

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## Family appeals to community for help after explosion

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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Shortly after 3 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 12, Angela Morris' house on Trackrock Gap Road exploded with two of her children inside – one was thrown into the dining room wall, suffering a concussion, and the other was blown into the living room ceiling, chair and all.

Somehow, they survived, despite the blast lifting the home off its foundations, sending walls crashing through each other and even out the front of the house, depositing floor joists in the kitchen ceiling, and shattering windows in every room.

Compounding the miraculous circumstances, only two of the six people residing there happened to be

inside the home at the time of the explosion.

On any given Sunday, the Morrises hold a big family gathering among Angela's children and grandchildren who live in the area. But on Sept. 12, the mother of 10 was helping a friend celebrate a birthday in Ellijay, so there was no such gathering on this day.

It was an incredible stroke of fortune – or divine intervention – because a propane line being worked on by the boyfriend of the oldest child living there sprang a leak under the kitchen, apparently filling the space beneath the house and setting the stage for the accidental explosion.

The boyfriend was also OK, having been safely around a corner outside the home at the time of the blast. He had been assisting with a long-running remodeling process that was

very nearly done.

Sadly, the house was not insured, as the home insurance company was awaiting the completion of the renovations before it would reinsure the home, which was originally built in 1903.

"I've been blessed to have bought this gorgeous little two acres with two creeks here in Trackrock five and a half years ago," Morris said. "I got a wonderful, wonderful deal on it. I knew when I bought it that it was a fixer upper.

"And we've spent the last five and a half years pouring our heart and soul and every penny into making it ours, to make it our home – we were so close – but to leave a legacy for my kids. Their dad (Don Morris) passed away three years ago, and this is all we had."

Now, the six people living

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Thankfully, no one was seriously injured in the Sept. 12 propane blast that shook Angela Morris' home nearly to the ground. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Sydney Grace Jones honored with intersection dedication



L-R: David Ralston, Melinda Jones, Anthony Jones, Andrew Jones, Connor Jones and Stan Gunter at the Sydney Grace Jones Memorial Intersection dedication last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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Family and friends of Sydney Grace Jones gathered Sept. 14 to celebrate the life of the "well-loved young lady that never met a stranger," alongside a dedication of the Sydney Grace Jones Memorial

Intersection at Georgia 515 and 325 in Union County.

The Sunflower Pavilion in Meeks Park – a fitting location given Sydney's fondness of sunflowers – served as the dedication venue, providing shade on a beautiful sunny day and plenty of room for the more than 150 attendees whose lives

the young Morganton woman positively influenced.

In January, at the too-young age of 19, Jones succumbed to injuries she sustained in a car accident at Georgia 515 and 325. Since then, her family has worked hard to bring awareness to the

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## Grub-ba-que, Halfway Café team up to feed local EMS



Workers "BBQ" Grubbs and the Halfway Café joined forces to feed Union General EMS workers a delicious catered meal on Monday, Sept. 6. Photo by Jeremy Foster

By Jeremy Foster  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On Monday, Sept. 6, the Union General EMS team received free food through the generous contributions of James "BBQ" Grubbs, owner of Grub-ba-que Catering and Competition Team, and Joe Fendick, proprietor of the local Halfway Café restaurant.

An honorable mention was given to Ledford Small Engine Repair for donating drinks for the event, which occurred at EMS Headquarters.

When Fendick and Danette Peters moved from Florida to Blairsville, they were new to the restaurant business.

"We found out very quickly how much this a great place, as people were very supportive and awesome," Fendick said.

After opening the doors to Halfway Café in January of 2021, Fendick soon met Grubbs, who had success last year appearing on the first season of the Netflix series "The American Barbecue

Showdown," and the men became fast friends.

Grubbs is no stranger to feeding first responders. About a year ago, he made barbecue for local firefighters and 911 dispatchers to say thank you. He is a former volunteer at Union County Fire Station No. 4, after all, so he understands the difficulty of the job.

And the idea to feed local EMS workers came to Grubbs one recent evening as he was sitting on his porch and witnessed, within a very

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## State School Superintendent Woods talks policy with GOP

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Union County GOP welcomed Georgia State School Superintendent Richard Woods as keynote speaker in the group's Saturday, Sept. 18, meeting at the Union County Community Center.

Common Core, Critical Race Theory, COVID-19 and post-graduation pathways were among the topics discussed by Woods.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative has remained steadily in the crosshairs since Woods first secured his post in 2014. According to the superintendent, only a few remnants of the

controversial program remain, with the final pieces to be expunged by 2023.

"(We're witnessing) the end of Common Core in Georgia," he said. "It's already been stopped in science and social studies, and nothing will be left within two years.

"It shouldn't matter how you arrive at your answer as long as it's right. As I look at my office window at the Atlanta skyline, my only concern is, did the person who built these skyscrapers get it right?"

Another hot-button curriculum item that has made headlines this year is the so-called "Critical Race Theory," or CRT for short, and the superintendent firmly declared that Georgia "doesn't have time



Richard Woods  
State School Superintendent

to teach that mess," regardless of whatever federal dollars may accompany it.

"What I can control, I have done," he said. "We will

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## Whittle Blood Drive a boon for North Georgia region

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

This year marked the 10th anniversary of the death of Derrick Whittle, a selfless deputy who passed away on Sept. 18, 2011, from injuries he sustained in an automobile accident while on duty with the Union County Sheriff's Office.

Derrick's parents Jim and Sharon Whittle continue to honor their son's memory with high school scholarships and local memorial blood drives, most recently on Saturday.

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Jim and Sharon Whittle pose for a photo with their son, Derrick, whose memory they keep alive with life-saving memorial blood drives and high school scholarships. Photo by Mark Smith

## Pfizer boosters in the works; COVID continues local decline



By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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As the latest COVID-19 surge continues its downward trend in the region, the Food and Drug Administration's Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee voted Friday, Sept. 17, to recommend Pfizer booster shots for the most vulnerable to severe disease.

The recommendation includes people 65 and older and others at higher risk of severe illness, and it is possible health care workers and teachers will also be included in a booster decision due to increased exposure risk, though FDA

approval for any such boosters was pending at press time.

"We are not bound by FDA as your vote, just so you understand that; we can tweak this as needed," Dr. Peter Marks told the advisory committee Friday. Dr. Marks directs the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research.

Importantly, the committee voted against the one-size-fits-all approach of providing third doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine to all eligible vaccinees ages 16 and up, citing a current lack of compelling data that such was necessary at this time.

The picture of how Pfizer boosters will be administered in the near term will become clearer soon, as the FDA, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices

continue their work to finalize these plans.

Pending approval and guidance by the FDA and CDC, which could occur this week, District 2 Public Health will be ready to offer Pfizer boosters through local health departments for eligible recipients six months after their second shot.

"Approval for the booster dose is still pending, and the district will not administer booster doses until approval and guidance is granted by ACIP and FDA," District 2 Public Information Officer Natasha Young said.

Continuing, "The FDA's Sept. 17 discussion and review of data about the need for COVID vaccine boosters is a first step in the process; the same questions will be considered by ACIP during meetings currently

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## Woods...from Page 1A

not accept money from the feds for CRT. Our job is to focus on reading, math and graduating students, not indoctrination.”

Woods said he plans to take things further to promote American exceptionalism by providing copies of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to fourth-graders and by expanding the U.S. History requirements for high schoolers from one year to two.

“This is a great nation

— there is a reason people are trying to come here,” he said. “My pledge to you is this: CRT will not be a part of our standards and training.”

On the pandemic front, Woods assured local Republicans that the local school systems would not suffer from top-down governance and were free to make their own decisions regarding COVID-19.

“I’m a firm believer in local control,” he said. “Government is here to serve

the people, not the other way around. (COVID) has been a challenge, but I believe it’s important that our kids learn face to face. But I will also leave those choices to the local school boards and parents.”

He then touched on secondary education and promised to expand opportunities for recent high school graduates outside of traditional colleges and universities.

“Our worst mistake was the idea that everyone needed a four-year college degree to be successful,” Woods said.

“I have visited Union County High School, and they’ve done a great job with their fine arts and tech programs.

“We also want to start a partnership with ROTC programs and add an ROTC rep at the (Georgia) Department of Education.”

Another topic Woods broached Saturday was the eventual inclusion of a personal finance course at Georgia high schools to replace the traditional economics requirement so as to better prepare students for life by teaching money management skills.

Woods also praised the recent rise in statewide SAT scores, moving Georgia above the national average.

Enatah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley and his predecessor, District 8 Georgia House of Representatives member Stan Gunter, were in attendance, and each said a few words to the audience.

Langley explained the importance of prosecutors who will enforce and follow the law, noting three Georgia prosecutors currently under indictment.

Gunter discussed redistricting and the possibility of a special called legislative session in November to debate the redrawing of district borders.

According to the former Superior Court Chief Judge, District 8 voter totals fall within the margin of error and should remain safe from any noteworthy changes.

Gunter, Langley and Woods spent more than 30 minutes taking questions at the end of the event, with popular topics being election integrity, vaccine mandates and illegal immigration.

## Sydney Jones...from Page 1A



Sydney Grace Jones was blessed with some amazing friends in life, several of whom were all too quick to say the same in return in the Sept. 14 memorial dedication ceremony.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

dangers of that stretch of road, which has seen multiple crashes and fatalities over the years.

Due to their efforts, the Georgia Department of Transportation has committed to implementing important safety improvements at the intersection.

In concert with the Jones Family, the office of Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, which attended the dedication last week, approached the state earlier in the year to ask for a traffic light there.

GDOT countered with plans to make that intersection right-turn only from 325 onto 515 by installing an RCUT to prevent cross traffic.

RCUT stands for “Reduced Conflict U-Turn,” which is an intersection design “that reduces crashes by changing how minor road traffic crosses or turns left at a major road.” It will be the same design that was put in place at the Walmart entrance and exit at Georgia 515 in 2017.

And improvements at the Sydney Grace Jones Memorial Intersection have been sped up beyond the usual GDOT timeline, having been prioritized as a “quick response project.”

“The U-Turn has been awarded and is about to undergo construction,” GDOT District Communications Officer Melodii Peoples said. “Shortly after the U-turn is completed the RCUT will then begin construction.”

Welcoming everyone last Tuesday were Sydney’s mother Melinda, father Anthony, and brothers Connor and Andrew.

Speaking for the family, Melinda said she hoped the memorial intersection would “bring you a bit of joy and positive memory and thoughts of my daughter, as opposed to what we’ve gone through the last seven months, and it can bring a smile to your face as a tear to your eye.”

“Sydney did not waste a moment,” Melinda continued. “We can attest to that, because we tried to corral her at home every once in a while when we would get dinner.

“In her legacy, she didn’t waste a minute, and I would ask that you don’t waste a minute of your time, whether it be with your children, friends, or family members, because we don’t know how long we have on this earth.”

Older brother Connor recited a poem titled “Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep” by Mary Elizabeth Frye, entreating everyone present not to think of Sydney Grace as being gone from the world but carrying on in spirit, in the hearts and minds of those who knew her.

The Joneses thanked Georgia House Speaker David Ralston of Fannin County and District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter of Union County, who co-sponsored House Resolution 282 in the Georgia General Assembly to dedicate the intersection in memory of Sydney Grace.

State Sen. Steve Gooch could not be there that day, but the family thanked him, too, for his efforts in making the memorial dedication possible.

Ralston and Gunter helped

to coordinate the dedication, and together, they presented the Jones Family with: HR 282 in recognition of the valuable contributions Sydney made in her community; an intersection memorial sign replica; and pens Gov. Brian Kemp used to sign the resolution making the dedication official.

“I never met Ms. Jones, but I know this — she was a loving person,” Rep. Gunter said. “She loved her family, friends and strangers. Active in the church the day she died, she was on her way to help someone in need through a ministry that the church had started.

“And keep this in mind: Christ said the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, mind and soul. And the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself.

“It is my hope that, by naming this intersection, it will remind people to remember her example of loving others.”

Added Ralston, “Generations from now in time will see her name as they go through that intersection. And when we (finish adding) safety features there, then we would have done some positive things in her memory, which will help the traveling public for a long time to come.”

Several others offered testimony that day, detailing the free-spirited and timeless character of Sydney Grace Jones, including a group of her friends who took turns at the microphone to share personal stories and valuable life lessons they learned through their friendships with Sydney.

When it was her turn to speak, Jenny Williams related her family’s enduring experiences with Sydney, who for several years volunteered as an elf to assist in the Williamses’ large annual Christmas display at their home in Fannin County.

Williams talked about Sydney’s singular sense of style and said that, in addition to being a tremendous help making the holiday tradition more merry and bright, she “was sunshine to us (and) provided us with a lot of smiles.”

“Each year in December, Sydney became a big part of our family, and we want to thank you, the Jones Family, for sharing her with us and allowing us to have that time with her,” Williams said. “It

was a joy and a blessing for us most definitely.

“In closing, I want to say I believe in angels, I believe they’re everywhere, and I believe one of them is Sydney Grace.”

Pastor Bob Richardson of First Baptist Church of Blue Ridge spoke on Sydney’s commitment to Bible study during her first year of college, and how she inspired him to pursue a new youth ministry that is currently in the works with a skate park and other facilities near the church.

In high school, Sydney was an active member of The Ridge Community Church in Mineral Bluff, and Pastor Chan Mitchell took the opportunity that Tuesday to thank God for Sydney and how her life “continues to impact others,” presently with the intersection improvements and budding youth ministry.

Mitchell implored people to follow his former congregant’s example by living their lives to the fullest and always keeping “Sydney’s Reminders” close to their hearts.

The reminders come from Sydney Grace’s personal list of principles to live by, which her family discovered on her bedside table following her death. The family shared this list with those present to highlight the uplifting nature of their Sydney.

Printed in the dedication program, the reminders showcase a level of wisdom beyond the understanding of most 19-year-olds, serving as a perfect legacy for the kind, adventuresome soul that was Sydney Grace Jones:

“You are beautiful; God loves you. (Pray); Stop worrying; Don’t stress over non-stressful things; Do what makes you happy; stop caring about what people think; Make my family proud; Be HAPPY.”

Of the reminders, Melinda said that Sydney had certainly made her family proud.

After the program, people continued to swap stories of their loved one amid smiling photographs of the remarkable young woman, a display of sunflowers, and refreshments via Catering By Cindy, and everyone in attendance received a Sydney Jones memorial card.

## Misty Mountain Quilters Guild September Meeting: “All About Feet”

By Kathleen Traylor

The Misty Mountain Quilters Guild’s September meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, September 28, at the First Methodist Church of Union County, on Highway 515 in Blairsville. Social time begins at 12:30 PM, with the business meeting commencing at 1 PM. The guest speaker this month will be Jennie Priven, who was a Bernina ambassador, and has vast knowledge of all aspects of sewing and quilting. She is going to talk about the feet you can use (for any brand of machine) to enhance your quilting and sew out embellishments on them. She is bringing many different feet for you to look at up close, as well as explain what each foot can do.

Our previously scheduled speaker, Vickie Clontz,

is unable to be here and her workshop will be rescheduled for a later date.

The mission of the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild is to educate, share, promote and keep alive the art and traditions of quilt making here in North Georgia and Western North Carolina, and new members are always welcome! We have a variety of outreach programs, including Quilts of Valor, that makes quilts for military members and veterans; Heart 2 Heart, that creates quilts and other items for local nursing home residents; and Hugs and Kisses, that makes small quilts for children in need. For more information, please visit the Guild website at <https://www.mistymountainquiltguild.org/> or email [mmqinfo@gmail.com](mailto:mmqinfo@gmail.com). NT(Sep22:22)CA

## Pfizer Boosters...from Page 1A

scheduled for Sept. 22-23.

“When CDC/ACIP provide recommendations and guidelines for booster shots, DPH has the inventory to quickly ramp up access to Pfizer COVID vaccine statewide.”

Exactly who all falls under the “other” category for booster shots will be known in the coming days, likely to include people who are at high risk due to pre-existing health conditions. Pfizer boosters have already been authorized specifically for certain immunocompromised individuals.

There is still no booster recommendation or timeline for people who received either the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccines, though current data suggests that Moderna recipients do not experience

the same drop in protection against severe COVID as Pfizer vaccinees over time.

Messaging around boosters has been particularly fraught, as the Biden administration apparently pre-empted regulatory guidance by public health professionals this summer when it announced that most vaccine-eligible Americans would be able to receive boosters by Sept. 20.

The president walked back this announcement after two high-ranking officials in the FDA’s vaccine program announced their intention to leave the agency reportedly due to political pressure from the Biden administration to approve boosters without evidence to back such a decision.

Locally, the current

COVID-19 surge continues its decline in Union and Towns counties, including for hospital admissions, testing positivity and case growth, as well as in the number of positive cases in the school systems.

People should continue to remain cautiously optimistic and follow COVID best practices during this trend, as the dynamics and exact mechanisms of COVID-19 transmission have proved elusive throughout the pandemic.

COVID vaccines are available for free and without appointment at local health departments, and people may also find them at any number of area pharmacies.

District 2 Public Health continues to offer free drive-thru PCR testing at Union General Hospital for anyone wanting or needing one.

Testing is available

Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at 35 Hospital Road in Blairsville. No appointment is required to receive a test, but registration via <https://honumg.info/LTSGA015> is encouraged to decrease wait times at the testing site.

Hospitalizations have begun to dip nationally as well, though various regions around the U.S. appear to be experiencing an uptick in cases, potentially pointing to seasonal effects playing a part amid the wider geographic distribution of the country’s population.

## Feeding EMS...from Page 1A

short amount of time, several ambulances flying by with lights and sirens blaring.

He decided then and there to use his trade once again to thank local first responders for all the hard work they have committed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they are constantly on the move and never get a break.

Plus, he was aware that hospital workers have been receiving much support from the community, so he wanted to do something special for EMS particularly.

“I knew in my heart I had to do something,” Grubbs said, “and the least I could do for my community was to make sure they were fed to stay healthy while they are dealing with everything on their plate, figuratively and literally.”

“I wanted to make sure

they were able to get a little extra attention, care and focus, because they are the ones on the frontlines, too.”

Grubbs and Fendick share the same love and passion for cooking, but also the same affection for the community of Blairsville and those who are trying to help the most during the pandemic.

“These are the people going out there to pick (sick) people up and put them on gurneys to take them to the hospital for the chance to live,” Grubbs said.

Continuing, “Being here is great, and this is a wonderful place. (When we can) literally be a part of the community helping each other with everything that is going on, then the reward is tenfold, because that is what makes a real community.”

Union General EMS Director Wesley Rogers said he and his staff were incredibly grateful for the delicious food and attention paid to their hard work.

“I am very honored about this showing of community support,” Rogers said. “It is amazing to know that people took time out of their day to make sure our workers are fed through all of this to keep us going – makes us truly feel appreciated and loved.”

Added Rogers, “We have gotten busier with increasing calls and volume of work even with a full staff, and we are hoping to hire more soon to have as extra backup for everyone.”

“We could not be more grateful that our hometown has been patient and willing to be there for us, and that is all that we could ever ask for.”

## Lake Nottely Improvement Association celebrates 30 years, welcomes TVA Board Member Frazier

Poteete Creek Pavilion provided the perfect location for the Lake Nottely Improvement Association’s Annual Meeting and celebration of its 30th Anniversary on Saturday, Aug. 28.

The purpose of the organization is to maintain, protect and enhance the quality of Lake Nottely.

Founding members Dick and Sandy Bell are still active on the board and received an appreciative thank you for their service.

Record attendance welcomed special guest A.D. Frazier of Mineral Bluff, the only Georgia Member of the TVA’s Board of Directors. He was nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate for a five-year term.

Mr. Frazier’s position on the Board is concerned with the financial operations of TVA, and his wealth of knowledge about the history and future of TVA is exceptional.

“The TVA was an FDR New Deal creation founded during the Great Depression to combat economic crisis and ensure the expansion of electricity, which turned this area from a very dark place into light for now over 10 million customers,” stated Frazier.

Mr. Frazier has worn many hats during his career, including the COO position for the 1996 Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games and executive positions with Caremark, Gold Kist, INVECO and the Danka Business Systems.

LNIA members submitted questions to Frazier, of course, the first being Lake levels. Lake Nottely is a reservoir which holds water for



**Dick Bell,  
LNIA Founding Member**



**A.D. Frazier  
of TVA Board of Directors**

flood control, navigation and electricity in the Tennessee Valley Region. We all realize by now that the lake will fluctuate, but our concern is that we are not treated equally with other TVA reservoirs. Mr. Frazier was tasked to find the answer for that.

Derelect docks are a problem, over 40 have been pinpointed, their owners contacted. TVA’s Regulation 26A provides for action, and we hope Frazier can direct us to the appropriate solution. This year alone, eight docks have been found free floating with no identification. USF is working with members Phil and

Eva Lausier to remedy that problem.

The south end of the lake at the mouth of the Nottely River has been an area of concern for many years.

LNIA Treasurer and Secretary Gary and Liz Hogan are a part of our water QUALITY testing team.

“Strong storms have brought massive debris and even large algae fields into the lake recently. Our testing also discovered the LEACHATE debacle. We need help from the TVA, and Mr. Frazier will lend his expertise and influence to find a resolution,” said Hogan.

Wake boats have caused a great deal of concern this year. Mr. Frazier strongly suggested calling the Department of Natural Resources. LNIA President Lynn Varian also suggested a quick solution is to dial #GSP, take pictures, and the closest water or land officer will be dispatched. This method has already resulted in fines for offenders.

“We will continue our program for boating etiquette and hope to have that problem solved by next season.”

Once these concerns are addressed and remedied, LNIA looks forward to continuing a productive relationship with Frazier and our local TVA representative, Kemmy Garrett. The professional qualifications of both gentlemen is an asset to LNIA, and we are appreciative that they would take the time to join us.

LNIA is an organization of 260 family members and 15 corporate sponsors. Anyone is welcome to join, and our application is on the website at <http://www.lakenottely.org/>.

# Home Explosion...from Page 1A



**It's hard to believe, but this was once the kitchen of the Morris family home on Trackrock Gap Road, the floor of which blew into the ceiling in an accidental propane explosion Sept. 12.**

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

in the home and their dogs have been completely displaced, as the building itself is one strong wind away from simply caving in, and the Morrises are hopeful the community can help them get back on their feet in time.

"The only thing we can do is start over," Morris said. "Several people have asked are we going to fix the house, but there's not any fixing it. That leaves us with nothing but the land and a lot of Irish stubbornness, so our plan is to start another house.

"But I am beyond grateful, because we can build another house, but I can't replace children. So, there are so many things to be grateful for."

At the moment, the family is looking to raise money for rebuilding, and people can contribute by searching gofundme.com for the fundraiser titled "Help my mom and siblings rebuild!" by Mary Barnard, or by depositing to the "Angela Morris Rebuild Fund" at United Community Bank.

Barnard is Morris' eldest daughter, and she is currently housing several of her family members as they search for a camper or other form of temporary accommodation to set up on the property.

"My mom is a single mom of three children under 15," Barnard said on GoFundMe. "Their father passed away a few years ago. (On Sept. 12), their home was destroyed by a propane leak. It completely blew up."

Added Barnard, "My

mom has put her heart and soul into this property and had made it a beautiful home for herself and her children, and they are absolutely devastated with the loss of everything.

"(Angela) was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor a few years ago and has recently had a stroke and is unable to work. Please consider helping them in any way possible to begin rebuilding their home.

"If anyone has a camper/fifth wheel or motorhome to donate or purchase for longer term living, please send a message."

A volunteer firefighter herself out of Murphy, North Carolina, Barnard has been on the scene of home explosions before, and she credits "a higher power" for the survival of her siblings.

"This is one of those things you don't think will ever happen to you or your family," she said. "It's a miracle. I'm a firefighter, and people don't normally make it out alive. I guess it was not their time to die."

For her part, Morris has been overwhelmed by the outpouring of support her family has received so far, including from Jan Teague at The Hole In The Wall Restaurant, Chris Spry of Spry Family Dry Cleaners, Frank Alexander, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, community offers of food and furniture, and even the donated use of a roll-off dumpster and portable toilet.

"I just want to say thank you for everybody's support, we really have appreciated

it," Morris said. "I have been so humbled by (this experience)."

The Union County Fire Department responded to the blast. It was the third local home explosion in under a year, including the Sept. 22, 2020, fatal camper explosion in River's Edge RV Park and the May 2, 2021, fatal house explosion on Pauline Lane.

Like the incident on Trackrock Gap, last year's camper explosion was due to an accidental propane leak, though the cause of the Pauline Lane blast is still under investigation by the State Fire Marshal's Office.

Thankfully, the Morris home only experienced a minor fire following the explosion that Angela's children were able to put out before firefighters arrived, so they have been able to salvage many items from the home that will be going into storage.

"The fire investigator told me that if anybody who was in the house had been one foot in any other direction of where they were, we would have had fatalities," Morris said. "So, miracle plays really, really big in this. Apparently, we're not done and we have important things to do."

Fire Chief David Dyer urges people who are completing home repairs to call in professional help when working on propane appliances and lines, adding that gas companies will gladly come out to properly pressure test for leaks before propane is turned back on after repairs.

# Remembering Derrick...from Page 1A

Sept. 18, at the Haralson Civic Center.

"Because of his love for Union County and because we're his parents, our worst fear is that our son will be forgotten," Sharon said. "So, in 2012, we started giving scholarships to graduating seniors at Union County High School.

"Derrick was not a real good student, but the older he got, he realized how important a good education was."

Sharon and Jim funded the scholarship out of their own pockets the first year, then began holding fundraisers because they couldn't sustain the scholarship alone. Since 2012, she said they've raised approximately \$30,000 for local graduating seniors.

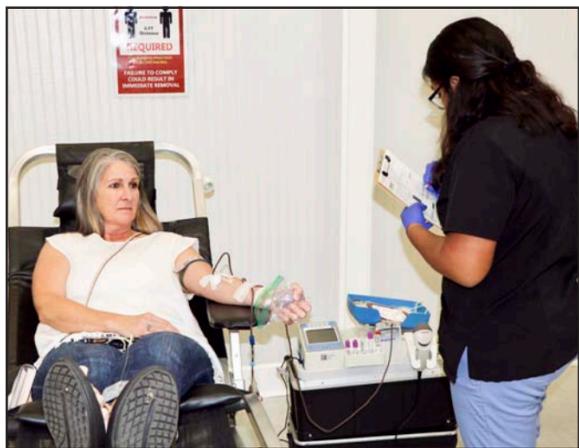
"In 2013, we wanted to do something on his birthday," Sharon said. "So, we contacted Blood Assurance, and since 2013, we have had a blood drive every year on his birthday, which is April 11.

"Last year, 2020, with the COVID, we were not able to have (the blood drive) in April, so we decided we would have it on his date of death, which was Sept. 18. And we had such a good response in September of last year that we now have two (blood drives) each year.

"We have one in April on his birthday, on the 11th, and we have one on (Sept. 18). They say that we're doing good for the community, but this is ... our son, who can't be forgotten," Sharon said tearfully. "And we will do what we can to keep his name out there.

"Union County has been right here for us all along, and Blood Assurance blood actually stays in Union County (along with Fannin County, Towns County and Erlanger in Murphy, North Carolina). It does not go to New York or California or New Jersey – it stays right here.

"God turns a tragedy into something beautiful, and this is what is happening from our tragedy, Derrick's loss (has been turned) into something beautiful. So, we are very blessed," she said, adding that it took her and Jim a while to realize that. "He's standing



**Union County School Finance Director Karen Bundy donated blood at the 2021 Derrick Whittle Memorial Blood Drive.**

Photo by Mark Smith



**Blairsville Church of Christ Pastor Terry Stuart led a prayer at this year's Derrick Whittle Blood Drive. Photo by Mark Smith**

right here with us today."

Following the Memorial Blood Drive Saturday, Jim said 71 people registered for a blood draw with a total of 59 units given, bringing the total volume of blood donated since the drive's inception in 2013 to 639 units, with a life-saving potential of helping 1,917 people in this area.

Blood Assurance Nurse Dina Youngblood, who oversaw Saturday's blood drive, said that the nonprofit checks each donor's height and weight and tests for iron levels, as people must have a minimum required iron level to donate. Donors must also fill out a health

questionnaire.

"It's pretty simple," Youngblood said. "The whole interview and physical process takes about 10 minutes."

Potential donors can be turned away for health reasons, past sickness or for being within the deferral period after a blood transfusion, among other things.

However, those who have had a COVID vaccine will not be turned away, nor will anyone who has fully recovered from COVID and exhibits no symptoms, Youngblood said. For more information, visit [www.bloodassurance.org](http://www.bloodassurance.org).