

# North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## Sorghum Festival returns for sweet 2nd weekend

By Jeremy Foster  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The 53rd Annual Blairsville Sorghum Festival debuted over the weekend with plenty of sweet syrup-making, games, support for worthy local causes and shopping opportunities, and it will continue this weekend, running Oct. 15 & 16 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. inside Meeks Park.

Local heritage was on full display as festivities kicked off Saturday morning with the grinding of sorghum cane and cooking of syrup down at the big wood-fired pan at Meeks.

About an hour after the festival opened, the Sorghum Festival Parade, resumed its annual tradition in Downtown Blairsville after a hiatus last year.

Organized by Festival presenting sponsor Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co., the parade featured hundreds of spectators gathered around the Old Courthouse to watch as community groups participated in the parade.

Roy Townsend, known by many as the "Honorary Mayor of Owltown," served as Parade Grand Marshal, and local history buff Libby Stevens announced parade participants as they made their way through the square led by the Union County Sheriff's Office and Fire Department.

From the Union County High School Marching Band and Woody Gap Band of Steel to the Blairsville Cruiser, Sole Commisioner Larus Paris and local organizations such as New Hope Counseling of Blairsville, the parade enjoyed

much local support.

Jointly hosted by the Blairsville Sorghum Syrup Makers and Enotah CASA for Kids, the festival welcomed thousands of people to Meeks Park Oct. 8-9 to enjoy family-friendly activities like acrobatic dog shows, musical performances, rock throwing, log sawing and biscuit eating contests, woodworking, arts & crafts, delicious foods from vendor trucks and much, much more.

Longtime festival organizer Terry Kane spearheaded the efforts of the Sorghum Syrup Makers over the weekend as the dedicated group of volunteers made the sugary sweet stuff live in front of guests.

"The guests were pretty good this year," said Kane, who has been honing his syrup-  
*See Sorghum Festival, Page 6A*



The heritage-inspired Sorghum Games begin at noon each day of the festival, to include the ever-popular Biskit Eatin' Contest. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

## Challenge coins to support UCSO Christmas program

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Once again, the Union County Sheriff's Office will be making Christmas wishes come true for underprivileged local children with the annual Give A Gift Program, and Sheriff Mack Mason is asking residents to partner with him to provide toys for the effort.

To thank supporters of the program and to incentivize donations, the Sheriff's Office has prepared a limited production run keepsake for residents who donate \$10 or more to Give A Gift.

The keepsake is a challenge coin bearing the badge of the Union County Sheriff's Office on one side, and a Thin Blue Line Flag with an inscription of Matthew 5:9 on the reverse.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God," reads the Bible verse, highlighting one of the guiding principles of Sheriff Mason and his office.

"We can't do the job that we need to do unless we get almighty God's support and blessings," Mason said. "That's why I'm here, trying to serve my fellow man and serve the Lord."

People wishing to obtain  
*See Challenge Coins, Page 2A*



## Mom raises over \$3,000 to help pay for school lunches



(L-R) Elementary School Principal Gerald Bavero, Becca Sasser, Jacob Sasser, Nutrition Director Cindy Jones and Nutrition Assistant Samantha Panter during the recent Full Bellies Fundraiser check presentation to the schools. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Many parents struggling to pay for their children's school lunches will now see some relief thanks to the efforts of Becca Sasser and others who organized, volunteered for, and supported the "Full Bellies Fundraiser" to benefit students in need at Union County Schools.

The fundraiser was so

successful – helping to clear the lunch debt balances of more than 200 local schoolchildren – that Sasser has decided to start a nonprofit organization based on the effort called the Full Bellies Foundation Inc.

"So blessed I was able to be the hands and feet of this mission God sent us," Sasser said on Facebook last week. "We are in the process of building it into a full nonprofit organization instead of a one-time funding so we don't

stop here! If you're interested in helping me build this organization, please reach out to me!"

More information can be found at <https://fullbelliesfoundation.com/>, including contact details.

Sasser is the mother of two children, ages 9 and 7, enrolled at Union County Schools. It came to her attention recently that more than a few local parents were having a  
*See Full Bellies, Page 2A*

## Union County ranks in top 6% of Georgia school districts

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Education-ranking organization Niche has placed the Union County School District as the 11th safest school district in Georgia out of 180, Superintendent John Hill announced during last month's regular Board of Education meeting.

That puts Union County Schools in the top 6% in Georgia for safety. Other accolades included rankings as the 11th best district out of 179 in Georgia; second best of 180 districts for top teachers in Georgia; and third of 180 for the best places to teach in Georgia.

Niche, which also operates on a national level, ranked Union County Schools No. 796 out of 10,772 school districts in America, which puts UCS in the top 7% of all school districts in the nation. For more information, visit [www.niche.com/k12/rankings/](http://www.niche.com/k12/rankings/).

Moving along, Lead Registrar Edna Hicks was presented with a Going the Extra Mile Award by Assistant Superintendent Tiffany Setzer in the Sept. 20 meeting.

"Tonight, we want to recognize one of our top employees who has done so much for our district over the years," Setzer said. "She works very hard all summer. She keeps up with all lists. She tracks down documents and makes sure that everyone that we have the most accurate data."

"So, for all you do, and all that you're going to continue to do for years and years, we present you with an Extra Mile Award."

In other news, Assistant Superintendent David Murphy asked the board to approve a Fiscal Year 2024 Union County Middle School HVAC application, which will allow

the district to begin procedures to get state reimbursement funds for an HVAC replacement project next year.

"We have to petition the (Department of Education) for entitlement money," said Murphy, adding that, periodically, the district needs to rejuvenate buildings and equipment, for which the state provides partial reimbursement.

In the case of the Middle School, the HVAC system has reached the end of its useful life and needs to be replaced, he said, noting that the current system runs on electricity, which is very expensive to operate, so the plan is to replace it with a more cost-effective propane system.

The project has an estimated price tag of about \$1.1 million. However, reimbursement from the state would be \$645,800, making the local match cost about

\$454,000. The School Board approved the application that evening.

Board members also approved the Fiscal Year 2023 Budget for the Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Program. CTAE Director Josh Davis said the budget for CTAE for 2022-23 is under \$50,000, given all the state grants and community support.

Davis said the CTAE program will receive \$334,500 in equipment grants from the state this year.

Also, the CTAE residential building program being conducted with Habitat for Humanity, which was halted in 2020 due to COVID-19, is back on, and students are constructing a house on campus this school year. When finished, the house will be moved to its permanent location.

There are currently 209 students enrolled in the Work-Based Learning Program, Davis



Assistant Superintendent Tiffany Setzer recognizing Lead Registrar Edna Hicks for "Going the Extra Mile" in last month's School Board meeting. Photo by Mark Smith

said, which gives students a chance to see if a career in their chosen field will work for them and is a benefit for local businesses.

Referring to the new  
*See UCS Top Rankings, Page 2A*



Vol. 113 No. 42  
Arrests - 3D Legals - 5D  
Church - 3C Obituaries - 4C  
Classifieds - 4D Sports - 2B  
Opinion - 4A

**SPORTS**  
VOLLEYBALL  
Oct. 13 Region Tournament @ Banks 6 PM  
FOOTBALL  
Oct. 14 vs. Providence 7:30 PM

**Early Voting Starts Monday** *See page 3A*  
**Sorghum Festival Parade Photos** *See page 6B*  
**Sons of the Pioneers Concert Oct. 23** *See page 1D*



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## UCSO Challenge Coins...from Page 1A

one of the challenge coins may make their donation at the front office window of the Sheriff's Office at 378 Beasley Street in Blairsville. Coins are limited to a maximum of 20 per person on a first-come, first-served basis and while supplies last.

The program put presents under the Christmas trees of about 80 families last year, and Sheriff Mason is hoping to continue the success of Give A Gift in 2022.

"Unlike the Shop With A Cop at Blairsville (Police Department), we deal with younger children," Mason said. "The way that we fund this is solely through donations, and we want to thank the public for their generosity in past years."

"We get referrals for families with small children that need a little boost, and some families contact us directly. We receive a list of children, their ages, and some desires for a particular toy that a child wants."

"We go to local stores and try to purchase these toys, and then parents pick them up prior to Christmas."

Programs like Give A Gift are needed in the community, as too many families find themselves unexpectedly having to choose between, for example, the power bill and providing for Christmas.

"We see what the majority of the people don't see and don't hear about," Mason said. "There are people with needs in this county – we're not unique. We've got people that have fallen on hard times."

"The testimony behind that is the vast amount of kids that Blairsville PD services with Shop With A Cop and the track record that we have of dealing with 70 to 80 families per year with our program."

According to Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Shawn Dyer, who also works as a major at the Sheriff's Office, the police department intends to help approximately 150 kids

this year.

And even though Give A Gift is a Christmas program, donations are accepted year-round in preparation for the effort, and people looking to donate can make checks payable to Union County Sheriff's Office Give A Gift. Folks donating cash will receive a receipt.

Toy donations are also

welcome for children ages 1 through 12, and the sheriff asks that toys be dropped off NEW and UNWRAPPED at the Sheriff's Office. No toy weapons, please.

Give A Gift for Christmas has been ongoing since 2001, and the sheriff is grateful for everyone who has supported Give A Gift over the past two decades.

"This was going on when I got here (in 2013), and it's very worthwhile need being met in the community, so we carry it on the best we can," Sheriff Mason said. "Give A Gift gives people in the county the chance to give back to some of their fellow citizens, and the Sheriff's Office is more than willing to lead this effort with the help of donations."

## Full Bellies Fundraiser...from Page 1A

difficult time affording school lunches for their kids.

Some people even reached out to her asking if she knew of any resources that could help with extra money or food assistance inside the schools because several families had been denied food stamps and participation in the free lunch program due to income restrictions.

So, Sasser took matters into her own hands and organized the "Full Bellies Fundraiser," a bake sale and silent auction that took place on Saturday, Sept. 24, just off the Blairsville Square.

"One family told me that they had Social Security income (for their disabled child) that put them \$30 over the limit to qualify for free school lunches and for food stamps," Sasser said.

Of course, the mom of two recognizes that there's a place for regulations governing such restrictions, but given the record inflation impacting the budgets of all families – especially those without means – Sasser said she also realizes that "people are still needing help."

She has suggested that families in need check out food banks and apply for the reduced school lunch program, "but, even with reduced lunches, when you've got multiple kids five days a week, that adds up really, really quickly."

"And if you go to a food bank," Sasser continued, "most of the time you're going to get canned goods, and you really can't send your kids to school with canned goods."

"I was a foster kid; I remember (being hungry) very vividly, and it's just heartbreaking to know that there are kids in our community in this day and age that have to worry about food."

Once she and her husband Jacob decided on a bake sale, Sasser said it all came together in about 10 days. Because her husband owns Summit Media

Group, LLC, and with her experience as a local realtor, the couple knew how to market the event online and through word of mouth.

After getting their promotional campaign going and people began hearing about the bake sale and its purpose, Sasser said the effort enjoyed an outpouring of support from the community.

"As soon as I posted it on Facebook," Sasser said, "a lot of local businesses and a lot of the other moms all jumped in and offered to help, whether it be baking, or sharing, or spreading the word and taking flyers to hang at different places, or just showing up to hold up signs."

"I was really blown away," she added, noting that with high hormones due to being seven months pregnant, she cried more tears of joy that week than at any other time during her pregnancy so far. "It was beyond words how amazing it turned out."

Sasser said about eight adults volunteered to work the tables that Saturday in the parking area of Brown Haven Homes and Papa's Pizza. Others contributed home-baked goods or donated items for the event's silent auction, which continued on Facebook after the bake sale.

On offer at the sale were fresh loaves of bread, cookies – including the gluten-free variety – cookie cakes, cake pops, banana nut bread, and brownies.

Available in the silent auction were donations of a two-hour cleaning by a local cleaning company, photography by a local photographer, a fly-fishing trip, handmade wooden trays, gift baskets, outdoor metal art, and a dozen other unique items and services.

"We're just beyond thankful," Sasser said. "Words don't express the amount of gratitude that we have felt. To see everybody put everything aside – there was no politics involved; it was purely about

feeding the babies. And it was such a wonderful experience to watch my kids learn."

"They were out there in the direct sunlight, they didn't complain, and they wanted to tell everybody and anybody what they were doing. That was such a cool experience as a mom to watch my kids fall in love with helping other people."

On Friday, Sept. 30, Sasser and her husband met with Union County School Nutrition Director Cindy Jones to present a \$3,128 check to be used to pay off the "food debt" owed by struggling parents covering their kids' school meals, and to help those who can't pay in the future.

Jones said that she and her assistant, Samantha Pantele, have been working with Union County Family Connection school guidance counselors and social worker Amy Rogers to identify students in need.

Because Union County Schools' nutrition program operates under U.S. Department of Agriculture rules and guidelines, officials are forbidden from using any extra money generated by the school district to help these kids: "Our hands are tied," Jones said.

Fortunately, there is no rule that Union County Schools can't accept payment for school meals from a third party, so this donation from the community is a godsend, Jones said.

"We paid the debts of all free (lunch) students, and some had large balances before applying for free lunches, and all reduced (lunch) students to date," Jones said Oct. 5. "We were able to help 219 students and still have a little over \$1,000 to help future students in need."

By all indications, this campaign to stamp out hunger at the community level is just the beginning, as Becca and Jacob Sasser plan to continue fundraising with the nonprofit moving forward.

## UCS Top Rankings...from Page 1A

vocational programs. Because of the bigger lab spaces, we'll be able to house more students and do more training."

Incidentally, the automotive shop services vehicles within the community, Davis said, adding, "All one has to do is call the school and make an appointment." For more information or to make an appointment, call 706-745-2216.

Next up, the School Board held the second reading and adoption of the revised Board Policy on Public Participation in Board Meetings, as required by state law.

People can access the revised policy online through

the Union County Schools website by navigating to [www.ucschools.org/home](http://www.ucschools.org/home), clicking on "District," then "Board of Education," followed by "Public Guidelines and Request" at the bottom of the page.

The district is working on the definition of what will be considered disruptive behavior warranting ejection from board meetings and will finalize that procedure soon.

There were three public speakers at the September board meeting: Vince Peterson, Cindy Vandereedt and Zeb Blanchard, all residents of Union County.

Peterson and Vandereedt criticized the rule limiting public comments at board meetings to

three minutes, requesting more time to share their concerns in the meetings.

Blanchard related his observations of high school students' lack of knowledge surrounding American heritage and exceptionalism. He said he mentored these students in the past as they interned at the local free clinic.

The School Board holds monthly work session and business meetings typically on the third Tuesday of each month starting at 6 p.m. at the Board of Education Office. This month, however, the board will meet on the fourth Tuesday, or Oct. 25, and on the second Tuesday in December.

## Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 continued community and youth engagement



The Blairsville Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 meets Tuesday, October 18 beginning at 6:30 PM and will feature information on several opportunities for the Post to be impactful within the community, especially local youth.

"The Post is working hard on developing its annual plan of programs supporting the four pillars of the American Legion: Americanism, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, National Security and Children and Youth" explains Mike Merritt, Post commander.

"Each of these pillars has several opportunities to reach out, such as teaching a flag etiquette class in the Union County Elementary School, planning a holiday dinner for our membership and spouses and ensuring our youth have an opportunity to participate in local, state and national American Legion competitions like the oratorical contest," he

added.

### Local Business Roadside Distillery serves as guest speaker

"We continue to pursue occasions to increase camaraderie and esprit de corps," Kathy Merritt, Post Senior Vice Commander, emphasized. "We had the successful jeep trail ride and for this meeting we're learning about one of our local cottage industries. We want to include having fun in our Post meetings and will seek out such activities throughout the coming months," she said.

Tickets are still available for the Stoeger 410 stagecoach shotgun, donated by former Post commander Don Sullivan, valued at \$550. The tickets are \$10 and the proceeds will go towards many of the Post programs, especially Veteran suicide prevention. The drawing will take place in November at the Blairsville Cruise-In for Veterans at the Farmers Market.

The October meeting will also seek volunteers for the Veterans building cleanup October 29 from 8 AM to noon followed by chili cookoff. Local Cub Scouts will also be there to help. Details on the Rotary hosting the Veteran's day luncheon at the community center will be discussed

and the monthly meeting of the Post always includes an overview of other Post activities, current information on Post finances and committee updates.

The American Legion is the largest and one of the oldest and most inclusive of all veterans' organizations worldwide and devotes itself to mutual helpfulness, mentoring youth, advocating patriotic honor, promoting strong national security, and continued devotion to fellow service members and veterans.

All members, and interested veterans, are encouraged to attend the meeting at the Veteran's Center, 78 Blue Ridge Street. It's a great opportunity to become engaged in the community and to establish strong bonds with fellow Vets. The Legion Auxiliary, for spouses of Veterans, will begin its meeting at 6:30 PM in the same building on the same day. Additionally, the Sons of the American Legion and the Legion Riders will have their joint meeting beginning at 7 PM.

For more information on the meeting or any Post activities email the Post at [post121@gmail.com](mailto:post121@gmail.com), visit the website at [legionpost121.org](http://legionpost121.org) or follow us on Facebook.

# Rep. Gunter visits students for Georgia Pre-K Week

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Pre-K students and staff celebrated the kickoff to Georgia Pre-K Week at the Union County Primary School on Monday, Oct. 3, to include a visit from District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter to read from a children's book titled "Hey Georgia."

"This is the 30th year we've had pre-K in the State of Georgia, so, it's all about Georgia, it's showcasing Georgia," said Principal Debbie Decubellis, adding that the theme for the day was "Hoedown."

Specifically a Georgia hoedown, with kids, all about 4 years old, and teachers alike wearing cowboy hats, boots, neckerchiefs and western shirts. The kids all looked and sounded like they were having a blast, given away by their ubiquitous smiles and enthusiasm.

"Pre-K gets the kids ready to go to school," Rep. Gunter said. "It gives them that discipline that they might not get at home to sit down and read a book or some other project. They learn to take direction (in a learning environment)."

The Primary School is serving 126 pre-K children this year, and they were all packed into a semi-circle around Gunter as he read to them with wife Rita providing hand gestures and pantomime, which the kids found enchanting.

Published this year, "Hey Georgia" was written by former NFL and University of Georgia wide receiver Malcolm Mitchell and was inspired by Georgia First Lady Marty Kemp.

All about the Peach State, the book shows where Georgia is on a map, what products come from Georgia, what resources are available

here, and why it's really great to live in Georgia.

Aside from being entertaining, the exercise was a learning experience for the kids, who got to see what a map is and how it works, learn a little about animals and geography, and why Georgia is an important part of the United States.

"Bringing light to the fact that pre-K has been available (in Georgia) for 30 years is excellent," UCPS Assistant Principal Wesley Garrett said. "I think of the generations of kids who've benefitted from having a program in place to prepare them for school."

"You can just look around and see the tremendous growth that these little 4-year-olds have shown (seven weeks into the school year)."

"We are so blessed," added Decubellis, "to be able to give them the opportunity to do school and see what school is like, so that not only will they go more prepared for kindergarten, but they will be ready for kindergarten."

"You can see just in watching them, they're quickly falling into learning how to do a routine. This is different (for them), but they're doing what their teachers ask. And they're just doing a phenomenal job."

Pre-K Director Connie Coker said data shows that "by having children in this pre-K program, we reduce the at-risk population for academics, (that is, kids who drop out or do poorly), by about a third."

"It's really successful because pre-K'ers need to learn foundational skills," Coker said. "They need to develop muscles, learn how to follow directions, learn what a routine is. There are so many things that they have to learn during this year that makes them more prepared for kindergarten."



District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter hung out with local pre-K staff and students in recognition of Georgia Pre-K Week on Oct. 3.  
Photo by Mark Smith

Added Decubellis, "And crazy as it sounds, even just going to breakfast and going to lunch—they know how to do that now—it's not something they'll have to master (next year) when they go to kindergarten. They're the big boys and girls on campus when they come (into kindergarten) next year after being in Pre-K."

Learning such foundations early "really saves a lot of instructional time," Coker said, concluding that "in the past, the first four weeks of kindergarten were spent learning the routine, and now, they come into kindergarten ready to go."

## Sorghum Festival...from Page 1A



Sorghum Festival organizers use the massive event to raise money for local causes, and the many visitors to the festival also support area businesses with their presence.  
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

making craft for 35 years. "We will probably have made 350-400 gallons of syrup over the course of these two weekends."

Added Kane, "My favorite part here is just all the people that you get to see that you normally don't, meeting new people and keeping the tradition here alive and going."

Ty Brunet is a relatively new member of Enotah CASA, the advocacy organization that assists area children in navigating the legal system and foster care, and he shared how proud he was to be part of an effort that raises money for such worthwhile causes.

"It's great to be able to help make this festival grow and keep the legacy and beauty of it," Brunet said, reflecting on the Sorghum Festival's storied 53-year history. "(What I love most about this) is just the community."

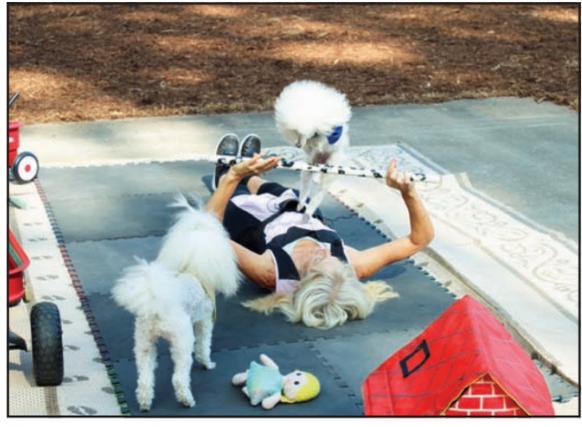
"This is my first time back here in a few years, and it's great because it brings out a lot of different folks from all walks of life, each one with a

unique story, so this is just a great experience, and we have a great culture."

Parking inside Meeks is free, and admission is \$5, with kids 12 and under entering free, so don't miss your last chance this coming weekend to soak up all the sweet sorghum goodness before having to wait for the

festival's return the second and third weekend in 2023.

For more information, including a complete schedule rundown of games, music and dog-show performances, live demonstrations and event sponsors, visit [blairsvillesorghumfestival.com](http://blairsvillesorghumfestival.com).



The Magical Poodles dog show wowed crowds for two performances on Sunday, and folks can check out more canine acrobatics with Dahlonega Action Dogs Oct. 15 & 16 at 1:30 p.m.  
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

## Full Bellies thanks community



Full Bellies Foundation would like to thank these businesses and people who really came together to help our Union County Kids!

They donated the following: Kim Farner Insurance - gift basket; Luna & Lace Photography - photography session; Tall Tails Fly Fishing - guided trip; North Georgia Construction & Project Management - funding; The Cupcake Chic - gift certificate and

cookies; Mountain Air Cleaning - 2 hour cleaning; Everybody Eats Chef Service - 3 course meal in home with private chef for two; Deys Welding - metal decor; North Georgia Extreme Bootcamp - 2 one month memberships and 2 four personal training sessions; Tilted Pi - \$50 gift certificate; Crooked Creek Farm - the goat milk basket; The Wreath Ladies - the Halloween wreath; and Summit Media Group - funding & marketing.

The website and Facebook page are up and running! The website now has all the information in order to apply for assistance, apply to volunteer, and even a donate button. The donate button links to a go

fund me and all the proceeds go to helping us file to become a fully functioning nonprofit!

Unfortunately, in the state of Georgia, it cost about \$1000 to register and file a 501(c)(3). But once we are fully functioning and accredited by the state, we can give people documentation for tax write offs for their donations, and we can function year-round!

Our goal is to continue the trend of keeping all of the needy families account balances in the positive, but also to be able to provide families who are struggling with food during the summer as well! [www.fullbelliesfoundation.com](http://www.fullbelliesfoundation.com)