

Shop with a Cop...from Page 1A



It's quite possible there were just as many if not more volunteers than kids at the Blairsville Shop with a Cop Saturday, Dec. 12.

Photo/Facebook

the store.
One mother who brought her 12-year-old daughter to the event said she was incredibly grateful for the opportunity, as things have been difficult for her family recently; her husband passed away three years ago, and she experienced a medical emergency earlier in the year.
"I work full time, and my mom, she takes care of my kids while I'm at work," the mother said. "I've been having

a hard time getting help from the government. We do live day by day, but as long as my kids have groceries and food, that's all that matters.
"I just thank all the cops and the people around here for everything that they do for everybody in the community, especially with this program and the churches that want to help. Plus, the school system here is great."
The daughter qualified

for Shop with a Cop for a second year in a row, and it still blows her away seeing her hometown come together to make a program like this possible for kids. With her trip, she bought some pillows, movies and vinyl records, and a few things for her brother.
"Every cop is really, really nice, and they basically let you shop for anything that you want," she said. "It's great of them to do that, because you

don't really expect anyone to give you money to go places and do things you want to do."
Another resident waited outside Walmart Saturday for his family to finish shopping. The man has grown kids of his own, but he took custody of his three nieces and nephews 12 years ago when their parents died.
He said other organizations in the community help families in need all the time, including the various churches in the area, and that for him, Shop with a Cop was but one of the many reasons he's glad he moved here nearly 30 years ago.
"If it wasn't for this community, I couldn't raise these kids," he said. "We do fine, don't get me wrong, but if it wasn't for this community, these kids wouldn't get much Christmas this year from us."
"My wife's working at the hospital and I've got lung issues, so my job's went way down. This is a great community; I don't care what anybody says."
Also attending were volunteers from Fellowship of the Hills Church, which posted up in front of Walmart with Fisher the Fox of their Children's Ministry and a trailerful of "Buckets of Love," or 5-gallon food baskets for each participating family.
Pastor Marty Duncan said

the outreach was a terrific way to talk to people, to minister to and pray for those in need.
"As you might guess, we're hearing stories of just about everything," Duncan said. "Grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, to other stories that will just break your heart."
Added Duncan, "We're also going to take 100 buckets over to Katy Jones at Family Connection, which will be distributed (separately) to families from the school."
Union County Family Connection is the liaison group working inside the school system that connects Blairsville PD and other civic-minded organizations and individuals with children recommended by teachers for various Christmas shopping experiences.
Volunteer chaperones Dec. 12 came from the Blairsville Police Department, Union County Sheriff's Office and Jail, Union County Schools Police, Department of Community Supervision, CSRA Probation Services Inc., Castoff Pet Rescue, Blairsville Cruisers and officer spouses.
UCSO Chief Deputy John George said Shop with a Cop was a great way to invest in the future by allowing police officers to bond with children who in turn grow up to be the decision-makers in their

community.
"It's also part of the community-based policing that both Blairsville and Union County Sheriff's Office practice," George said. "This is part of our mandate of helping our community be better across the board, not just in law enforcement."
"Caring for the youth and providing guidance and direction builds a partnership between the community and the kids."
Walmart awarded community grant funds for the shopping experience as well as day-of refreshments for shoppers, and the many generous donations to Shop with a Cop this year enabled the program to provide, once again, \$100 grocery cards for all participating families.
"I would like to thank our community for their love and support of our youth," Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter said after the shop. "Without their support, we couldn't make this event a success."
"We appreciate our volunteers who came today, but we also want to thank all the individuals, churches, civic groups and businesses who made sure the young people of Union County had wonderful Christmases."



2020 Shop with a Cop is but one of more than 60 local endeavors that takes over 500 local children Christmas shopping each year. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Vogel Park...from Page 1A



A bevy of talented musicians graced the stage at Vogel State Park Dec. 12 for a rainy yet spirit-filled Christmas program. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

New Year)," and a final prayer was offered before Justin Terry closed out the music portion of the evening with "Christmas in Dixie."
Afterward, cars formed ranks to make their way up to the ballfield and back around "Joy Land," where church and park volunteers handed out activities for kids, tree ornaments, cookies and other refreshments, and Santa said hello with assistance from his helper elf.
The Great Tree looked resplendent all festooned with lights and ornaments, and volunteers made sure everyone made it through the roundabout before exiting the park, where a Union County Sheriff's Deputy maintained a presence on Gainesville Highway for safety.
Year after year, Vogel welcomes guests from all over to be part of the Christmas program. One carload in attendance traveled more than 500 miles, and though several people arrived from Union County, there were other newcomers there Saturday.
Stephen and Christina Moore from Dawsonville love the outdoors and are regulars at the state park. But 2020 was their first time visiting during the Christmas program, and they headed down from their

camper to see what it was all about.
The Moores said that this holiday season they were thankful for their health, for each other, and for their families and jobs.
In terms of annual yuletide traditions, the couple attends church Christmas Eve and makes sure to spend time with family. And now that they know about Christmas at Vogel, Christina said they'll "definitely be back for this."
As a neat Christmas gift to guests, the park waived the usual \$5 parking fee, and Assistant Park Manager Murphy said they were grateful to be able to offer the program despite all the challenges of 2020.
"We have been noticing left and right that people were canceling their events or their Santa visits, so we said, we need to have something," Murphy

said. "So, we devised a plan and came up with this."
This is Murphy's third tree lighting since arriving at Vogel three years ago, where she serves under Park Manager Jack Becker, who is away for military service.
"I love it," Murphy said. "This was the first event I was able to help with once I became assistant manager, so this will always hold a special place in my heart. Christmas is one of my favorite times of the year, so being able to listen to the carols and see the lights, it's really magical."
"I don't get to spend Christmas with my family because they live back in Missouri, but I do get to spend it with so many other people who absolutely love this time of the year. And being able to see the joy in their smiles, having this community come together - it warms my heart."