

North Georgia News

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Shop With a Cop serves over 150 local children

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The spirit of Christmas echoed throughout Blairsville Walmart last Saturday morning, Dec. 9, as the community gathered to support families in need for the 23rd Annual Shop With a Cop.

This heartwarming local tradition provides an opportunity for families facing financial hardships to give their children a big, memorable Christmas regardless of their circumstances.

In 2023, the Blairsville Police Department, in coordination with Union County Family Connection based in the schools, was proud to provide over 150 Union County children with a meaningful Christmas experience they likely would

not have gotten otherwise.

"It's just such a wonderful example of community support," Union County Family Connection Coordinator Katy Jones said. "It gives (these kids) an opportunity to experience the joy of the Christmas season and to know that their community cares about them."

Jones and the rest of the staff at Family Connection begin planning Shop With a Cop in October each year, after much community fundraising has already taken place by the Blairsville Police.

The process begins when the Union County School System sends referrals to the Family Connection office. From there, the students' names are placed on various lists according to their needs.

As the day of Shop With a Cop approaches, the staff

works diligently to organize the event and provide volunteers to chaperone and spend time with the children while they shop.

"I was born and raised here, and to me, it is just all about my community and giving back to those students," Jones said. "The goal is for these students to experience love, and then at some point in their life, hopefully they'll be able to give back."

"We've heard many, many stories about how, as a younger person, the volunteers here experienced something like that. So, now they're back to share that - to complete that circle and give back to those who are less fortunate."

And whether they were a returning volunteer or a new face, all of the chaperones last Saturday shared a genuine passion for helping others and

spreading love.

"With all these kids in need, I'm just trying to help them out," said Charles Turner, who volunteers at Shop With a Cop every year. Turner also participates in the yearly Shop With a Cruiser event put on by the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club.

While volunteers like Turner are veterans in the world of charity shopping events, some chaperones experienced their first Shop With a Cop this year, such as CJ Bingham, who showed up Saturday morning with her two children.

For Bingham and her family, the experience of chaperoning was just as rewarding as the experiences for the children shopping.

"Our church has been involved with it for several



For the Blairsville Police Department, Shop With a Cop for Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

'Classic Christmas' welcomes families, hosts live Nativity

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Local children received a spirit-filled view onto Christmases past - including the very first Christmas - during the Second Annual Classic Christmas by the Union County Parks & Recreation Department at the Sports Center Dec. 8-9.

In the words of Rec Director Scotty Thompson, the Rec Department hopes that the Classic Christmas will become a tradition in the mountains for years to come.

On the first night, running from 5-7:30 p.m., the exterior of the Sports Center was the site of a live Nativity, backed by the caroling Union County Middle School Chorus stationed on a festive wagon near the entrance and across from the manger.

Pastor Jerry Helton asked gathered children if they knew what the Three Wise Men brought to Jesus' birth, and he admitted that he used to believe that gold, frankincense and myrrh were the very first Christmas gifts.

"God gave the first Christmas gift when he gave

Jesus Christ, His son, to be born in a stable in Bethlehem, to be laid in a manger, and later to die on a cross for our sins so that we could have a relationship with Him," Helton followed up. "Know that most of all, Christmas is about God's gift of Jesus Christ, and He wants

you to trust Him. He wants you to love Him."

For the last 30 minutes of the first night, the chorus moved inside to perform in a warmer venue while kids and adults alike rode a donkey, posed for pictures with a goat, and petted

See Classic Christmas, Page 6A



A wisewoman from the live Nativity at the "Classic Christmas" handing out another candy cane to a little guy on Friday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Beta Club treats second graders to Merry Christmas



UCHS Beta Club members Ava Sharp, Harmony Lindsey, Lily Harkins and Zoe Murphy had lots of fun chaperoning a second-grade girl through a magical Christmas shopping experience on Friday.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

According to staff and students at this year's Shop With a Panther for Christmas, 2023 has been one of their most

successful years for fundraising, making the event a major success on Friday, Dec. 8.

A grand total of 20 second-graders were treated to a big day out by Union County High Schoolers in

the Beta Club, similar to the well-recognized "Shop With a Cop" or "Shop With a Cruiser" Christmas shopping programs for kids.

The Beta Club is See Shop With a Panther, Page 6A

Blairsville Cruisers break bread in Christmas dinner



Members of the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club joined with their spouses for a nice Christmas dinner at Cook's Country Kitchen in Downtown Blairsville this month.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blairsville Cruisers Car Club commemorated Christmas early on Sunday, Dec. 3, giving its members ample time to celebrate with their families later this month. Still, among friends, the event

was merry and bright and included the eponymous dinner as well as some gift giving.

Tommy Jones and Wayne Tanner are founding members of the Blairsville Cruisers, dating the club's official start date to 2007. Nearly 20 years after its inception, the goal of the

organization hasn't changed in serving local causes.

"It's been great. We've helped a lot of kids," Jones said. "We spend between \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year on kids, and it takes a lot of work to raise that much money, but we got good help, too. We got a good club."

See Cruisers Christmas, Page 3A

UCSO arrests two people connected to NC kidnapping

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A Union County woman and a Murphy, North Carolina, man wanted in connection with an out-of-state kidnapping were arrested this month by the Union County Sheriff's Office.

According to the Cherokee County, North Carolina, Sheriff's Office, on Thursday, Nov. 30, a Cherokee County resident picked up Jordan Hedden, 30, and Stephanie Neace, 31, who were hitchhiking.

"After entering the vehicle, Hedden kidnapped the Cherokee County citizen, forcing her into the back passenger area and taking over the operations of the vehicle," according to the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office.

The kidnapped woman reportedly escaped later that day at a convenience store in Polk County, Tennessee, and arrest warrants for Hedden and



Jordan Nathaniel Hedden



Stephanie Miranda Neace

Neace were issued in North Carolina and Tennessee.

On Friday, Dec. 1, the Union County Sheriff's Office received a call from a Cherokee County investigator who believed that Hedden and Neace were at a residence here off Smyrna Road, near the state line.

Union County Sheriff's Deputies located Neace at the residence in question, according

to UCSO Lt. Lamar Dyer, and she was taken into custody that Friday. Among the charges Neace is facing are aggravated kidnapping, carjacking and theft by taking, all felonies.

Hedden was not at the Smyrna Road residence on Dec. 1, but the Sheriff's Office established increased patrols in the area.

Then on Saturday, Dec. 2, Neace was arrested. See Kidnapping Arrests, Page 2A



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Ag Agent Williams discusses upcoming class, UGA Extension

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE – People are invited to participate in the upcoming Mountain Gardening Course by Jacob Williams, the University of Georgia Agricultural and Natural Resources Extension Agent for Towns and Union counties.

Williams discussed the course during a recent appearance at the weekly meeting of the Mountain Movers & Shakers.

Set for four sessions between Jan. 16, 2024, and Feb. 6, 2024, the course is being hosted by the Young Harris College Institute for Continuing Learning. Registration is open at <https://www.iclyhc.org/event-5473779>, with a fee of just \$25.

“This course will talk about gardening,” Williams said in the description. “Whether you are an experienced gardener or want to learn more about gardening in the mountains, there’s always something new to learn in the plant world.”

“We will learn about

growing vegetables, fruits, and ornamentals. We will also talk about insect pests and beneficials, how to control the former and encourage the latter. Plant disease control will be discussed with organic and conventional methods.

“We’ll also talk about wildlife and how you can manage their impact on your garden. If you want to learn how to prune fruit trees, or what types of plants to put in the ground, come join us! No green thumb required.”

Williams is also planning to teach another Master Naturalist class at some point next year, announced during his talk with the Movers & Shakers.

The in-depth Master Naturalist class is conducted largely outside and offers a broader look at invasive species, native species like salamanders, tree and plant identification, watershed management, mushrooms and more.

As part of a wider discussion with the nonpartisan civic group, Williams provided some information on the responsibilities of the Extension Program.

Soil and water testing is a popular duty, whether for agriculturists looking for the most optimal planting conditions or homeowners concerned about the quality of their well water.

Results typically return in about a week, and the price of a typical soil test is \$12. Information about everything from pH levels, nutrients and minerals can be gleaned from one sample, including searching for specific compounds like zinc and iron.

“I have (seen) a lot of folks who move in here who have spent most of their life on municipal water. Now that they have a well, they’re not sure how to take care of it, how to make sure that their water is clean, so we offer well water testing services,” Williams said in example.

That said, Extension’s testing services aren’t limited to soil or well water.

Seeing as the categories of Agriculture and Natural Resources comprise a wide variety of topics, Williams has worked with cattlemen who need to know the quality of their hay or the ponds on their property as much as he has answered the questions of homeowners who bring in a sample of water to scope out.

“We’re not a regulatory agency; we’re educational,” clarified Williams, and Extension has doubled down on that especially as it relates to mental wellbeing in rural areas. While the organization does not provide psychological help for emotional crises, it does act as a sort of middleman.

“When the state looks at who has a strong foothold in rural communities, Extension is one of the first agencies that comes to mind because Extension has an office in every county in Georgia,” said Williams, who added that if an Extension agent is approached by someone in need, they are usually pointed “to local resources.”

After fielding a few questions, Williams returned to the topic of the natural world.

“Blight usually means a plant disease,” Williams responded following some questions about boxwood blight and other threats to local trees. Some blights are fatal, like with boxwood, and signs of infection can turn up in stems, trunks, leaves and fruit, as is the case with tomatoes.

Invasive species can cause or exacerbate these problems. Bamboo grows quickly and must be cut back as often as weekly to avoid choking out areas that native plants could grow in.

An infestation of the hemlock woolly adelgid has destroyed plenty of hemlocks after the insects suck the sap out and inject a poison causing needles to fall out and growth to stop.

“We have a lot of (invasive species); the list grows every day,” Williams said. “A lot of our invasive species like hemlock woolly adelgids and bamboo have



Jacob Williams
Union/Towns Ag Agent

come from Asia because we have a similar climate to them.”

While not an invasive species, Williams said that the sugarcane aphid is a pest that has negatively impacted the production of sweet sorghum. This summer, Williams conducted some trials with genetically modified sweet sorghum developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to test its resilience.

As a fun, season-appropriate addition to the presentation, Williams shared the process of why – and how – leaves change their color in the fall.

With shorter daylight hours, chlorophyll begins to die off. It’s the substance in plants that helps them process sunlight and gives them their signature green color. But as the green fades, other pigments come through.

Depending on the tree species, leaves turn different, warmer colors; one type may display blood red leaves, while another turns gold or deep amber. In forests as diverse as those in the mountains, the results are a gorgeous palette of bright, warm fall colors against a cool blue sky.

The Mountain Movers & Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. inside the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee, usually featuring a guest speaker from the community. The public is invited and encouraged to attend.

Kidnapping Arrests...from Page 1A

2, Hedden turned up at a residence in Tennessee with a firearm, which was confiscated from him, and he fled the scene, eventually hitchhiking to Georgia, per the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office.

In the meantime, the public was warned that Hedden was on the lam and considered dangerous.

On Monday, Dec. 4, the Union County Sheriff’s Office received a call that Hedden was wanting to turn himself in at the

Smyrna Road residence, and UCSO Deputy Brody Brackett took him into custody there without incident.

Out of Cherokee County, Hedden is facing charges of first-degree kidnapping, larceny of a motor vehicle, common law robbery and extortion, all felonies, and possible additional charges are pending for him in Tennessee.

Hedden and Neace were taken into custody here on holds for other agencies

and were not charged locally. Hedden was transported to Polk County Jail, while Neace was taken to Cherokee County for detention. They are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer said he is proud of the local Sheriff’s Deputies, who did a good job of working with both the community and other agencies to make arrests in a kidnapping case that originated outside this jurisdiction.

Native American Recognition Month Observed by Daughters of the American Revolution



Old Unicoi Trail Daughters & Guests



The small but mighty Old Unicoi Trail Chapter’s ‘Lunch Bunch’ went ‘Day Trippin’, braving the chilly mountain air to observe “Native American Heritage Recognition Month” at the Cherokee Homestead Exhibit in Hayesville, NC.

According to Chapter Regent Pam Greene of Hiawassee, “The NSDAR American Indians Committee is entrusted to the continuing education of the history and culture of this community as well as the support of the educational and cultural pursuits of its citizens.”

The exhibit is a part of the Quanassee Path. Quanassee Town served as an important trading post along the English trading route from Charles Town, SC, to the Cherokee towns in Tennessee. The brave daughters and guests also toured the historic town of Hayesville including the barn quilt trail, courthouse, and unique shops! ‘Day Trippin’ is a Chapter activity in months when a Chapter meeting is not held and focuses on a day trip related to one of DAR’s standing national committees, often with a focus on local heritage.

November’s ‘Lunch Bunch’ enjoyed a noon meal at Epic Catering and Eatery in Hayesville.

The DAR represents

over one million Daughters. A woman 18 years or older, regardless of race, religion, or ethnic background, who can prove lineal descent from a patriot of the American Revolution is eligible to join.

Old Unicoi Trail primarily serves Towns, Union and Fannin counties with members from North Carolina and other locations. Email oldunicoi-trail@gmail.com to attend a meeting or learn about joining.

To further perpetuate the memory of patriot ancestors, the Chapter will hold an Introduction to Genealogy Workshop January 20, 2024, 10:30 AM - 1:30 PM at the Union County Library Community Room.

To register for the workshop email the address above.

Cruisers Christmas...from Page 1A

That money is raised through public events, especially car shows, and, in Jones' words, children and veterans are the ones who receive the funds.

This can mean anything from paying a light bill to offering a scholarship so a student can attend the college of their dreams, making the Cruisers, at their core, a charitable organization.

For example, the Cruisers helped cover the medical bills for Deklin Jones, a local youth cancer survivor. And on Dec. 2, the Cruisers took 93 children to Walmart to spend "a few hundred dollars less than \$25,000" making sure they received a very Merry Christmas.

But there's still much fun to be had by the classic car lovers. Tanner jokingly refers to the club's start as "just a bunch

of old guys standing around the Square, talking (and) playing music," and to this day, loving cars and their history is the tie that binds the whole group together.

Outside of spinning wheels and revving engines, events like the Christmas dinner bring them all together and remind them that they're more than just a like-minded organization – the Cruisers are a family.

Everyone started filing in at Cook's Country Kitchen between 3:30 and 4 p.m. for the Christmas dinner that Sunday. Jones, the pastor of Fairview Baptist Church on Blue Ridge Highway, blessed the gathering and the food before the buffet was opened.

Time was allowed for folks to finish their plates before the club's top sponsors of the year were thanked for

their support; representatives from O'Reilly Auto Parts and the North Georgia News were called to the front to accept certificates of recognition and a couple of quick photos.

Of course, with it being the season of giving, two tables were set out for gifts. Cruisers – and their spouses – brought presents suitable for men and women, with either getting a category to choose from. There were no names assigned to the packages and envelopes that were brought in.

Instead, everyone picked up a number, and when their number was called, they picked a present from their corresponding table. Similar to the "White Elephant" tradition, participants were allowed to "steal" a gift from another person if they wanted it bad enough – but only once.

As it happens, there

were very few instances of light-hearted thievery. Some received gift cards, while others took home soap, homemade cookies and candies or simply money.

A charming, detailed depiction of Santa Claus was a very popular item, but by far the most fun was had when Jones unwrapped box after box in a single package only to uncover a gift card.

In all, the Cruisers went home with full bellies and even fuller hearts, looking forward to doing the same charitable work next year.



The Blairsville Cruisers broke bread and gave gifts in their 2023 Christmas Dinner, celebrating being together one last time until the next Cruise-In season starts up in April 2024.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Iota Iota "Decked the Halls" of Branan Lodge



(L.): Charles Long, Vincent Fertitta, Kathy & Charlie Ross; (R): Denise Long, Marie Fertitta, Jeanee & Jerry McJilton



(L.): Randy & Robin Zimmerman, Carolyn Southard, Ron & Sally Shuck; (R): Jan Albernathy, Joe & Jan Valencia, Helen & Cecil Teboe

Tuesday, November 28th members of Iota Iota, a chapter of Beta Sigma Phi helped set up and decorate the trees on each of the floors and the two in the lobby at Branan Lodge. To get us ready for all the decorating we helped ourselves to complimentary coffee, water, and donuts. Several of the residents stopped to provide design instructions and to

help put the ornaments on the trees. The front team decorators could not get the front lobby tree topper to be straight nor stay on. A knight in a brown suit (the UPS driver) was kind enough to pitch in and save the day getting the star on straight and staying put. Kudos to the UPS driver, our hero.

If you should visit Branan Lodge, you must go to each

floor to see their tree as each tree has different color bulbs and other decorations.

Iota Iota wants to give a shout out to Susan Freeman, Marsha Hughes, Pat Hawkins, and Shirley Coledge, our Branan Lodge design crew, for the front lobby tree. A shout out to resident Mrs. Ellen who helped Jennifer Weber decorate two trees.

The Sons of the American Revolution

The December meeting of the Sons of the American Revolution met at The Arbor Community Clubhouse in Blairsville. The entertainment for the evening consisted of attendees, most of whom were history buffs taking the history portion of the Federal Naturalization Exam required by immigrants to become citizens, followed by a history trivia game.

The highlight of the evening was the presentation of the coveted Sockdolager Award to Tommy Westbrook. Westbrook received the esteemed award for volunteering to be the editor of the chapter newsletter, The Mountaineer. Using his computer and design expertise, Westbrook reformatted the newsletter, creating a style that piques the interest of 21st-century readers.

The Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter, SAR meets five times yearly; the next luncheon meeting begins at



(L-R): 2022 Sockdolager Award winner David Anderson passing the coveted cup to Tommy Westbrook, awardee for 2023. Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter President Stephen Weaver looks on.

11 a.m. for lunch and starts at 12 on January 9, 2024, at Daniel's Steakhouse in Hiwassee. Membership in the SAR is available to male descendants of patriots who either served or supported the American Revolutionary War. The SAR goals are preserving our constitutional foundations

and liberties, sharing historical knowledge and the civic duties implied, and honoring and celebrating contemporary acts of patriotism and courage. For additional information, please phone or email Stephen Weaver, President, at 828 360 2476 or spweaver@mindspring.com.

Shop With a Panther...from Page 1A

comprised of UCHS students with a grade-point average of 92 and above, with sophomores, juniors, and seniors invited to join to take part in local activities to build integrity, leadership skills and more as role models in their community.

Since 2012, Shop With a Panther has given high schoolers a chance to do something meaningful for the upcoming generation. It was started by late UCHS Principal George "Ed" Rohrbaugh and has become just another way that Beta Club members can help those in need.

In this case, the younger children were chosen based on "level of need" by their teachers. From there, the little guys and gals were entrusted to a team of older friends who led them around Walmart to go Christmas shopping.

The youngsters were free to choose gifts for themselves, but many, if not most, found something for their families as well.

In years past, every child has been allotted \$150 to spend as they see fit after fundraising efforts by the Beta Club collect a "wallet" for everyone. This year, the funds added up to \$175 per kid.

As noted above, a common decision for the small shoppers is to use the opportunity to buy gifts for their loved ones. They pick up everything from extra toys for younger siblings to socks and other clothing items for older family members, and 2023 was no different.

Of course, they also enjoy just being kids among all those toys.

Hope Patton and Kamryn Mull were part of a group whose shy charge clutched a cuddly, bright red Squishmallow dragon. The boy was excited to silently show off the plush toy.

"He loves his Squishmallow," said Patton, adding, "His mom works here, but he's quiet." When she asked him if he was having fun, he nodded affirmatively.

Ava Sharp, Lily Harkins, Harmony Lindsey and Zoe Murphy were in a group watching over a little girl with plenty of pep. The quartet had their work cut out for them as their new friend zipped around to look at toy after toy.

Murphy admitted that she had gotten so attached that she wanted to use her own personal money to buy all the gifts the little girl wanted. The other girls agreed and took the time to play with the singing Santa she found. The sledding reindeer was another popular item.

"I like to do community outreach and help with things, but it's hard to figure out ways to help. And Beta gives you an opportunity to help your community – an easier path to do so," said Lindsey, whose friends added that they loved that day's opportunity in particular. The four older girls agreed their charge was "sweet," and they enjoyed playing tag and getting to know her.

The celebrated 2022 UCHS Teacher of the Year Dixie Conger was there to help Beta Club Sponsor Jennifer Hogsed, who has taken over the initiative.

"She's done a phenomenal job this year making sure that this tradition keeps moving," Conger said. "These kids have

all been great; they're having a great time. It's been good to watch it continue and for them to all be excited about it."

For her part, Hogsed said Shop With a Panther was "a huge responsibility, but I've had a lot of help, so it's been a good experience."

"Walking around and seeing the kids interacting with the other kids and seeing that, when they need something, they will pick up the slack on whatever they are needing – even on the financial end of things – (is really fulfilling)," Hogsed said.

After returning to the school, the second-graders were treated to a winter wonderland of fun and a pizza feast.

The Beta Club, Key Club, 4-H, Interact Club and DECA teamed up to wrap presents and set out Christmas-themed activities for the kids after shopping, making doubly sure the holiday season is merry and bright for little ones who may not otherwise have a chance to enjoy Christmas fully.



Part of the fun of chaperoning during a volunteer Christmas shop is watching the children interact with all the toys. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Classic Christmas...from Page 1A



Union County Parks & Rec hosted a very festive Classic Christmas over the weekend. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

a friendly calf. People of all ages enjoyed apple cider and hot cocoa courtesy of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

The celebrations on Saturday, Dec. 9, lasted longer, starting at 2 p.m. before things began to wind down around 7:30 p.m. With everything staged inside the second evening, kids could sit in a familiar sleigh and get their pictures taken with Santa Claus, Mrs. Claus and even an elf.

Instead of having children create their own ornaments as originally planned, it was decided to "do something different" and set up a table where kids could pick out a tiny plush bear complete with adoption certificate and sit down to color their choice of wooden car or truck.

"We were just trying to keep with the theme of 'Classic Christmas,' so that's why we wanted to do the cars and the little bears," said Kristy Penney of Parks & Rec.

Along with getting some

small Christmas gifts there in the lobby, the kids could pen letters to Santa detailing the kinds of things they'd like to find under their Christmas trees at home. They could then drop the letters into a very convincing mailbox bound for the North Pole.

Finally, on their way out, kids and their families were free to grab a brown paper bag full of the traditional Christmas gift of fruit and small snacks. Apples, oranges, popcorn and various candies used to be the most common choice for parents to gift their children, and the goodies were once again enjoyed in the modern era.

County Manager Larry Garrett was pleased with the high turnout on both days and wanted to thank the staff of the Rec Department for their dedication to setting things up and involvement in making sure things ran smoothly once the event kicked off.

Not only that, but Garrett thanked the community for their willingness to come check

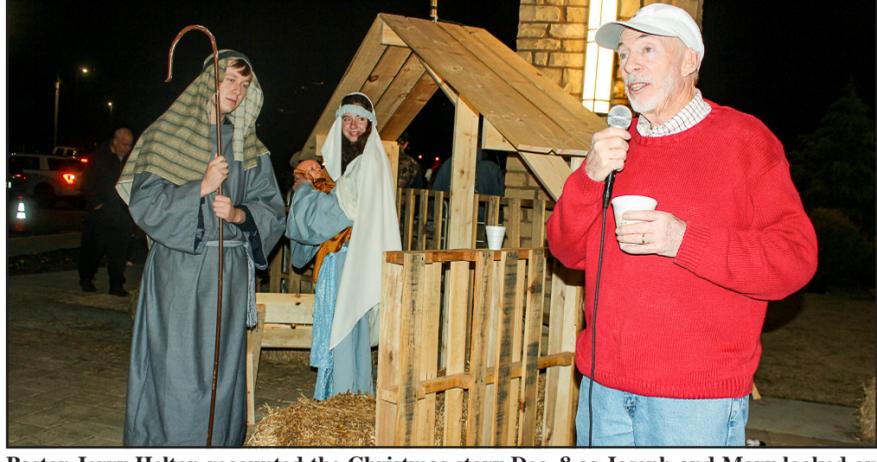
everything out.

"It's really super special," Garrett said. "I want it to be contagious. Everybody needs to have a part in this, especially the little kids. The adults need to come back to stuff like this so that we can teach our kids, our grandkids, this is what Christmas is about – fellowshiping."

Next year, the Classic Christmas will be moving to the Union County Farmers Market to allow for more room to better accommodate guests. Folks can also look forward to having fun with additional activities and hanging out with even more animals.

Also in 2024, the live Nativity will come together with the Classic Christmas activities to take place on the same day, allowing families to enjoy the winter wonderland over the course of one outing instead of having to come back for two.

"As the saying is, I can't wait to get around the next corner," said Garrett with a smile.



Pastor Jerry Helton recounted the Christmas story Dec. 8 as Joseph and Mary looked on from the live Nativity. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Shop With a Cop...from Page 1A



As they always do, employees of the Union County Sheriff's Office helped out during the annual Blairsville Shop With a Cop, this year on Saturday, Dec. 9. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

years, and we decided to jump in and help today," Bingham said. "I think it was pretty awesome getting to meet that young man. We got to talk about some things, and we got to know him a little better and be a good friend to him.

"(The experience) was really great for my son. (He and the boy we shopped with) are bonding right now. My son relates to him about LEGOs and all of his interests, so it's really cool that he's got that older brother vibe going on. That was the most surprising part to me, getting someone that he could bond with and be a big brother to."

Shop With a Cop really is an event for the whole community. Not just for the families, children, volunteers and police officers who showed up Saturday morning, but also for the many businesses, civic groups and individuals who worked behind the scenes organizing and donating to the cause.

"I have been involved with Shop With a Cop ever since it started," Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter said. "In my opinion,

it's the most important thing we do every year. It's the most rewarding thing our officers do, and I'll be the first to tell you, if we didn't live in a good community and have good community support, we couldn't make this thing happen.

"We don't take credit for this; our community should. They make this happen. When we first started 23 years ago we had nine or ten kids, and today, we're going to be shopping for about 155 kids from over 80 families. So, it is truly a blessing that we're able to make this happen.

"We live in a great place, we live in a great town, and we live in a great community. All I can say is that I can't thank (the community) enough."

One organization that Baxter made sure to credit was the Fellowship of the Hills Church, whose members have shown up each year for the past decade to give free food to the families participating in Shop With a Cop.

"We provide them with what is called 'Bundles of Love,' which are bags filled with food," Fellowship of the Hills Pastor Marty Duncan said. "As

the children register, the parents (come outside and) meet us at the trailer, then we walk them to their vehicle and give them one of these Bundles of Love.

"It gives us an opportunity to pray with them and love on them and share the love of Christ with them, which is exactly what the season is all about.

"I retired with over 28 years of law enforcement in the state of Florida, so I came from law enforcement into pastoring (for 16 years now), so obviously this means a lot to me from both angles of that."

Fellowship of the Hills also participates in several other charitable initiatives throughout the Christmas season, such as a Christmas Eve delivery of close to 200 Bundles of Love bags to various Union County neighborhoods.

All told, the 2023 Shop With a Cop was a tremendous display of Christmas cheer, making dreams come true for well-deserving local children while also providing an outreach opportunity for local law enforcement to get to know the youngest members of the community.