

North Georgia News

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Seniors celebrate New Year's with 'Possum Drop'



The Union County Senior Center rang New Year 2023 in right with the return of a tried-and-true tradition on Friday, Dec. 30. Photo/Submitted

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Senior Center Possum Drop made a comeback on Dec. 30, 2022, when one of Judy Brown's prized crocheted opossums symbolically ushered in 2023 via a special Possum Delivery System, aka the customary lowering by fishing pole.

It was a return to tradition after having to take two years off for the COVID-19 pandemic, and people were excited to take part in the celebration.

"For a lot of them, it's their first time to do it," Former Administrative Assistant Phillip McGlamery said. "Some of them didn't think it was a real event, that it was just a story," he explained, giving a

reason why an apple box with "breathing holes" had wound up in the center.

Such an elaborate plan was played up for the sake of "the rookies" – those who had just begun attending the center and taking part in various activities like group singing, crafts and similar recreations.

So, it was a surprise to those rookies when McGlamery lowered the Possum Delivery System, lifted the lid from the box, and revealed a harmless plush animal rather than the "real mean varmint" it was made out to be.

McGlamery is no wildlife wrangler, and while he used to take part in the Senior Center's Possum Drop every year from an administrative standpoint, he can now enjoy it as a volunteer after retiring last May following

12 years at the center.

"I hate using the cliché of 'giving back' ... but it's pleasurable to be able to do something for someone else, and you're doing it not expecting anything from it," McGlamery said. "Or at least, that's me. It's just an honor to help somebody else anymore."

For him, the Possum Drop has always been about bringing a little joy to the lives of the community's senior population, and McGlamery considered every smile a success.

"They appeared to enjoy themselves tremendously," McGlamery said of the attendees, who partook of sweet treats like cake and ice cream as part of the New Year's hangout.

And it was a true

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Partygoers ring in 2023 with Granddaddy Mimm's



Live music was a major component of the Granddaddy Mimm's New Year's Eve Bash, with Elliott Sperin and Wyatt Espalin pictured here. Photo by Jeremy Foster

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Dec. 31, the award-winning Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co. in Downtown Blairsville held

its inaugural New Year's Eve Bash to say goodbye to 2022 and hello to 2023.

It was a joyous occasion with delicious food from Jim's Smokin' Que, refreshing beverages, and live College Football Playoff viewing, the

latter of which resulted in an inspiring Peach Bowl victory for the Georgia Bulldogs over The Ohio State Buckeyes at the stroke of midnight.

Bash guests enjoyed a fireworks display, cornhole and

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Residents, visitors share hopes and dreams for '23

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With 2022 having come to a close, people all around the world – including in the mountains – are looking forward with a hopeful gaze to 2023. Their resolutions and hopes aren't that much different from widespread desires for health and happiness, but some are definitely personalized.

Take, for example, Aniuska Reimondez and her husband, who were out shopping at Ingles last week. Although the couple have residency in Clearwater, Florida, they have found that the cooler weather and mountainous environs appeal to them, so they're looking to move to Blairsville full-time.

"We are thinking of

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Laura Puerto and her sons Landon and Levi stopped for an interview and a photo while shopping at Ingles last Thursday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

State Sen. Gooch informs constituents over breakfast

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch offered a legislative update to guests in the latest installment of Eggs & Issues.

Organized by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, Eggs & Issues is a semi-regular breakfast meeting at the Community Center in which chamber members, local leaders and residents are invited to hear from elected officials on the various levels of governance.

Gooch was first elected to the Georgia Senate in 2010 and ran unopposed in the 2022 General Election for a seventh consecutive two-year term in the 51st District, which is made up of multiple North Georgia counties, including Union and his native Lumpkin County.

The Republican state senator was recently elected by his colleagues as the Senate Majority Leader after serving as majority whip of the Senate Majority Caucus since 2014.

"Now that I'm majority leader, I'm going to be putting a



Steve Gooch
State Senator

different hat on," Gooch said in the Dec. 15 breakfast. "I'm still going to be your state senator, and that's always going to be my No. 1 priority, to represent the people back home, because you're the ones who hire and fire, and I don't want to get fired yet.

"So, I will continue to represent you, but I will take on a different role as

being the spokesperson for the Republican majority in the state senate."

Gooch offered a behind-the-scenes take on where the state stands in the current uncertain economic climate, noting a recent meeting he attended with Gov. Brian Kemp's team.

"We all know how

See Eggs & Issues, Page 6A

'Ghostface Gangster' of Blairsville arrested in Towns

News Special
North Georgia News

YOUNG HARRIS – On Monday, Dec. 26, Towns County Sheriff's Investigators initiated a traffic stop on 1400 Hwy 66.

Probable cause was established, the vehicle was searched, and approximately 8 ounces of methamphetamine laced with fentanyl – which field-tested positive on the scene – was found.

Mathew Carl Simon was arrested, and the investigation revealed that Simon is a member of the "Ghostface Gangsters" out of Union County.

Simon, 48, of Blairsville, has been charged with felony possession of methamphetamine; felony possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; felony trafficking methamphetamine; and window tint violation.

The investigation is ongoing.

According to the U.S. Attorney's Office of the North District of Georgia, Ghostface Gangsters, aka GFG, is a "whites-only gang" that was originally organized in or about 2000 in a Georgia county jail.

"Within GFG, the seven founding members are



Mathew Carl Simon



Randy Delain Ledford

known as 'pillars,'" the U.S. Attorney's Office said. "All GFG members trace their gang 'bloodline' directly back to one of the pillars.

"GFG members and associates (have) engaged in drug distribution and acts of violence involving murder, kidnapping, assault and witness intimidation," with operations "both within and outside the Georgia prison system."

In a separate incident on Saturday, Dec. 24, the Towns County Sheriff's Office Drug Unit continued an intense investigation into a suspect for transporting illegal drugs. The suspect was identified as Randy Delain Ledford.

Drug Investigators, K-9 Deputies and Clay County, North Carolina, Sheriff's Office converged on the suspect at the

Windy Hill Gas Station on Highway 66. An amount of drugs field-tested positive for methamphetamine laced with a high amount of fentanyl, also containing cocaine.

Ledford, 34, of Blairsville, was arrested and charged with felony possession of methamphetamine, with additional charges pending.

"This is a highly dangerous cocktail for potential overdose," Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson said, adding a "thank you" to his investigators and K-9 deputies for working tirelessly during the Christmas Holiday "to get these highly dangerous drugs off the streets and out of our community."

All persons are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.



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BASKETBALL
1/3 @ Providence (Boys) 7:30 PM
1/6 @ Athens Academy 7 PM

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Possum Drop 2023...from Page 1A

assessment. Seniors and organizers alike poked fun at the event – “The Possum Landing at the Union County Senior Center” – and made jokes. Here, someone teased that the possum had landed on her head to use the bathroom. There, the “Yellowstone” logo on Hill’s shirt was likened to “Possumstone.”

As for Judy Cobb, one of the center’s newcomers, she hadn’t believed that the Possum Drop would wind up on her agenda.

“I’ve never been up here before, and I found out that it’s real – the possum wasn’t real (and) I petted him, but it wasn’t real. It was very interesting, and Phil made it fun,” said Cobb, likening the event to “making a joyful noise” for the holidays.

And if the tooting noisemakers supplied to guests weren’t enough, some folks were happy to voice their delight at being able to attend a much more tame, relaxed New Year’s celebration.

“We loved it,” one woman contributed, with a friend agreeing that it was “very entertaining,” and on a scale of 1 to 10, she would rate the Senior Center Possum Drop an 11.

“Nobody made possum stew,” another guest remarked, pleased with the warm reception that the little symbol of New Year’s prosperity received upon being taken from its box.

Kay, a former Pennsylvania resident, compared the event to that

of popular Groundhog Day ceremonies, where she can recall watching a live animal predict the spring forecast.

The Senior Center’s iteration of the program follows a long tradition of similar holiday celebrations involving animals.

Before PETA succeeded in getting the practice banned a few years ago, the regional Possum Drop – not affiliated with the Senior Center – was an event that plenty in the mountains considered an annual

staple. A live opossum was caught, fed, put in a cage, and lowered slowly to the ground to ring in the new year.

Organizers of the more official Possum Drop turned to a taxidermy animal before the event was outright canceled, and staff at the Senior Center, devoted to making seniors feel special and loved, decided to reinvent the Possum Drop with a twist.

“I can honestly say (that) every time I went over there with my husband, family,

and friends, nothing bad ever happened to the possum,” reassured another guest, who dismissed PETA’s claims but is no less glad that she can come and relive fond memories with new friends.

The Senior Center is always looking for volunteers, whether to contribute time, money, art supplies, or meal delivery.

To find out more about volunteering, contact Manager Kathy Hill at 706-439-6105 or stop by for a physical visit at 95 Senior Center Drive, located just below North Georgia Technical College.

Looking Forward...from Page 1A

it, (buying) land and getting a cabin,” Reimondez said, even as her husband browsed for available parcels on his phone.

For the time being, the Reimondez family had plans for spending New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day at a local cabin they’ve been coming to for six years. It’s there that the five of them – Aniushka, her three sons, and husband – spend some quality time together with a cookout.

Another shopper, Teresa Clark, said she had just purchased a home in Blairsville a year ago. Her old life lingers in Florida still, and she looks forward to starting anew with her husband as soon as she ties up one particular loose end.

“I want) to get my business sold in Florida ASAP. It’s actually a restaurant, a bar and grill,” Clark said, revealing that she and her husband are unable to live in Georgia full-time until the place sells, which they hope will happen by April.

That’s when Clark plans on retiring officially and moving north, where she can enjoy the mountains year-round.

“Everybody is very kind in Blairsville, and I feel right at home,” she said.

While out grabbing

groceries, Laura Puerto revealed that she, too, was just visiting for the holidays. Her parents live in Blairsville, and she came up to vacation with them. Unlike the Reimondez family, Puerto has no real desire to be a permanent resident, but she does look forward to the little – but very important – things that 2023 might bring.

“We’re looking for a year with blessings. We’re looking for a year with friends and family and good health,” Puerto said, summing up her hopes.

“Well, I’m watching the Georgia game; that’s what I’m doing,” said shopper Jim Belcher, who added that, after midnight, he and his family go outside and ring in the new year by banging pots and pans together.

The unique custom was an amusement to longtime friend Rod McClarnon, who attends church with Belcher at First United Methodist of Blairsville.

Still, Belcher and McClarnon were open to other New Year’s options, with interest in the Granddaddy Mimm’s Bash after hearing about the offerings the celebration would showcase, including moonshine samples, dinner, karaoke, live music, fireworks and other fun party plans.

Daylee Parker was working at the Starbucks kiosk that day, also putting some hope into change for the future, especially when it comes to bettering herself. Parker believes she relies too much on the opinions of others and is looking to adjust in the coming year to become more confident in herself and her work.

Ordering drinks were twins Jaden and Jordan Olmsted, who are longtime Blairsville residents. Jaden works in home health care and anticipates becoming a certified nurse sometime within the next year with the help of a degree in Health Sciences.

“I really like being around people, and I really like health care – working with dementia clients, stuff like that,” Jaden said.

Jordan, on the other hand, works in landscaping. In the coming year, however, he plans on learning more about ecology and getting officially certified in a position that allows him to work in conservation. From there, he will work to memorize all native plants.

But where their jobs and career goals differ, they share the same wish for the world at large, as voiced by Jaden: “We hope everyone had a great Christmas and a happy New Year.”

Appalachian Wealth Management Staff Passes Series 7 Exam

WealthPlan Financial Group, L.L.C., is pleased to announce that Chase Gunter, Customer Service Associate for Appalachian Wealth Management, has passed the Series 7 FINRA exam! “The Series 7 FINRA exam is extremely tough. The pass rate for first time test takers is widely accepted to be around 65%. Chase set his sights on passing it the first time. He studied like crazy and knocked it out of the park. The diligence and determination he demonstrated are just two of the many qualities that will lead him to a long and rewarding career. We are proud to have him on our team!” stated Melissa Ekeberg.

Chase was reared in Blairsville and understands the distinctive needs of the wonderful people in this area. He is passionate about connecting with clients and helping them

achieve their goals. Chase spent 17 years in the Athens, Georgia area but returned to Blairsville in 2022 to raise his family and serve his hometown.

Spending time with his family is very important to Chase, as well as making lots of fond memories. The Gunter family enjoys participating in outdoor activities and cheering on the Dawgs.

WealthPlan Financial Group, L.L.C. is an independent, comprehensive financial services firm with a passion for helping clients achieve meaningful financial goals. We help individuals, families and businesses achieve success through goals-based financial planning. The firm has locations throughout the United States including



Chase Gunter

Branch Office: 341 Gainesville Highway, Suite D, Blairsville, GA 30512. For more details, visit www.wealthplanfinancial.com.

Brasstown Woodturners

Woodturners: You are invited to attend the next meeting of the Brasstown Woodturners Guild, at 9:30 AM, Saturday, January 7, 2023.

We meet monthly at the Brasstown Community Center, 255 Settawig Road, Brasstown, NC, usually on the first Saturday of the month.

Our demonstrator for the January meeting will be Scarlett Rouse, who describes herself as “Christian, wife, mama, grandma, farmer, hunter, woodturner, woodworker, DIYer, from Eastern NC,” and who sometimes teaches at the Campbell Folk School in Brasstown. Scarlett will be showing her use of color, texture and other ways to enhance wood turnings. Please join us!

GMRC Executive Meeting Notice



The Georgia Mountains Regional Commission’s Executive Committee will hold a special called meeting on Tuesday, January 10, 2023 at 3 PM, at the GMRC office located at 1310 West Ridge Road, Gainesville, GA 30501. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the activation of the Nominating Committee and approval of contract with NV5 for Aerial Photography.

Please RSVP by calling Gina Kessler at 770-538-2607.

Eggs & Issues...from Page 1A

much inflation has hit our pocketbooks over the last two years," Gooch said. "Personally, I believe a lot of that is due to the irresponsibility of the federal government.

"Some of the things that the federal government has done in the last two years has been helpful, especially the (Paycheck Protection Program) loans they gave to businesses to keep their employees at work and drawing a paycheck.

"But a lot of the unemployment benefits went way beyond what I think was necessary. A lot of people quit working who could have been working; they stayed home for six months to a year, and some haven't gone back to work yet."

Gooch said the trillions of dollars injected in the economy in the name of COVID-19 pandemic-response spending directly contributed to inflation hitting record highs.

"And it's had an impact on all of us in our pocketbooks," Gooch reiterated. "You don't have to tell the people in this room how much gasoline has cost us in the last few years ... Fortunately, it's gone back down some; a lot of that has to do with supply and demand."

On the subject of gasoline, Gooch brought up the state's suspension of the gas tax starting in March, which Gov. Kemp has extended repeatedly.

"That equates to \$175 million to \$180 million for every month that we suspend that," Gooch said, noting that the money is being "backfilled" from state surplus reserves totaling about \$6 billion.

"The governor has decided to reinstate (the gas tax) starting in January," Gooch said. "You will probably see that impact on the gas pump ... we've got to keep that rainy day fund healthy, and we also have to keep DOT projects going."

Speaking of DOT projects, Gooch mentioned the Georgia 515 widening and relocation project between Blairsville and Young Harris, and he went over the state's decision this year to break the project up into three phases to make it more manageable amid widespread inflation.

"Inflation is hurting every industry in our state," Gooch said before sharing recession projections for the next two years based on feedback from multiple economists who met at the governor's office last month. "We believe it will be a small, modest recession.

"We're seeing shrinkage now in some of the sales and the retail sales. (In November), retail sales dipped for the first

time ... since 2019, so we're starting to hear that and feel that in some parts of Georgia, not all parts."

Gooch said North Georgia was "pretty recession-proof" due to several factors, such as strong workforce and business environments as well as larger retirement communities comprised of folks with disposable income and retirement benefits.

"We believe we'll be able to weather the storm better than a lot of areas, but we do believe there will be a slowdown in the economy, and some people are seeing it now," he said. "And a correction is not always bad.

"We want to get our inflation numbers under control and down to 3% and 4%, and that's what the economists think will happen over the next 18 months ... we're going to see an impact on housing here locally, and you'll see a slowdown in real estate sales and construction."

The state continues to be among the best in the country to conduct business, Gooch said, even amid economic uncertainty, and he highlighted strong recruitment efforts to boost industrial development in Georgia to secure "better, high-paying jobs" in communities.

On crime, Gooch said North Georgia was fortunate not to suffer the same degree of issues as more populous areas like Atlanta, and he and his colleagues in the senate will continue to push tougher crime policies while fighting "defund the police" movements that are popular elsewhere.

Concerning education, Gooch advocated for strong local control of what children are learning, saying, "We want the parents to have more say in the future of their kids' education."

Also in the meeting, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley spoke on the upcoming major repaving of the sidewalks on Cleveland Street, with construction expected to begin in May or June 2023.

"We're looking forward to this because we're going to replace a lot of feet of sidewalk, and also curbs and gutters, which have been needed for a long, long time," Conley said.

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris touched on several projects the county will be undertaking in 2023, including assisting the city with its big sidewalk rejuvenation and the completion of Fire Station 13 on the north end of the county toward Ivylog.

"It'll not only be a fire station - it'll be an ambulance depot for the ambulance service



Jim Conley
Blairsville Mayor

to use, and also the Sheriff's Office will be able to use it as a separate office," Paris said. Fire Station 13 should be ready for use by late summer or early fall.

Paris talked about plans to build another community gym and Election Center next to the Sports Center, which will allow the county to consolidate the Election Board and Voter Registration offices as well as get early voting out of the Union County Courthouse during elections.

The bid process has begun for construction of the new multipurpose gym and Election Center, the latter of which could potentially enable the county to consolidate several precincts for Election Day voting purposes.

Union General Hospital and the Mountain Life Team at Keller Williams Realty sponsored the Eggs & Issues Breakfast last month, with The Sawmill Place restaurant providing food for the occasion.

District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter could not attend due to quarantining with COVID-19, but the chamber plans to welcome the elected officials back in the spring for an after-action report on the upcoming legislative session, which kicks off next week on Monday, Jan. 9.

Attending the breakfast was Field Representative Connor Land from the office of Georgia's 9th District Congressman Andrew Clyde.

Chamber President Steve Rowe emceed Eggs & Issues, and he made several announcements, including about the Casino Night Annual Banquet on Jan. 20, to begin at 6 p.m. at Brasstown Valley Resort. The event will feature cocktail attire, and people must RSVP ahead of time.

GDM New Year...from Page 1A



Jim Humphrey of Giggles & Grins Caricatures delighted Granddaddy Mimm's New Year's Eve guests with personalized artwork to remember the occasion. Photo by Jeremy Foster

other activities alongside good conversation and live music from talented local artists such as Elliott Sperin and Wyatt Espalin, Good Souls, and Granddaddy Mimm's very own owner, Tommy Townsend.

And to ring in 2023, fittingly, the establishment dropped a whiskey barrel as the calendar turned over to Jan. 1, 2023.

"We wanted to do something like this after we moved from our old location (at Pappy's Plaza), but the pandemic of 2020/2021 kind of put a damper on it, so we chose this year to begin it as a yearly thing," Townsend said. "Besides everything else we've got going on, it's really cool to have the 'Groovy Bus' from Helen shuttling people back and forth while having karaoke.

"As far as a New Year's Resolution, I always keep it because I always make a resolution not to make resolutions," Townsend joked. "In 2023, we are looking forward to going into a couple more states as far as distribution and doing some more flavors maybe in the summertime.

"I appreciate all the support from Blairsville and everybody that's been so good to us, and we're looking to

expand and continue the success on to everybody, because, at the heart of it, my favorite part about what I do are the community gatherings, and we just love having them."

New Year's Eve Bash attendee Stacie Dinatale was born and raised in Union County and said her favorite part about the holiday was embracing "new goals."

"It's an opportunity to think ahead, and positive thinking, be more health-conscious, and those types of things," she said.

Dinatale is hopeful that 2023 will be an upward swing compared to recent years, and while she concedes that matters seem more difficult internationally, she is comforted by the fact that Union Countians appear to be doing what they can to keep this community going in the right direction.

"(Union County) is home," she said. "Everybody in this community is willing to help; all you got to do is ask. It's a great place to live, and that's why this place has grown dramatically, and so many people are moving here.

"It's a beautiful place, friendly people, beautiful mountain views, and still just a couple of hours close enough

to the city if you need. And we always have a great time here at Granddaddy Mimm's, too."

One particularly unique attraction at the bash on Saturday came by way of illustrator Jim Humphrey and his business, Giggles & Grins Caricatures, with many patrons sitting down to receive personalized artwork of themselves to take home.

"After graduating from LaGrange High School and spending years traveling all over the world through the military, I finally decided I was going to be a full-time artist, moved to Tampa for a while, then decided to move here in March (2022)," Humphrey said.

"So far, one of my favorite things about Union County is they have all these events. I have been slammed and thrilled to death with it, and you absolutely cannot beat these mountain views.

"For me, 2023 looks to certainly be in a better and faster-paced direction - we have been speeding up more and more since moving here. As far as New Year's Resolutions go, I'm just glad to get up every single day."

Happy New Year to everyone from the North Georgia News!