncan Cabin and much more, including historical artifacts.

Always free for the public to attend, this year's festival - again, returning for the first time since 2019 - will host more than 60 vendors offering everything from food to handmade arts and crafts,

and live music will be available throughout the festival as well.

Of course, the history of it all is the central theme of the Heritage Festival, and to say that much has changed in terms of living standards and technology over the years is perhaps the understatement of the

See *Heritage Festival*, Page 6A

School community gathers after shooting incident



Multiple prayer circles formed during the Sunday, Aug. 14, prayer meeting at Mike Colwell Field. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Unity and faith are paramount to sticking together after tragedy, and that's exactly what Union County proved itself capable of in the wake of the Aug. 11 shooting incident at

Union County Primary School, in which, thankfully, only a school vehicle was targeted by gunfire.

And while no one was physically hurt in the incident, understandably, the event has left students, parents, teachers, and others outside of the scope of the school system shaken to

their very core.

The Panthers are not so easily subdued, however, as shown mere days later on Sunday, Aug. 14, when the community gathered on Mike Colwell Memorial Field at 5 p.m. for a prayer meet.

Organized by multiple See *Community Prayer*, Page 2A

New 'Convenience Center' now open at Moccasin Road

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Attention residents, especially those living in northern Union County: the new Moccasin Road Convenience Center is now open to the public, adjacent to the Union County Fire Department Station No. 4.

Union County Government opened the new facility on Monday, Aug. 22, and while it requires a few finishing touches before it is considered fully completed, the center is ready and waiting to handle people's bagged garbage and recyclables disposal needs.

"The hours will be 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, and Saturday 7 a.m. to noon, just like the hours at the other convenience centers," County Purchasing Director Pam Hawkins said. "It'll be the same price per bag: \$1.50 for up to 30-gallon bags, \$1.75 for over 30-gallon bags. And recyclables drop-off is free."

There will be multiple clearly labeled places to deposit



The new Moccasin Road Convenience Center will provide a new, clean, weather-covered area for people to dispose of their trash and recyclables. Photo by Mark Smith

each type of recyclable: #1 plastics, #2 plastics natural, #2 plastics colored, corrugated cardboard, aluminum, mixed paper and glass.

The recycling bins are set to be replaced with compactors scheduled for delivery on Sept.

12, and the bagged trash bin will be replaced with a compactor as well, with the compactors to allow for more tonnage to be accepted before transfer is needed.

Until the compactors See *Convenience Center*, Page 2A

Winkler & Winkler awarded Fire Station 13 construction

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In his Aug. 18 regular meeting at the Union County Courthouse, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris awarded a contract to Blairsville-based general contracting firm Winkler & Winkler, Inc. to build Union County Fire Station No. 13 for \$2,437,583.

"Fire Station 13 is going to be (at the entrance to) Hidden Harbor on Murphy Highway ... to cover the north part of Union County," said Fire Chief/EMA Director David Dyer. "We have three volunteer stations in that part of the county, but we have plans to put career firefighters at this station."

That means Station 13 will be manned 24/7/365 by full-time firefighters, who will be able to respond about seven to eight minutes faster to fire and medical emergencies in that area compared to Station 1 first responders in Blairsville, Dyer said.

"The biggest thing is it's going to help the ISO (Insurance Services Office) rating in that



Union County Fire Chief David Dyer attended the August county meeting to discuss details of the upcoming Fire Station No. 13. Photo by Mark Smith

area. For people who have really high insurance rates in that area, it's going to bring those insurance rates down," Dyer said. "So, better coverage and better insurance rates."

In the works for over two years now, the new fire station will also house an office for a Union County Sheriff's

Deputy and will likely have an ambulance staged on the premises, though that's not inked yet.

Paris said the only other bidder for the project was Scroggs & Grizzel Construction out of Gainesville. Their bid was \$2,946,734, a difference of over See *Fire Station 13*, Page 2A



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SPORTS
FOOTBALL
Aug. 26 vs. Lumpkin Co. 7:30 PM
CROSS COUNTRY
Aug. 25 @ Meeks Park 4:30 PM

SEE FALL SPORTS PREVIEW INSIDE!

Gospel Music Festival Aug. 26-27
Fine Arts Center
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Community Prayer...from Page 1A

church groups, the gathering was already planned to wish students and staff a successful year ahead. After the events of that Thursday, there was a much more poignant goal in mind.

The turnout was massive, as folks came out to give and receive support. Prayer cards left on the ground in neat stacks were picked up one-by-one by those who needed some prompting as to how to start their requests for a better year.

Offered on the cards were suggestions to keep in mind students, teachers and classroom assistants, administrative staff and support, Board of Education members and personnel, and even the families of all involved in the school system.

Printed across the top of each "Prayer Guide" was a verse from Acts 4:31, defining well the event and spirit of those attending: "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."

And just like responses to trauma differ between individuals, so too does prayer style. Many circled the track in silence, with small groups of families and friends showing solidarity by walking together. Others huddled on the field or bowed their heads and linked hands. A minority stood and prayed alone, their forms as still and quiet as everyone else's but



Members of the community, including students and staff of Union County Schools, took to the football stadium to pray three days after the school shooting incident at the Primary School.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

no less sincere.

Then, scattered across the field and throughout the evening, were the hugs, tears, and reassurances – promises, too, that the Lord would keep His eye on Union County Schools. But no matter the style, everyone was joined in common purpose.

"Today we're one united body, together to pray," said Roy Wright, Ministry Coordinator of First Baptist Church.

Ricky Powell, new Senior Pastor of First Baptist and recently arrived resident of Blairsville, was wholly willing to stand with his neighbors of just four weeks.

"The events on Thursday reminded us of how vital it is that we pray together and stand together as a community not only on this day, but every day," Powell said. "And so, we are here because we love this community."

Powell comforted and inspired prayer participants with a moving declaration, observing that, "while we saw what we don't want to see on Thursday come into our community, let's keep our focus

on what we did see that was good about this community.

"We are strong, we are united. We may be from different backgrounds and denominations and ethnicities and areas. We may root for different college football teams. But when it's said and done, I've learned this about Union County – we stand together. We are one."

And finally, Powell asked that those gathered include the shooting suspect himself in their prayers, noting that "something snapped," and he and his family deserved mercy and grace as much as anyone else.

The following Monday, Aug. 15, saw counselors and pastors visiting with school system personnel to offer their services to teachers and staff in need before the Aug. 16 start of classes.

Superintendent John Hill commented on the helpful phenomenon, saying that teachers and staff "took advantage of the services offered."

"It was a good thing for those employees who chose to

participate in that," he said.

Monday was provided as a staff workday to give educators not just a chance to continue the preparations that were interrupted the previous Thursday, but to serve as a reprieve as well for those who needed some time to recover from the shock of the incident.

Hill added that just seeing students return that Tuesday for the first day of school was enough to raise spirits and restore morale, but overall, the services on Monday were "a good time, a needed time for that staff."

The outstanding support from the community, the support from local law enforcement agencies in the schools' time of need, and support from faith-based observers like First Baptist Church moved Hill to express his gratitude for how well everything has gone, all things considered.

"I just think we need to thank the Lord for a great outcome, (and) thank our staff and law enforcement for a tremendous response," he said.

Fire Station 13...from Page 1A

half a million dollars.

Moving on, the commissioner presented substance abuse grant checks to Freedom Ministries, New Hope Counseling, Positive Pathways and Union County Family Connection. The grant amounts were not disclosed, and there was a total of six applicants.

"In 2010, when the alcohol referendum was passed, I made the commitment to set aside up to \$50,000 each year from the alcohol license fees and tax receipts to put back into the community for the purpose of helping to combat alcohol and drug abuse problems that already existed at the time," Paris said.

"We have a completely independent committee set up to review these applications and award the grants," he continued. "The committee has done an excellent job every year, and I commend them highly for the time that they spend selecting recipients, but they wish to remain anonymous."

Paris then accepted three Accountability Courts Grants for the Enotah Judicial Circuit from the State of Georgia, all with grant periods from July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023.

The first went to Enotah

Adult Felony Drug Courts South of White and Lumpkin Counties for \$350,170; the second to Enotah Adult Felony Drug Courts North of Union and Towns Counties for \$241,080; and the third to Enotah Family Drug Court, to be split between all four counties, for \$194,824.

And the Union County Fire Department was the recipient of the Walmart Community Grant in the amount of \$2,000. The money was used to purchase three iPads for use with three of the Station 1 fire apparatus for maintenance scheduling and gated community access.

In other county news, the commissioner accepted an agreement between ACNS, Inc. and Union County to provide computer consulting services to 911 Dispatch in the amount of \$600 per month, which includes but is not limited to workstation maintenance and network operations.

The duration of this contract is one year, from Aug. 1, 2022, to July 31, 2023.

Next, Paris adopted three resolutions.

The first, Resolution R-2022-18, certified the renegotiation of the local distribution of revenues received from the state-mandated Local Option Sales Tax of 1%, with

Union County getting 80% of those revenues and Blairsville getting 20% – the same arrangement as in years past.

The second, Resolution R-2022-19, amended the FY2021 Budget, and the third, Resolution R-2022-20, adopted and added the updated Debris Management Plan to the Local Operations Plan for Union County EMA.

In his Commissioner's Comments, Paris said the new Moccasin Creek Convenience Center, located behind Fire Station No. 4 off Ivy Log Road, would open for business on Monday, Aug. 22.

The new Union County Gun Range is moving along slowly because of all the requirements and regulations of the U. S. Forest Service. But it is moving forward.

And, finally, Paris said the cannery at the Union County Farmers Market has served the most people this year since it opened about nine or 10 years ago, and that the county is considering opening the Canning Plant three days a week next year.

Union County Commission meetings are held the third Thursday of every month at 6 p.m. inside the courthouse.

Convenience Center...from Page 1A

are operational, Union County employee Matt White will be making multiple trips daily to replace full bins with empty ones.

The newly paved Convenience Center is designed for easy ingress and egress, just like the main Transfer Station off Deep South Farm Road in Blairsville, where traffic flows in a circular fashion. The design also ensures a clean area with a minimum of odors.

County Manager Larry Garrett estimated that the new center will alleviate about

30% of the traffic at the main Blairsville station, which not only means relief for the Blairsville site, but less traffic on the roads coming from north Union County as well.

The new Moccasin Road Convenience Center will also relieve some of the traffic at the Convenience Center on Georgia 325 in front of the Union County Horse Arena, which will be the next location to get a major expansion and overhaul, with plans already in the works.

In planning the new

center, Hawkins said she and Garrett researched trash and recycling operations of other counties. The design of the new convenience center is very similar to one in Pickens County, they said.

"We got the idea from them. It works very well, it keeps everything clean, and there won't be trash blowing around," Hawkins said.

Be advised that recyclables will need to be separated prior to coming to the center to facilitate efficient traffic flow.

Pilot in Command: Lara Turner



Student Pilot Lara Turner and Stephen Thompson, CFI

What did you do on summer break? That's a typical conversation starter on the first day of school. For one Union

County student, the answer is anything but typical.

Lara Turner was selected in June to receive a signifi-

cant Ray Aviation Scholarship. This scholarship is provided through EAA (Experimental Aviation Association) and administered by local Chapter 1211. It is meant to jump-start a high school student's aviation career. It has definitely done that for Lara.

After hours of flight training provided by CFI (Certified Flight Instructor) Stephen Thompson, Lara soloed August 11th. Soloing is the first major step in the process leading up to taking her Private Pilot check ride.

Members of EAA Chapter 1211 located here in Blairsville are enjoying her progress vicariously.

We look forward to welcoming her into that rather exclusive club: Pilot in Command.

Cal Wolcott
EAA Chapter 1211
President

First Day of School...from Page 1A

traces are already run in Meeks Park, students will now go there to practice.

But before the end of the first day called for the retrieval of running shoes and leg stretches, the 3,025 kids who attended across the system got in their fair share of catching up with friends after eventful summers spent both at home and abroad with family.

"There's a lot of smiling faces from the kids, and of course kids just being there in general really makes everybody's day," Superintendent John Hill said. "Everybody's happy and excited, proud to have them in the building when you see little fellows with their lunch boxes and little girls all excited about school."

Sixth-grader Evyn Davis was happy to reconnect with her best friend Mya Jordan, but she also enjoyed her summer break, detailing trips out West and up North to Pennsylvania. Jordan

traveled, too, helping construct houses in New Orleans on a mission trip.

While Davis was getting ready for her first 4-H show, Jordan felt that her own return to school was a bit more stressful, as she wasn't familiar with the Middle School campus at all.

"Sometimes I felt like I could have a nervous breakdown, but sometimes I felt like I could go wherever I needed to," said Jordan of her first time exploring the UCMS halls. "And (Evyn) was there, so that helped."

As it turned out, many students were ready to dive right into their courses. According to Evyn's mother and art teacher Katie Davis, "The kids really love connection classes," which are essentially extracurricular electives like music or technology.

"They were happy to be here, they were chatty," described Davis. "(For) a lot

of them, it was like they didn't even leave. I was like, 'What'd y'all do this summer?' And they just wanted to talk about what we're doing now. They were ready to do art today."

Agriculture teacher Katie Rittenhouse, along with class rabbit Raisin, was ready to start the year off right by branching out and making new friends.

"It was fun to see everybody again," admitted Rittenhouse, saying that she valued the nearly tangible feeling of camaraderie among not just students and their friends, but also students and their teachers.

"I like being with the kids and just seeing their excitement and coming into school and hearing my name screamed by 15 or 20 eighth-grade boys," she said. "It was hilarious."

Rittenhouse and Davis both had messages for the community that fell under the scope of the "Union United"



A Primary School car rider who was clearly happy to return for classes Aug. 16, as evidenced by his choice in first day of school apparel.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

slogan for the school system.

Davis, for her part, urges parents to get their kids involved in some kind of hobby so they can discover who they are and potentially uncover hidden talents that could very well uplift the people of their community someday.

And as for Rittenhouse, she would like parents to know that she is honored to take care

of their children and grateful for the chance to enrich their lives just as they did for her own.

"Thank you for having awesome kids," Rittenhouse said. "They make our day so much fun; the kids are just so excited to be here, it allows us to be excited about doing our jobs every day."

In a callback to the mantra and its meaning, Hill reiterated

that Union United is "how we try to operate every day."

"We try to work together to take care of those kids," he said. "And our community supports us, and we're so thankful for all the support we receive on a daily basis."

Go Panthers! And remember to stay "Union United" through another awesome school year.



UCMS Art Teacher Katie Davis with sixth-graders Mya Jordan and Evyn Davis, also accompanied by Raisin the Rabbit and UCMS Ag Teacher Katie Rittenhouse on the first day of the 2022-23 school year.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Heritage Festival...from Page 1A

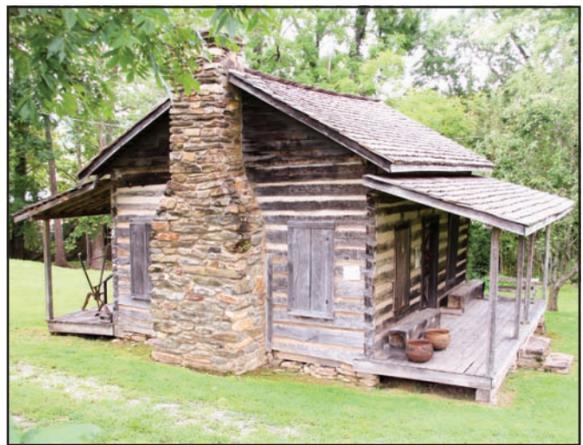
the past two centuries.

People who have never attended will likely be surprised at how stark the differences are between modern times and the way people lived just a couple generations ago, before electricity and the convenience of industrialization permeated the communities of North Georgia.

These stark differences will be on display in "living history" demonstrations, with volunteers dressed in outfits from bygone eras performing what were once everyday tasks in the early years of Union County, such as spinning, quilting, blacksmithing, churning and cooking at a fire.

Students with the local Future Farmers of America will also be on hand to offer a petting zoo for families and showcase some of their animal projects, and something always popular with the kids is the Gold Panning activity returning in 2022.

In addition to offering a one-of-a-kind view back in time, the other purpose of the Heritage Festival is to act as a fundraiser for the Union County



The 1861 Payne Cabin rests on the property of the Mountain Life Museum, where Heritage Festival guests will be able to watch "living history" demonstrations.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Historical Society, which is run primarily by volunteers who care deeply about preserving that which came before.

During festival hours, the Old Courthouse Museum on the Square will be open for people to venture through for an even deeper look into the history of Union County and the area, and people should keep in mind there are plenty

of keepsakes to purchase to support the society.

So, come Labor Day Weekend, head on over to the Mock House for the return of a time-honored local tradition, and in so doing, support the people who work hard behind the scenes to remember where North Georgia has been so its people can better know where they may go.