

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Cruisers delighted to take children Christmas shopping

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Blairsville Cruisers is a local nonprofit consisting of volunteers who are driven by two primary motivations: an enthusiasm for cars and a desire to give back.

Cruisers combine these driving forces to promote wellbeing in their community, holding a regular season of car shows during the warmer months of the year to raise money for charitable giving.

Their biggest charitable effort is Shop with a Cruiser, an annual program that provides shopping experiences for underprivileged children to give them something to open with their families on Christmas morning.

The event acts as a mentorship opportunity as well, bringing civic-minded shopping chaperones together

with children to set a good example of community stewardship.

"We enjoy helping kids and seeing the looks on their faces," Cruisers President Charlie Brown said Saturday. "Last year, I was chaperoning two kids, and they were buying gifts for their grandma and grandpa - that gets to you a little bit."

"There's a lot of needy kids in this county, which you don't realize until you do something like this. So, it's good that we can work through our old cars and events to have donations and make money to do something like this."

Of course, 2020 has presented its challenges to fundraising of every kind, what with COVID-19 and all. The start of the regular Cruise-In season was postponed several months, and the Cruisers were unable to hold their biggest

annual fundraiser, the Car Raffle.

Fortunately, Cruise-In attendees love to give to the cause, and, coupled with events like the Salute to Veterans Car Show held every November, the Cruisers were able to raise enough money this year to take about the same number of kids as they usually do.

A very happy 58 kiddos arrived via parent delivery to Walmart on Saturday, Dec. 5, to take part in this year's shopping experience.

Chaperones included the Cruisers, Blairsville Police Officers, Sheriff's Deputies, volunteers associated with the Union County School District and others, all coming together to help children track their spending budgets and generally lend a helping hand.

Also attending Saturday was Family Connection, which

See Cruisers, Page 3A



Given the number of bicycles that rolled out the door during Shop with a Cruiser at Walmart Saturday, kids seem ready to get out of the house to do some cruising of their own.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

COVID testing available locally five days a week

State, local officials prepare for vaccine delivery

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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The Georgia Department of Public Health District 2 has expanded local COVID-19 testing opportunities, so now, people can get tested right here in Union County, five days a week.

Most recently, regional public testing has only been available out of the Towns County Health Department on intermittent weeks, but since Nov. 30, the Union County

Health Department has been providing appointment-only testing Monday through Friday from 8-9 a.m.

Appointments can be made by reaching out to the scheduling call center at 1-888-426-5073. The call center is open from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and from 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays.

"Offering testing each day of the week will be more convenient for our residents and allow our staff to continue providing other health department services," said Dave Palmer of District 2 Public Health.

Added Palmer, "We also started this same schedule for testing at our (Towns),

Banks, Dawson, Hart, Rabun, Stephens and White County Health Departments on Nov. 30."

Residents needing a weekend appointment can call about one of the district's two Saturday testing sites in either Hall or Habersham counties, both of which are open from 8:30 am to noon Saturdays.

Any Union County resident can sign up for a COVID test, with or without symptoms, by scheduling an appointment for testing at the local Health Department at 67 Chase Drive in Blairsville.

Results may take a few days to return and will be accessible online, and people testing positive can expect a follow-up call from District 2

See COVID Testing, Page 2A

Runoff early voting begins Monday; closed on holidays

Elections Board completes second presidential recount

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Georgia is on the nation's mind as it enters the final stretch before the much-anticipated U.S. Senate Runoff Elections set to take place Tuesday, Jan. 5.

Voters will also be deciding the next District 4 Public Service Commissioner in a concurrent state runoff election come January.

Early in-person voting for the runoffs begins Monday, Dec. 14, and will run weekdays through Thursday, Dec. 31, at the Union County Courthouse. Voting hours are between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. in the Jury Assembly Room on the bottom floor, even during lunchtime.

See Runoff Election, Page 2A



Technicians with Dominion Voting Systems walked Union County Elections Board Member George Burch and others through the presidential race machine recount process Nov. 30.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Vogel readies for Christmas Program, Drive-Thru event



The Vogel Tree Lighting Program is a much-anticipated community event that fortunately will still take place this year despite COVID causing many other cancellations.

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With Christmas just around the corner, the annual Vogel State Park Christmas Tree Lighting is set to return once again on Saturday, Dec. 12, from 4-8 p.m.

Due to COVID-19, this year's program will look different than in past years, as social distancing will require a new setup in 2020. Regardless, Janet Hill, who helps to organize the event year after year, feels it is important to keep the tradition going.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2013
"We are actually not able to have more than 50 in a group because of the (Department of Natural Resource State Parks division) and their rules," Hill said. "We are moving people around and making it to where they are not gathering at the tree

See Vogel Christmas, Page 2A

Gowder hoping to avoid 'death trap' prison sentence

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

A federal judge has denied a request by former hospital CEO Mike Gowder for re-sentencing to home confinement, according to court documents.

U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story issued the order Monday in response to Gowder's motion filed Dec. 3 requesting emergency action regarding another motion he'd filed in October initially asking for re-sentencing.

Gowder, 62, was requesting home confinement citing concerns over COVID-19 in prison and several personal "serious medical conditions,"

including "hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, early Type 2 diabetes, chronic and acute lower back and leg pain."

He filed the motions on behalf of himself without an attorney in the federal Northern District of Georgia, with little time remaining before he was to begin serving his sentence.

"On Jan. 4, 2021, Defendant is required to turn himself into a federal prison, which could or would cause his certain death," Gowder wrote.

Judge Story said in his Dec. 7 order that, "while the court is sympathetic to Defendant's conditions, they do not rise to the level of extraordinary and



Mike Gowder compelling circumstances that justify compassionate release." However, "in light of advances being made regarding a COVID-19 vaccine, to delay Defendant's report date in order

See Gowder, Page 3A

Local man pleads guilty in Kentucky rape cold case

News Special
North Georgia News

COVINGTON, Ky. - On Nov. 30, 2020, Michael Dean Tate, 78, pleaded guilty to rape, sodomy and kidnapping stemming from an attack on a Park Hills, Kentucky, woman outside her home in the early morning hours of Oct. 1, 1978.

With assistance from the Union County Sheriff's Office last year, Tate was arrested at his Blairsville home on Nov. 14, 2019, by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

His arrest came just over 41 years after the offense, on a warrant obtained by Boone County, Kentucky, Sheriff's Department "Cold Case" Detectives Coy Cox and

Timothy Adams.

At the time of the crime, the victim told police a man grabbed her by the throat from behind as she exited her car shortly after 2 a.m. She said the man threatened to kill her if she continued to struggle or make noise.

The man shut the victim's car door and forced her into his car before driving to St. Joseph's Lane in Park Hills, where the victim reported being raped and forced to perform other sex acts against her will for about the next two hours.

During the assault, the victim said her assailant bragged about having killed other women. She said she begged for her life and was



Michael Dean Tate eventually released alive. The victim then went to police, who were unable to identify her attacker.

Fast forward nearly four decades to 2017, which is when the two "Cold Case" detectives began looking into

See Tate, Page 3A

Vol. 111 No. 50
4 Sections 24 Pages
Weather
Thurs: Sunny Hi 65 Lo 33
Fri: Sunny Hi 60 Lo 43
Sat: Rain Hi 56 Lo 38

Arrests 2B
Church 3B
Classified 3D
Opinion 4A
Legals 4D
Obits 4B
Sports 2C

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SPORTS BASKETBALL
12/8 vs. Tallulah Falls 6 PM
12/10 vs. White Co. 5 PM
12/12 @ Fannin Co. 4 PM

Quilt of Valor Recipient
See page 6A

Union County Runoff Sample Ballot
See page 2B

County Budget Hearing December 17
See page 2D