

Cruisers...from Page 1A



Blairsville Cruisers Lee Lehman and Rev. Tommy Jones with community volunteer Rick Maddox helping kids check out at Walmart during Shop with a Cruiser Dec. 5. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

works with teachers and staff inside Union County Schools to refer students each year for more than 60 community-based programs that benefit over 500 local schoolchildren of all ages at Christmastime.

"For some of these children, this will be their Christmas," said Katy Jones of Union County Family Connection. "For most of them, they won't be getting anything else. So, just to see the looks on their faces - they're so appreciative and excited, and they're ready to go."

As always, donations and community support make these programs possible, with Shop with a Cruiser benefiting specifically from Walmart grant funding and

day-of refreshments, Chick-fil-A donated lunches, and countless others chipping in at car shows to make the event special for kids.

And everyday people make a difference, too, like Faron and Monique Barton of Fannin County. The Bartons were simply in town shopping that morning when they realized what was going on and decided to make an on-the-spot cash donation to support the Christmas event.

"This is a super idea, the children are ecstatic," Faron said. "(These volunteers) are great mentors to be around, (giving these children) someone to look up to and respect so they'll grow up with the same kinds of values."

Added Monique, "And this is nice, because with all this COVID lockdown, it's good to see something still being done."

Faron is a U.S. Army Veteran who served in Bosnia, where he took part in a military group helping a local orphanage - which is what Shop with a Cruiser brought to mind for him Saturday, giving him the idea to possibly start a local "Shop with a Veteran" to benefit even more kids.

That's exactly the kind of positive civic engagement the Cruisers are happy to inspire, Brown said. For more information on the car club and to get involved, check out <https://blairsvillecruisers.com>.

Tate...from Page 1A

an unsolved homicide in their home jurisdiction of Boone County.

Similarities between their case and the unsolved Park Hills rape and kidnapping case in neighboring Kenton County led the men to open an investigation into the 1978 attack.

"This case is surreal. It's like a real-life version of Law & Order or CSI," Kenton County Commonwealth's Attorney Rob Sanders said, referring to popular but oftentimes unrealistic television crime dramas.

In the original investigation, Park Hills Police recovered a fingerprint from the victim's car door that was closed by her assailant during the crime.

"Fingerprinting was relatively new back in those days," Sanders said. "And the database of prints law enforcement had available for comparison was limited, so it's no surprise there wasn't a match at the time."

"But when the Boone County detectives re-submitted the print almost 40 years later, they got a match to Michael Tate."

Cox and Adams then began meticulously combing through public databases, looking to corroborate the fingerprint evidence, according to Sanders.

"Their investigation confirmed Tate's presence in the Cincinnati area in the mid-'70s, when he was working as a traveling salesman," Sanders

said.

The detectives also conducted an extensive investigation to track down the victim who had moved thousands of miles away from Kentucky, flying to her home for an interview.

There, she told them she didn't know anyone named Michael Tate and there was no reason his fingerprints would be on her car if he wasn't her attacker.

Cox and Adams found the car was kept in a garage and had not been serviced near in time to the attack, so there was no innocent explanation for Tate's fingerprint to be on the victim's vehicle.

On Nov. 13, 2019, the detectives traveled to Tate's home in Union County, Georgia. During a lengthy interview, Tate admitted to having raped a woman in Kentucky, near Covington, but did not know the exact location or date.

Sanders said the detectives recorded Tate admitting he grabbed a woman from behind as she exited her car in a garage, forced her into his own car, and drove her to another location where he sexually assaulted her.

Tate went on to admit to additional sexual assaults in at least two other states. Cox and Adams have since been in contact with multiple police agencies looking to match Tate's confession to other unsolved rapes, but to date, no other charges have been filed.

"This is some of the

most amazing police work I've ever seen," said Sanders, who prosecuted the case alongside First Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Casey Burns.

Sanders applauded the tenacity of the cold case detectives, as well as Boone County Sheriff Mike Helmig's commitment to justice for victims of sexual assault.

"Some police executives would have balked at the cost of this investigation, especially considering it was from another jurisdiction," Sanders said. "But I can't say enough good things about Sheriff Helmig and his team."

"They relentlessly pursued this rapist until he was brought to justice. I'm still amazed with their work. They're fantastic."

Tate will appear before Kenton Circuit Judge Patricia Summe for formal, final sentencing on Jan. 12, 2021, at 3:30 p.m.

Sanders and Burns are recommending a 12-year prison term, which would make Tate almost 90 years old by the time he completes his sentence.

"We consulted the victim every step of the way," Sanders said. "She was very relieved to learn she would not have to return to Kentucky and relive this nightmare she has spent over 40 years trying to forget."

"Most of all, she was very appreciative of the detectives who took up the investigation and continued to fight for her even though four decades had passed."

Gowder...from Page 1A

to afford him an opportunity to be vaccinated before beginning this custodial sentence," Story said Gowder would not be required to report to prison before May 1, 2021, effectively granting him four additional months before he must start his sentence.

The former Union General Hospital executive was sentenced in June 2020 to a year and a day in prison after being found guilty on more than 100 counts of prescription drug fraud in his federal jury trial last year.

In recognition of COVID-

19's impact on the prison population over the summer, at the time, Judge Story postponed Gowder's confinement until at least Jan. 2, 2021. He was subsequently ordered to report to the low-security federal facility in Jesup on Jan. 4, and now, he has until at least May 1, 2021.

The Dec. 7 order partly addresses Gowder's core contention that his sentence "could be rendered a death sentence," with the judge casting an eye toward the future in hopes of a vaccine alleviating such concerns.

COVID-19 is a viral disease that is caused by a highly contagious pathogen known to spread in congregant settings like prisons, which Gowder describes as "death traps."

As such, he has argued that home confinement is a reasonable alternative to his present sentence, and that federal statutes and the U.S. Constitution "make it possible for the Court to adjust its sentences accordingly."

"With the COVID-19 pandemic infesting all federal prisons, it is only a matter of time before COVID-19 would attack the defendant and certainly could or would kill him," he wrote in the denied

motion.

As previously reported, Gowder and former Blairsville-based physician James Heaton were publicly arrested in February 2016, after which they became co-defendants later convicted for prescription drug fraud in a nearly two-week trial in October 2019.

For his crimes, Heaton was sentenced to five years behind bars and is due to report to the medium-security U.S. penitentiary in Atlanta on Jan. 2, 2021, to begin his sentence.

Heaton's attorneys have filed an appeal in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. Legal briefs for each side are due Jan. 12, 2021, so a hearing will be scheduled at

some point after that.

Mike's brother David is currently serving an 18-month sentence at the same low-security federal prison facility in Jesup, to which he reported in July after sentencing in June 2020.

David was a former co-defendant in the case, though he avoided trial by entering a guilty plea in March 2019 to one count of prescribing oxycodone to a patient without a legitimate medical purpose.

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