

North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, November 29, 2023

Christmas arrives early with parade, local events

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Christmas is rapidly approaching, bringing with it jolly celebrations for Union Countians of every age. From gift shopping to light watching, there's sure to be something to make every Grinch feel merry and bright.

For an early start on gifts, the three-day Jingle Bell Buys is well worth consideration. From Nov. 30 to Dec. 2, over 20 local businesses will be offering amazing deals around town. For a full list of participating stores, check out <https://www.visitblairsvillega.com/>.

Though celebrated throughout the month, the Blairsville-Union County

Chamber of Commerce's Tour of Trees starts bright and early at 9 a.m. on Dec. 1, to run the rest of the month.

More than 75 unique trees and wreaths have been decorated for the season by local businesses and organizations, which people are invited to vote on anytime until Dec. 9. Winners for the Best Big Tree, Best Small Tree, and Best Wreath will be tallied up the following week.

Hosted and sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and United Community Bank, the 2023 Holly Jolly Christmas will be at the Union County Community Center on Dec. 2 from 8-11 a.m.

There, kids can enjoy a free breakfast before getting

photos with Santa and writing letters to him. They can also play "reindeer games," take part in festive crafts, carol, and ride the Christmas train.

The 11th Annual Blairsville Holiday Stop and Shop will be Dec. 1-2 at the Pat Haralson Memorial Civic Center. Admission is free to come browse the wares of more than 50 businesses selling anything from sweet treats to beard balms and oils. Friday hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Saturday is 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Touted as "a visit to the European Outdoor Holiday Market right here in the North Georgia Mountains," the Union County Farmers Market's annual Kris Kringle Mountain Market on Dec. 2 will feature

more than 100 vendors this year.

So far, it's shaping up to be one of the biggest in the history of the event, with local artisans and crafters encouraging the support of small businesses.

Swing by the Farmers Market anytime between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. to check out what's for sale, and once there, let the kids ride the Santa Train and enjoy holiday entertainment by the Union County High School Chorus Ensemble and the Woody Gap Band of Steel.

Of course, people will want to jingle-bell-rock their way to Downtown Blairsville on Dec. 2 to enjoy the Annual See Blairsville Christmas. Page 2A



Christmas in Blairsville will be on full display the evening of Saturday, Dec. 2. Photo by Shawn Jarrard/2019

UCFD helps to extinguish Blue Ridge commercial fire

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

When Union County Firefighters are needed, they answer the call, even if that call comes from a neighboring community.

On the afternoon of Saturday, Nov. 18, the Union County Fire Department was requested to assist Fannin County firefighters with a large commercial structure fire at Danielle's Cafe in Downtown Blue Ridge.

It was a challenging fire, blazing hot and threatening nearby businesses and residences on the busy East Main Street thoroughfare, but the dozens of firefighters from three agencies – Fannin, Union and Gilmer counties – rose to the challenge to contain the fire.

Thankfully, there was no loss of life in the fire, and while multiple businesses were lost in the strip containing the restaurant, the combined rescue efforts were able to save three businesses and three homes that were directly exposed to the initial fire.

"While this fire was a terrible tragedy for the local



Union County's Fire Ladder 1 helped fire suppression efforts from above at the recent commercial fire in Downtown Blue Ridge. Photo/Facebook

business owners involved, we are glad it was not worse," Fannin County Fire Rescue said later that day. "This fire could have easily jumped the street and taken out more buildings.

"Thanks again to our mutual-aid partners for helping out. Fannin County rarely calls

for assistance, but it's good to know it is there when we need it."

Responding to the mutual-aid request, Union County sent its Ladder 1 fire engine and 15 career and volunteer firefighters, adding

See Blue Ridge Fire, Page 2A

Blessings Dinner serves 1,356 meals on Thanksgiving

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

This Thanksgiving, over 200 community volunteers and 15 local churches worked together to provide spiritual support and 1,356 meals to families in need at the 2023 Thanksgiving Blessings Dinner.

This community effort has been a tradition for 13 years now, having started small at United Community Bank in 2010.

The team served 130 meals during its first Thanksgiving, and after growing at a steady rate of nearly 40% a year, the operation moved to the House of Prayer Church where they now serve nearly 1,400 people out of the Family Life Center.

To pull off something this big, the organizing committee began meeting biweekly right after Labor Day. Closer to Thanksgiving, many other selfless individuals volunteered to prepare food and decorate the church dining area.

On Thanksgiving morning, they began distributing the meals three



Volunteer delivery drivers picking up to-go boxes to take to residents who signed up for meals made with plenty of love on Thanksgiving Day. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

different ways: delivery, pick-up and dine-in.

The delivery process began long before Thanksgiving morning, when meal requests started pouring in from the online form, the school system and several other sources.

As addresses came in, a team of volunteers mapped out the entire county to determine the most logical delivery routes. The drivers were then assigned

a route on Thursday morning

before leaving to deliver a total

of 498 meals across the county.

After the delivery drivers

left the church, the remaining

volunteers rearranged the room

for families picking up meals.

Elsewhere across the county,

several other participating

churches also opened their

doors for meal pick-ups. In

total, 136 families picked up

See Thanksgiving Dinner, Page 6A

Local Marching band senior plays in Macy's Day Parade

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For Union County High School Senior Ayden Burnett, the Macy's Great American Marching Band has become like family, with this year marking his second appearance in the famous Thanksgiving Day Parade as a piccoloist.

After a thrilling week in New York City last Thanksgiving, Burnett couldn't stand to see his final opportunity to march alongside his friends in America's most renowned high school marching band pass him by. So as early as January, he began preparing to audition.

"It was just too good of an experience not to go back," he said. "There were people going this year that also went last year, and I couldn't just not go back and see them."

On top of that, he also wanted to explore the city a little bit more, since his trip last year inspired him to consider moving there after he graduates.

See Burnette in Parade, Page 2A



UCHS Senior Band Member Ayden Burnett in Times Square last week for the famous annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Photo/Submitted

UCSO works to tackle drugs with multiple recent arrests

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Both the Narcotics and Patrol Divisions of the Union County Sheriff's Office have been busy making drug arrests in recent weeks, driving home the law enforcement message that people doing or selling drugs in Union County will be caught.

From the narcotics side, investigators have

been amassing evidence via controlled drug buys, resulting in five recent arrests, UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer said.

On Oct. 3, deputies arrested Dakota Luther Stamey, 28, of Blairsville, for selling heroin, violating probation and failing to appear in court.

According to Narcotics Lt. Tyler Miller, Stamey is a "lower-tier dealer" under William "Bill" Lueckert, who was arrested on Sept. 13 for

trafficking and selling heroin

laced with fentanyl.

Then on Oct. 4, drug

investigators arrested William

Derek Chastain, 37, of

Hiwassee, on two counts of

selling methamphetamine in

Union County. UCSO worked

with the Hiwassee Police

Department to make the arrest,

transporting him from Towns

County to the Union County

Jail.

See UCSO Drug Arrests, Page 3A



Dakota Luther Stamey



William Derek Chastain



Robert Lee Hughes



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BASKETBALL

11/28 VS. TOWNS 6 PM

12/1 VS. WHITE 7 PM

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Drought Funds for Union Co. Crops

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Give the Gift of Food This Holiday

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Blairsville Christmas...from Page 1A

Nighttime Christmas Parade and Tree Lighting. As it has in more recent years, the event will feature more than just dazzling displays from local businesses and organizations.

Caroling on the square starts at 5 p.m., and once the sun goes down at 6 p.m., the tree outside the Union County Historic Courthouse will be lit to mark the beginning of the parade. For those interested in joining in, this year's theme is "Santa's Toy Land," and \$500 goes to the best float.

The Vogel State Park Annual Christmas Tree Lighting will fall on Dec. 9 this year, from 4-7 p.m. Weather willing, hayrides will start ferrying folks from the Visitors Center to the ballfields before the sun goes down.

Santa Claus will come to town around 5 p.m., and caroling starts at 5:30 p.m., with 6 p.m. marking the magical time when the main event takes place – the lighting of a 35-foot blue spruce. As always, the program will include the story of Jesus' birth.

Hot chocolate and cider

will be provided for free, but guests are encouraged to bring their own blankets and chairs. Please consider bringing an unwrapped gift for children 12 and under to be handed out during the Union County Sheriff Office toy drive.

Courtesy of the American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121, the local Wreaths Across America Ceremony will begin at 10

a.m. at the Union County Fine Arts Center on Dec. 16. After, wreaths will be left on the graves of veterans resting in Union Memory Garden and Holly Hill Cemetery.

Join more than 2,500 participating locations in honoring and remembering America's departed heroes by sponsoring a \$15 wreath at www.wreathscrossamerica.org/GA0206P. People may also send a check to American Legion Post 121, P.O. Box 247, Blairsville, GA 30514.

There are many more local offerings for people to enjoy, so be sure to visit the chamber website for details. From the North Georgia News to your home, here's wishing you and yours a holly, jolly Christmas.

control and contain. "And departments usually do not have enough equipment on hand to handle these rare events. That is why we have mutual-aid agreements and requests so that we can call for help on these types of incidents."

For Chief Dyer, the mutual-aid call was just another example of how the hard-working firefighters of Union County "are willing to help and are willing to learn."

"This was the largest fire that some firefighters have ever seen, and they took away valuable experience that could be used on other fires," Dyer said. "I am happy that we were able to assist Fannin County."

"I am extremely proud of our firefighters – career and volunteer – for their response to this fire. They were professional, dedicated, and made a huge contribution to resolving the incident. The citizens of Union County should be proud to know that they have such a competent and dedicated Fire Department."

The cause of the commercial fire remained under investigation at press time.

Blue Ridge Fire...from Page 1A

to the impressive effort of more than 40 firefighting personnel from Fannin County alone, plus the many other first responders who showed up to assist.

UCFD Ladder 1 joined Fannin County's Ladder and Gilmer County's Ladder to contain and control the fast-moving fire.

Union County Fire was assigned to a division of the building/incident under division leader UCFD Lt. Pat Schmidt, and Fire Sgt. Cody Allen operated Ladder 1, while other UCFD firefighters fought fire in their assigned divisions and were on the scene for several hours.

Part-time UCFD Firefighter Eric McClure, who serves as the Fire Station 3 Volunteer Lieutenant, battled the blaze inside the building, directly contributing to suppression efforts that saved several businesses.

It was the largest commercial fire McClure had ever fought, but he said that his local training – the same supplied all across the state – made seamless the task of fighting fire alongside others with whom he had never worked.

"The Blue Ridge fire was a great demonstration that the training system works," McClure said. "All three agencies are trained to the same standard, so when we showed up, they gave us roles and responsibilities, and we were able to move right into the coordination, attack and suppression of the fire."

"It's just a testimony to our training that we do. In Union County, we do a lot of training for situations like that. We pray it never happens, but when it does, we know exactly what to do. There were multiple layers, and it was very complex, but we all knew what we had to do."

Sgt. Allen said they were "glad to be of service to a neighboring county," and he thanked the 13 Union County volunteers for the tremendous support they provided both inside the building and outside, bringing water to and managing hoses for tired firemen.

"This is what neighbors do; they help each other," UCFD Fire Chief David Dyer said. "Any major incident like a commercial structure fire, especially in a highly populated downtown area, is difficult to

Burnette in Parade...from Page 1A

So, by the end of January, he had submitted a three to five minute audition piece and a video exemplifying his eight-to-five march step while playing scales. He received his official acceptance letter in February.

Nine months later, Burnett boarded a plane and arrived in New York City on Saturday, Nov. 18. The next week was filled with hours of rehearsals and sightseeing, starting with nearly a full day of exploring the city Sunday. That evening, the band ran through its first music rehearsal of the week.

Monday was a bit more rigorous, beginning with an eight-hour practice session at a soccer stadium. This was the first time the group paired music with movement, and after a long day of perfecting the parade block, they enjoyed dinner at Dave and Busters.

The rest of the night was more relaxed as the group chatted with a motivational speaker. After a short morning rehearsal on Tuesday, the rest of the day was open to more sightseeing around Times Square.

On Wednesday morning, the band rehearsed for only three hours before dining at Margaritaville then heading to one of the country's largest malls, the American Dream. As fun as it was, the band had to be in bed by 8 p.m. to ensure at least four hours of sleep before

the big day ahead of them.

At midnight, Burnett woke up to get dressed for a 3 a.m. run of the parade nearly an hour up the road at Times Square.

"We basically had to pull an all-nighter," he said with a laugh. "We had to go to Times Square and perform the parade as if we were actually playing it to make sure the cameras had everything mapped out right."

Since band members were already in the city, they killed some time having breakfast at the Hard Rock Cafe before taking their places in the parade line at 6 a.m.

Meanwhile, across the country in Blairsville, Burnett's friends and family tuned in to the Macy's Parade livestream to watch him make his second-ever televised appearance at about 10:09 a.m.

"When you're actually performing it, you don't realize that 50-plus million people are watching you, so you're not extremely nervous," Burnett said. "But after you march off, it kind of settles in and you realize that, wow, I just did that in front of 50 million people. It's a very rewarding and exciting feeling, and it's very sentimental and emotional."

Thursday night following the parade, the entire band got together one last time for a dinner banquet and dance, then Friday morning, Burnett headed to Newark International

Airport to fly back home.

However, leaving New York City was a little bittersweet. While he was excited to get back to his family and his own high school ensemble, he was also having to say goodbye to the Macy's Great American Marching High School Band for the last time.

Although his journey with the famous group ended this Thanksgiving, Burnett mentioned the possibility of joining the Alumni Band in 2026 if circumstances permit.

"If all goes well then I want to do it, but looking at it now and being realistic, college will be really expensive, and the (Alumni Band) trip has a price tag on it," he said. "We'll have to see how that works out, but I would absolutely love to (go) if I can."

After his high school graduation in the spring, Burnett plans to attend college for a medical degree. But he isn't ready to let go of his passion for the flute and intends to minor in music performance as well.

All in all, the Macy's Parade may have been the closing chapter in Burnett's high school marching band journey, but his love for music will continue to grow with his endeavors in the UCHS concert band, the Georgia Music Educators Association All-State audition process, and eventually, his college ensemble.

The 11th Annual Blairsville Holiday Stop & Shop

A warm welcome along with Hot Apple Cider, Hot Chocolate and Holiday music will welcome the attendees as they arrive at the 11th Annual Blairsville Holiday Stop & Shop (BHS&S) on Friday, December 1st from 10 AM to 7 PM & Saturday, December 2nd from 10 AM to 5 PM at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center (165 Wellborn Street) in downtown Blairsville (next to the Humane Society Thrift Store).

A large majority of the vendors that are well known in the direct sales industry will be represented, like: Think Goodness | Origami Owl, Pampered Chef, Scentsy, LipSense, L'BRI (Aloe Based Skin Care), Norwex, Mary Kay Cosmetics, Willing Beauty, ColorStreet, Tastefully Simple, Touchstone Crystal, Books, Ruby Ribbon Shapewear, Tupperware, Lemongrass Spa, Surprise Parties and more.

We also have an eclectic variety of handmade crafters like Crooked Creek Farm Fox-fire Blends (goats milk soaps, lotions, and scrubs), Gourmet Dips by Sassy Bell Delights Not Just a Dip, The Bigfoot Refinery Beard Company, Ava Anderson's beautiful Wreaths, Jerae's Treasures, A & R Creations, Ash Designs, Farm & Forge Pottery, The Sewing Studio, G's Bees Apiary, Tumbling 4 You Tumblers, Old World Elderberry Company, Paper Pie, Brick Mill Trading,

The Art Studio, Adrienne's Angels Heavenly Macarons, A year of Encouragement Press, Mama's Concierge Service and more.

We will also have two food trucks featuring The Ark and Vincent's Coppertop Restaurant and Pub.

A little something for everyone. With all the festivities happening around Blairsville this upcoming weekend, we hope that you will add our event to your calendar.

We will be assisting three charities this year. The BHS&S each year asks the community to help with collecting canned goods, white rice, Mac & Cheese, Ramen noodles for the 9th District Food Bank. This year we are proud to have return S.A.F.E and their Angel Tree to help

children in need in our community. We also are collecting Cat food, toys, and bedding for the Whiskers Project.

Come by and do some shopping for your favorite person or yourself. We have all kinds of great Christmas gifts. This community event depends on the support of many in the area and without their help it just wouldn't be possible for the event to continue and be the huge success that it has become. We all thank you for supporting us.

For updates on the Blairsville Holiday Stop and Shop, please LIKE and follow us on Facebook. For more information on the event and vendor opportunities, please contact via email Sharon Penner at BHSandShop@gmail.com.

Georgia Mountains Regional Commission's Council Meeting



The Georgia Mountains Regional Commission's Council will hold its Annual Meeting on Friday, December 1, 2023 at 6 PM at The Dillard House in Dillard, Georgia. There will be a reception prior to the meeting that starts at 4:30 PM.

Please note that the Annual Meeting is a ticketed event for all attendees.

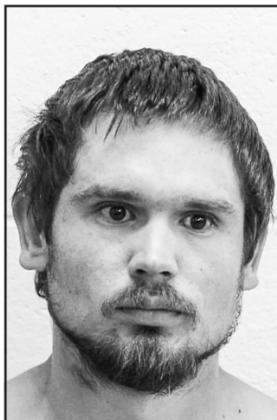
To purchase tickets, or if you are interested in sponsoring the event, please visit <https://www.gmrc.ga.gov/annualmeeting> or contact Gina Kessler at gkessler@gmrc.ga.gov or 770-538-2607.

To ensure your spot on the guest list tickets should be purchased no later than Wednesday, November 29, 2023.

UCSO Drug Arrests...from Page 1A



Brandon James Cason



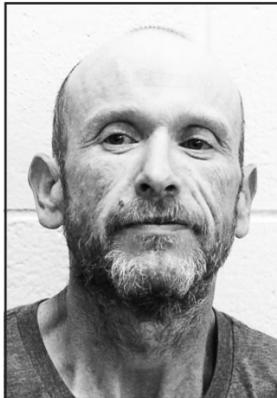
William Thomas Wooten



Emmanuel Joshua Neace



John Andrew Radtke



Eddie Lanier Nation



Caira Lynn Schmidt

And this month, on Nov. 2, deputies arrested Robert Lee Hughes, 57, of Blairsville, on three counts of selling meth and three counts of trafficking meth. In the process, UCSO confiscated about a quarter pound of meth. Hughes was on probation and parole at the time of his arrest.

As previously reported, Hughes was arrested on Feb. 19, 2015, and subsequently charged and convicted for distribution of meth. He received a sentence of 20 years, with 10 years to be served in prison and the remaining on probation.

On Nov. 13, investigators arrested William "Billy" Thomas Wooten, 30, of Blairsville, for selling methamphetamine. He, too, was on parole from prison and probation when arrested.

The Narcotics Division made another drug arrest on Nov. 16, charging Emmanuel Joshua Neace, 41, of Casa Grande, Arizona, with three counts of selling methamphetamine.

Deputies with the UCSO Patrol Division have made multiple recent drug arrests as well after pulling people over

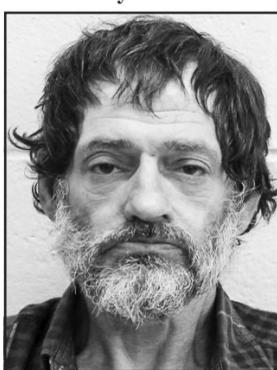
for driving infractions, Maj. Dyer said.

On Oct. 26, John Andrew Radtke, 55, of Blairsville, was arrested for possession of meth, driving while license suspended or revoked, and violation of registration/license requirements. Radtke was on probation when arrested, and UCSO seized his Dodge pickup under civil asset forfeiture.

On Nov. 1, a deputy pulled over Eddie Lanier Nation, 47, of Blairsville, was also on parole from prison at the time of his arrest.

Patrol deputies arrested two people in the same car on Nov. 2 after pulling a vehicle over for a taillight violation: Brandon James Cason, 25, of Carrollton, and Caira Lynn Schmidt, 31, of Murphy, North Carolina.

Cason has been charged with four counts of possession of a controlled substance, including meth,



Mike Milton Wigley

an unknown type of pill and marijuana; possession of drug-related objects; and taillight requirements.

Schmidt has been charged with five counts of possession of a controlled substance, DUI (drugs) (less safe), and two counts of possession of drug-related objects. When arrested, she was out on bond for a separate drug charge.

A Toyota was seized by the Sheriff's Office after Cason and Schmidt's arrest.

On Nov. 13, Mike Milton

Wigley, 56, of Blairsville, was pulled over for failure to maintain lane. Upon further investigation, he was arrested and charged with possession of meth, possession of less than an ounce of marijuana, tampering with evidence, and failure to maintain lane.

Maj. Dyer understands that Union County, like every county in Georgia, is dealing with an ongoing drug issue in the community, especially methamphetamine.

The drug issue is nowhere more apparent than in the overcrowded Union County Jail, where a significant percentage of the inmates are in custody on drug charges.

Still, Dyer said deputies remain undeterred in their mission to take drugs – and the

people who sell them – off the streets.

"The Sheriff's Office continues to work hard to combat the drug issues of

Union County," Maj. Dyer said.

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

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Ferst Readers of Union County wants to know: Who's your favorite reindeer?

Who is your favorite reindeer? Check out our local Union County celebrities, vote for your favorite one(s), and help Ferst Readers get FREE books to registered Union County preschoolers, birth to five years old! Each vote is \$5.00.

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get FREE books to Union County preschoolers.

To find out more about the Ferst Readers program visit FerstReaders.org.



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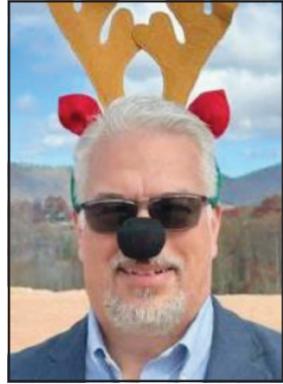
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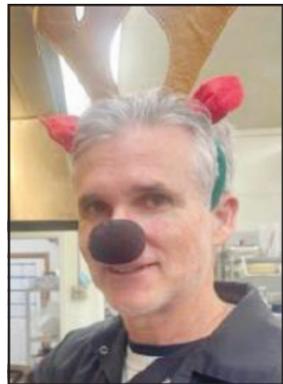
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Blairsville Council Member



COMET
Shawn Kight
Sawmill Place Restaurant

Thanksgiving Dinner ...from Page 1A



The House of Prayer Family Life Center, with its full kitchen and large gymnasium, is the perfect venue for the annual Thanksgiving Blessings Dinner. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

769 meals.

Meanwhile, other guests made their way to the House of Prayer dining area to enjoy restaurant-style hospitality, and for those interested, volunteers offered their companionship and spiritual connection.

"As good as it is, the meal is just (meant) to open a door so that you can have a conversation with people about Christ," said Cal Wolcott, who has been in charge of the event since its start. "And if they're not comfortable with that then we leave them alone. But if they're open to it, we want to share it and pray with them."

Wolcott was part of the original group of seven that founded the Thanksgiving Blessings Dinners over a decade ago and is grateful for the community support they've received since the start.

"Every year the community provides enough money to cover all of our costs," he shared. "This year we (targeted) 1,200 meals, and it ended up at 1,356."

These growing numbers are a testament to the trying financial circumstances many Union Countians face, proving that this kind of support is necessary in the community - something that long-time volunteer Lynn has believed since the Thanksgiving

ministry's founding. "We've just been blessed with so much, and we wanted to share that blessing," she said.

Thanks to generous people like Lynn, hundreds of families that otherwise couldn't have enjoyed Thanksgiving got to, such as a single mother who picked up meals for her 3-year-old child and her adolescent sister last Thursday.

"They deserve that kind of meal for them," the mother said with many thanks to the generous ministry, "and we couldn't afford it otherwise."

Many other guests also suffered from less than fortunate circumstances, such as a woman with a teenage son, an ill husband and an adult daughter moving in with three more children.

"I'm very thankful that they're offering this. It means we were able to have a Thanksgiving meal," she shared. "We're struggling. Money is very tight, (and) what's tight is going to be even tighter."

Hearing their stories and seeing families in need getting to enjoy hearty Thanksgiving meals never fails to inspire more community members to step up and help their neighbors, both physically and spiritually, which two-year volunteer Mike Osborn explained.

"Our men's ministry

sometimes gets leads from this to (do things) like go build a ramp or cut down a tree," he said. "Or maybe someone is just having a tough time physically from coming out of a surgery or something, and one of the elders will go to their home later and pray with them."

Osborn plans to take over as head of the event starting next year, because as much as Wolcott loves serving his community each Thanksgiving, after more than a decade as the lead organizer, he is ready to pass the torch.

This year's Thanksgiving Blessings dinners could not have been possible without the help of First Baptist, All Saints Lutheran, Antioch Baptist, Blairsville Church of Christ, Choestoe Baptist, Fellowship of the Hills, Harmony Grove Baptist, House of Prayer, Mountain Presbyterian, Redemption Point, St. Clare's Episcopal, St. Francis of Assisi, The Cross and Vertical churches.

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