

North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Station 13 makes quick response in north Union

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Union County Fire Station No. 13 has been paying property- and life-saving dividends ever since it opened in November off Murphy Highway.

Last week, career firefighters stationed at the new location were able to respond to a house fire a full 10 minutes faster than UCFD headquarters at Station No. 1, which also houses full-time firefighters.

The fire occurred at a home in the Fox Lake subdivision off Ivylog Road in the early morning hours of Thursday, Feb. 8.

A smoke detector alerted the homeowner, who

called Union County E-911 at 1:08 a.m., and the call was dispatched to all firefighters at 1:09 a.m.

Only about six miles away from the fire, Station No. 13 was able to have Engine 13 on the scene by 1:19 a.m. – 10 minutes before Engine 1 arrived from the more centrally located Fire Station 1, effectively cutting the old response time in half.

The scene that greeted those first firefighters was dramatic; the garage area of the home was completely engulfed, with flames shooting through the roof, and the blaze had spread to the front porch overhang along the length of the house.

Fortunately, the arrival of

Engine 13 and nearby volunteer firefighters enabled a quick suppression effort to prevent further spread of the fire, and firefighters from Station 1 and volunteer Stations 2, 3 and 4 assisted to completely extinguish the blaze upon their arrival.

“We saved most of the house,” Fire Chief David Dyer said, estimating that upwards of 30% of the home received burn damage. “There’s actually a couple of places in the house that weren’t even touched.”

Of course, things could have turned out much differently for the homeowner had Station 13 not arrived so much earlier than the next closest help, which would

See Station 13 Response, Page 6A



This is the sight that greeted firefighters as they pulled up to a house fire in the north end of the county Feb. 8. Photo/Submitted

2024 Night to Shine welcomes 92 kings and queens



The 92 guests of the 2024 Night to Shine enjoyed dancing amid a balloon drop in their honor on Friday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Night to Shine 2024 was a huge success, especially considering the outpouring of support from the community.

The annual event was held at its usual venue at the First United Methodist Church of Union County on the evening of Feb. 9 to celebrate individuals with special needs across five counties: Union, Towns and Fannin in Georgia, and Clay and Cherokee of North Carolina.

While commonly referred to as a “prom,” all ages are invited to attend. Indeed, the main event is the dance, but guests also enjoyed a karaoke room and party bus

rides, and caretakers were offered a special Caregiver Dinner.

For two years now, Scott and Elizabeth Terry have organized the event, and in 2024, they were joined by more than 270 volunteers who helped set up decorations, chaperone guests, direct traffic and parking, serve food, shine shoes, style hair and more.

“It is amazing to us how the community just comes out and supports us both financially and volunteer-wise,” Elizabeth said.

But not everyone who plays a part in making the Night to Shine is “stationed” at the church. Stephanie Conner was out on the Blairsville Square with family and friends, ready

to greet the buses as they made their rounds around the Union County Historic Courthouse around 7 p.m.

She and her group were among many others who stood at all corners of the square that night, waiting at the ready with noisemakers and posters to cheer when the buses made their circuit.

“I think it’s great that the community comes together to bring joy and smiles and love to the faces of these participants for Night to Shine. It’s all about them,” Conner said, beaming. “I just love that our community always comes together for things like this.”

Even a retinue of cheerleaders from Young Harris See Night to Shine, Page 6A

Talent shines brightly at ‘Evening with the STARS’

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce hosted the annual Evening with the STARS banquet on Thursday, Feb. 8, to honor the top SAT takers of Union County along with several other outstanding seniors.

This year, STAR Students qualified from both Union County High and Woody Gap School.

UCHS senior Eli Decker has been impressing his educators since he moved to Union County four years ago to enroll in the STEM Academy. In his final high school semester, he has managed to wow them once more by receiving the STAR Student honor.

“It takes a village, and without everyone’s support, I would not be receiving this award today,” said Decker,

expressing thanks to his teachers, parents, the STEM Academy, the STAR program and, of course, UCHS.

“About three quarters of the way through my eighth-grade year, myself and all of my middle school classmates were sent home for an indefinite amount of time due to the global pandemic,” Decker said. “It was during this time that my parents decided to move (me) and my brother in search of a better educational experience.”

They were able to find UCHS just in time for Decker’s first day of high school, where he was greeted with open arms.

“One teacher stood out to me,” Decker said. “He welcomed me and other students with genuine kindness and enthusiasm. He was patient and slow to anger, despite having to deal with a bunch of unruly kids straight out of See Evening with STARS, Page 7A



There was no shortage of achievement on display during the 2024 Evening with the STARS, with many awards presented to well-deserving students. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

Early voting starts Monday for Presidential Preference Primary



Voters will have a new place to vote early in-person this year, at the Union County Voting Center. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
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In-person early voting for the Presidential Preference Primary begins Monday to give active registered voters the chance to select political party candidates for the office of President of the United States.

Election Day for the upcoming primary is Tuesday, March 12. There will be three weeks of early voting for this election running weekdays between Monday, Feb. 19, and Friday, March 8.

Early voting will also include two weekend voting opportunities on Saturday, Feb. 24, and Saturday, March 2.

All in-person early voting will take place from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. inside the new Union County Voting Center at 33 Roscoe Collins Drive, located across from Union County High School off the Glenn Gooch Bypass.

Presidential Preference Primary voters who decide to wait until Election Day to cast their ballots will need to head to their predetermined voting precincts between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on March 12.

Union County has 11 voting precincts: Blairsville, Jones Creek, Choestoe, Owtown, Coosa, Pat Colwell, Dooley, Suches, Gum Log, Trackrock and Ivy Log.

For people voting absentee-by-mail, ballots may be requested at the Voter Registration Office inside the Voting Center now through Friday, March 1. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, as an email attachment, or in person at the Voting Center.

Voters returning absentee ballots can use the official drop box inside the Voting Center during early voting hours; mail them back in plenty of time to be counted after polls close on Election Day; or drop them off in person at the Voting Center through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Monday, Feb. 12, was the See Early Voting, Page 2A



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Week Five Update: Legislative Business Under the Gold Dome

We have officially completed five weeks of legislative business under the Gold Dome, and it's hard to believe that we are nearly halfway through the 2024 Legislative Session. While I am proud of the legislative progress we have made as a Senate body, we have plenty of work left to do for both the 51st Senate District and our state. I am excited to work with my fellow senators and Republican caucus members to continue our mission of passing meaningful legislation for Georgia. As a majority, we have enjoyed a highly effective session and biennium, and it's important that we finish the drill.

Since the start of the legislative session, I have been drafting and advocating for conservative legislation located in all stages of the legislative process. Specifically, I want to mention Senate Bill 382 which was passed by the Senate on Thursday. SB 382 would create a board of elections and registration for Gilmer County. I am thankful that my colleagues in the Senate passed this bill and I look forward to seeing its passage in the House as the legislative process continues.

Furthermore, SR 543, which I authored, was assigned to Senate Committee on Rules on Tuesday. SR 543 would support increased protections for American's borders. I am eager to hear the committee's discussion on this resolution.

Additionally, I would like to highlight the passage of SB 332 through the Senate on Tuesday. SB 332 focuses on enhancing the standards of conduct and rules governing the Prosecuting Attorneys Qualifications Commission. These bills aim to reform legal procedures and regulations within Georgia, particularly within the criminal justice system. I applaud Sen. Robertson (R-Cataula) for his work on getting this very important piece of legislation passed.

Finally, SB 362, after extensive discussion, was passed through the Senate. SB 362 would provide for require-

ments relative to employee representation by a labor organization for employers to receive certain economic development incentives from the state. I am pleased to have seen this bill pass as it helps further protect the rights of workers and gives them the choice to decide how they unionize.

As we move into the final half of the legislative session, I will continue to do the people's work and strive for legislation that achieves these priorities.

Additionally, my colleagues and I joined members of the House to hear from Chief Justice Michael P. Boggs as he delivered the State of the Judiciary address. During the address, Chief Justice Boggs updated the Georgia General Assembly on several efforts, including actions to support judicial security and retention. As legislators, we must protect our law enforcers both in the line of duty and on the bench.

This week, Senators took part in their respective appropriations subcommittees. In these hearings, members listened to budget requests from state agencies related to the Amended Fiscal Year 2024 budget. As I mentioned in our week two update when legislators participated in "Budget Week," these meetings are essential as we continue to maintain our AAA bond rating and \$16 billion surplus – all thanks to practical fiscal conservatism. Unlike the Washington elite, we manage our money responsibly and practice diligence at every level: from committees to the Senate floor. Georgia's working-class families deserve legislators dedicated to balancing dollars and cents, and the Senate's Republican majority is proud to continue leading this charge.

Each week under the Gold Dome, constituents, associations and organizations alike come to the Capitol to speak to legislators and host events with public officials. It was great to hear from Lt. Gov. Burt Jones as he held a press conference on Wednesday to give an update on Georgia's tax credits.



Majority Leader Steve Gooch

In Georgia, we have created an economic success story with increased employment and historic tax cuts. Echoing the sentiments of Lt. Gov. Burt Jones, we must continue to uphold transparency as Georgians deserve to know how our taxpayer dollars are being spent. I am proud of the work that this body has done so far on this issue, and know that we will continue to do great things in the weeks to come.

As always, I want to invite students between the ages of 12 and 18 to serve as a Capitol Page. This program encourages Georgia's next generation of leaders to participate in the legislative process by providing a front-row seat to a day's work in the Georgia Senate. Many of our current legislators participated in this program and first became interested in serving Georgia citizens because of their time spent as a Capitol Page. I encourage any students interested in the legislative process who want to spend a day at our Capitol please reach out to Chloe Satterfield at chloe.satterfield@senate.ga.gov.

Please never hesitate to contact my office if I can assist with legislative matters. I hope to see you under the Gold Dome soon as the 2024 Legislative Session continues.

Sen. Steve Gooch serves as Senate Majority Leader. He represents the 51st Senate District which includes Dawson, Fannin, Gilmer, Lumpkin, Union and Pickens counties and a portion of White County. He may be reached at 404-656-7872 or via email at steve.gooch@senate.ga.gov.

Early Voting...from Page 1A

registration deadline to vote in this election.

The 2024 election cycle will be a busy one, with federal, state and local elections up for voting this year.

Candidates for local elections will qualify the week of March 4 for the May 21 General Primary/Nonpartisan Election, with a runoff date of

June 18 if necessary.

The big General Election is slated for Tuesday, Nov. 5, with a runoff date set for Dec. 3.

April 22 is the voter registration deadline to participate in the May 21 General Primary/Nonpartisan Election, and Oct. 7 is the deadline to register for the Nov.

5 General Election.

Residents may visit <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/s/> for voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county, sample ballots for upcoming elections, provisional ballot status and more.

Local judges return for Hope House's 12th Super Chef Showdown March 9

Excitement is building for the 2024 Super Chef Showdown benefiting Hope House of Union County, and three local professional chefs will once again be judging this year's entries.

The 12th annual tasting event will be held Saturday, March 9, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at First United Methodist Church of Union County in Blairsville.

Three restaurant chefs will judge the specialty dishes created and cooked by multiple community chefs and name the winner of the Judges' Choice Award. They are Zach Edmonds of Jim's Smokin Que, Marife Arrazcaeta of Nani's Cuban Restaurant, and James "BBQ" Grubbs, former competitor in Netflix's American Barbecue Showdown.

Judges' Choice Award winners from the 2023 event were Appalachian Shrine Club for their Korean tacos, first place; Full Throttle Ministries for their baked beans, second place; and Union General Hospital for their Heath Bar Delight, third place.

In 2023, some 16 community chefs were featured at the annual tasting event, and Hope House Executive Director Pamela Alexander is hoping for even more this year. She has issued a challenge to local first responders – firefighters, law enforcement, dispatch, and emergency medical services – to step up and have full participation at the event, along with chefs from local churches, civic organizations, individuals, and professional associations.

The community chefs also compete for the coveted People's Choice Award, based on the most money earned from Showdown attendees who vote with their dollars. Doors will open at 11:30 a.m. after judging for the Judges' Choice Award is completed, and tasting and voting for fa-



vorite dishes ends at 1 p.m., with prizes awarded before the event concludes at 1:30. God's Club, with their Almond Joy cupcakes, won the top spot in 2023.

The menu runs from soup to nuts, literally, with some early 2024 entries including PBJB – peanut butter, jelly, and bacon – sandwiches, barbecue, Brunswick stew, meatball sliders, duck gumbo, chili, and cakes. Hotdogs and chips also will be available for the less adventurous. Attendees will dine to the live music of Southwind Band, back by popular demand. Hope House volunteer receptionists and caseworkers will be on hand to assist the chefs and diners.

Also honored will be the second winner of the "Giver of Hope" trophy, which will be awarded to the community chef who brings in the most money benefiting Hope House through ticket sales and dollars collected at the event from attendees' votes. The 2023 winner was God's Club.

Recognition will also be given by name to sponsoring businesses and organizations

from the community, at the gold (\$1,000), silver (\$500), and bronze (\$250) levels. Any local business or organization interested in sponsoring the event, donating items for the silent auction or door prizes, or participating as a Super Chef team, may contact Mrs. Alexander at Hope House at 706-781-3090 or sign up via Hope House's web page at hopehouse-unioncounty.com under "upcoming events."

Admission is \$15 for adults and \$5 for children ages 6-10; children ages 5 and under will be admitted free of charge. Tickets may be purchased at the door, and all ticket holders will be eligible to compete in door-prize drawings each half-hour. A silent auction of locally donated and produced items and services will also take place throughout the event. Children's activities bags will be distributed and face-painting will be available.

Hope House is a faith-based organization providing assistance with the basic necessities of life to Union County residents, transients, and homeless population who are in critical need. Its guiding scripture is 1st Timothy 4:10: "For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people." In 2023, Hope House helped Union County families and individuals facing financial crises 237 times, distributing \$61,035.

Hope House is funded by donations from member churches, businesses, and individuals as well as fundraisers, the largest of which is the Super Chef Showdown. Hope House Board Chairman Ken Engle echoed the admonition of 1st Timothy in inviting the public to support the Showdown. "Come alongside us, toil and struggle with us as we help our brothers and sisters in Union County," he said.

Corey Smith returns to Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE – No stranger to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, Peach State native country star Corey Smith will be returning to Anderson Music Hall on Saturday, Feb. 17, to perform a concert that will begin at 7 p.m.

Having released 10 albums, Smith has grown a broad fanbase for “telling it

like it is.”

Smith, who hails from Jefferson, writes his own music and has produced all but one of his albums, which includes a Top 20 Release from 2011, “The Broken Record.”

Particular fan favorites include songs “Twenty-One,” “If I Could Do It Again” and “I Love Everyone.”

Joining Smith is special guest and fellow singer/songwriter Jeb Gipson, who comes from Lakemont,

Georgia. Gipson has experience working in Nashville dating back to 2016, but even before that, he gathered experience.

Growing up, Gipson credits church choir and traveling with his father’s bluegrass group as important influences in his own career while he looks to artists such as Keith Urban, John Mayer, Ricky Skaggs and Brooks & Dunn for musical inspiration.

The gates open at 6 p.m., and admission is \$40 plus

handling. VIP packages are available for \$150 and include a concert ticket, merchandise bundle, and special meet-and-greet with Corey Smith. Tickets may be purchased at www.georgiamountainfairground.com or thundertix.com/events/222162.

Keep an eye out on the Fairgrounds for other Music Hall concerts like Aaron Lewis’ visit as part of The American Patriot Tour on March 2 and The Frontmen performing March 23.

To celebrate spring, the Rhododendron Festival will be in full bloom by April 12, and the Georgia Mountain Fair Spring Yard Sale kicks off April 19.

For more information on upcoming events, visit <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/>.



Corey Smith

Night to Shine...from Page 1A

College gathered on either side of the streets, occasionally moving positions when the traffic was safe to cheer on the kings and queens riding in buses.

With a flashing drone flying overhead and some residents shaking cowbells, the atmosphere was just as befitting of a party outside as it was inside.

Upon returning to the church, attendees enjoyed dancing to – and singing – upbeat songs like Whitney Houston’s “I Want to Dance With Somebody” and Village People’s “Y.M.C.A.,” but couples embraced each other and swayed for Elvis Presley’s “Unchained Melody.”

Mimi Myers celebrated her 21st birthday that night and was having tons of fun just hanging out with her buddy, Samantha Godwin. After the caregivers made their way to the upper track above the church’s gym, Myers waved to her family and made hearts with her hands.

Just a few tables away, Sydney Davenport was sitting with her buddy, Layne Colwell. The pair watched as some 92 kings and queens – including Davenport herself – received crowns, and the same number of caregivers cheered from around them during the magical moment when blue and silver balloons were later released atop the dancing royalty.

While Tabitha Richardson may have attended the Night to Shine as part of the Cherokee and Clay County Chapter of The Arc – a



Samantha Godwin and Mimi Myers were dressed to the nines during the Night to Shine event at FUMC on Feb. 9. Happy Birthday to Mimi!
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

nonprofit that advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities – the event means a lot to her on a personal level.

“(Volunteers and organizers) are very compassionate to the things that we have to do on a daily basis,” said Richardson, adding that “they acknowledge that we work hard.”

Richardson raised a non-verbal son with autism and is very passionate in her belief that all people should be celebrated and lifted up as part of the community.

“A lot of times, people with disabilities are not able to get out and do stuff, so this is a good thing. It really is,” Richardson said. “(The Night

to Shine) is all about them.”

And the guests themselves were reminded of that one last time on their way out around 9 p.m., as local Scouts handed them “goody bags” that included a commemorative T-shirt. As they filed out, the Terrys were quick to ask them if they had a good time.

The overwhelming response was yes, and that they would return next year.

Night to Shine is sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation. It was created in 2015 as a worldwide prom for people with special needs, ages 14 and older. This year, Night to Shine was hosted by 725 churches across the U.S. and in 56 countries around the world, on six continents.

Station 13 Response...from Page 1A



Union County Fire was able to shave 10 minutes off its response time for this fire with the recent opening of Station 13. In the firefighting world, that’s a lifetime.
Photo/Submitted

have been the case had the fire occurred before the new station opened last fall.

“Modern homes now are full of a lot of materials that are hydrocarbon based, and so they burn much faster, much hotter,” Chief Dyer said. “Ten minutes can make a huge difference in whether you can save a house or a life.”

“Traditional-style (home furnishings) were made out of cotton and natural fibers, and it took a while for them to burn, but (modern materials) burn really quickly.

“So, them being able to get on the scene quickly, size it up, and put water on what fire they could see and find at the time probably saved the rest of the house, because they cut the fire off exactly where it was when they got there.”

The fire is believed to have started in the garage area, though the cause – thought to be accidental in nature – had not been determined by press time.

And while fire emergency response times in the north end of the county have gotten a tremendous boost, so have response times for other emergencies where

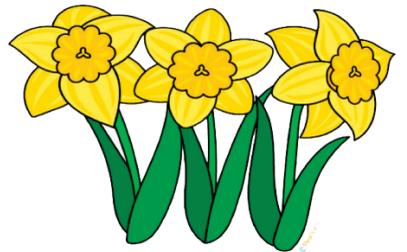
mere minutes can mean the difference between life and death.

“We’ve had several medical calls in which Station 13 has been extremely instrumental in making a time-saving difference of

approximately nine minutes before the arrival of EMS,” Dyer said.

Fire Station No. 13 is located at 40 Harbor Boulevard off Murphy Highway/US 129 North, at the entrance to Hidden Harbor subdivision.

Daffodil Days 2024 Flower Of Hope Project



Surprise a friend, family member, or “adopt” a group with a beautiful bouquet of 10 fresh cut daffodils for a \$5 donation to the American Cancer Society.

Contact Email: Wendy Holden at snickers13@windstream.net; 706-781-4166. Flowers will be ready for pick up 11 AM – 3 PM, Monday, March 18, 2024 at Allegheny Lodge #114 on Rogers Street Behind Cabin Coffee. Look for signs and balloons. Deadline is February 29, 2024.

Proceeds support cancer research, education, patient services and advocacy programs of ACS.

Quilt of Valor awarded to Navy Veteran Stan Lincoln

Appalachian Hospice of Blairsville was privileged to deliver a long-overdue honor to Vietnam Naval veteran, Stanley "Stan" Lincoln, by awarding him a Quilt of Valor on January 29, 2024, at his Blairsville home. He was surrounded by his family, including his 15-year old grandson.

While in the Navy and the Naval Reserve, Stanley served as a System OMD Technician and Ordnance Mechanic from June 1969 through June 1975. He was awarded the National Defense Service Medal, a Meritorious Unit Commendation, and a Good Conduct Medal for his honorable service.

The beautiful quilt was made with love by the quilters in the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild, which is one of hundreds of quilting groups in the United States that make patriotic quilts for veterans who have been "touched by war" as they defended our country here and abroad.

The Quilts of Valor Foundation (www.qovf.com) was founded in 2003 by Catherine Roberts to honor men and women serving in all branches of the military. This non-profit foundation is comprised of thousands of quilters in all 50 states and overseas



Navy Veteran Stan Lincoln and his wife

who sew pieces of red, white, blue, and gold fabrics together with thread, love and prayers to honor our "Heroes". For more information about nominating a veteran to receive a QOV, please go to this web-

site: www.mistymountain-quiltguild.org/quilts-of-valor

QOV, Appalachian Hospice and our nation thank Mr. Lincoln for his service and all he did to defend our country and our freedom. NFeb14 Z19/CA

Evening with STARS...from Page 1A



L-R: Union County High School STAR Teacher Jared Kelley and STAR Student Eli Decker, with Woody Gap High School STAR Teacher Jason Serrano and STAR Student Aidan Webb.
Photo by Daysha Pandolph

middle school.

"He was always smiling and never came into the classroom in a bad mood; you could genuinely tell he loved his job."

On top of making a lasting impression on Decker's educational journey, that teacher also helped show him the value of community service by serving as director of the Canal Lake Bible Camp.

"Whether it be in school or in the community, his impact on those around him is nothing short of fantastic," Decker said. "The teacher that stood out is my selection for STAR Teacher, Mr. (Jared) Kelley."

Kelley has been a teacher at Union County for 10 years, beginning as a middle school paraprofessional then working his way up to teach environmental science, physical science, biology, chemistry and AP Physics at the high school.

He met Decker in a freshman physics class and taught him once more last semester in AP Physics.

The first-time STAR teacher felt that Decker could have easily used the pandemic setback as an excuse, but "instead, he decided to work harder and make sure he got the education that would help him in the future."

"He is also very personable," Kelley said. "He is a leader in the classroom, on the soccer field and (in the community)."

After high school, Decker aims to attend the Georgia Institute of Technology to major in either aerospace or mechanical engineering.

Senior Aidan Webb earned the STAR Student honor at Woody Gap. While excelling academically, Webb has also displayed more extracurricular engagement than most through participation in basketball, tennis, cross country and band.

"The recognition I am receiving tonight is not just a reflection of my efforts, but also of the support and guidance that I have received from the people around me," Webb said. "This award means so much more to me than just a recognition of hard work; it serves as a reminder of the value of hard work and the importance of never giving up on our goals."

Attaining the award cost Webb many late nights studying for exams and courses, but also propelled him to overcome challenges and push himself to strive for more. This became especially relevant in the unique learning environment

of Woody Gap.

"Most of our classes are online," Webb said. "We've only just started having some classes in person again this year."

For that reason, students of all different grade levels and courses are often housed in a single classroom – ultimately landing Webb in Mr. Jason Serrano's class two years ago. Serrano did not officially teach Webb, but his peripheral educational influence impacted the student.

Webb credits Serrano for teaching him that "with hard work, dedication and gratitude, there is no limit to what we can achieve."

Serrano is not only a novice to the STAR Teacher program, but is also rather new to teaching. He has worked two years as a social studies teacher, both at Woody Gap. Despite his lack of experience, the young teacher has already greatly influenced a young life.

"I am proud that I was able to cultivate an environment in which (Webb) was able to keep his focus and get his work done with excellence," Serrano said. "(It) made the work that I do feel worthwhile when he told me that he feels he has learned so much just from sitting in my classroom and listening in to what we are working on."

"(This) award gives me something tangible to justify the work that I do day in and day out."

Serrano gave thanks to the custodians, bus drivers, maintenance staff, paraprofessionals, nurses, office staff and others for helping create a positive learning environment for the Suches youth.

A District STAR Student is selected each year, with that honor going to UCHS senior Eli Decker as Georgia Region 2 Representative for the district presentation that will be held March 11 at the University of North Georgia, Dahlonega campus.

From there, Decker will have an opportunity to progress to the state level as a representative for the Union County School District.

UCHS also honored several other exceptional students that evening.

Senior Ava Sharp received the Community Star Award for her charitable efforts bringing support and awareness to Type 1 diabetic students with a schoolwide initiative that collected over \$2,400 in supplies and visited students to provide counseling to young

diabetics and their peers.

Senior Natalie Payne served as a voice for her fellow classmates through her role as the Executive Student Council President. For her four years of service on the council, Payne received the North Star Award.

Captain of the basketball team, member of the all-region basketball team and 2022 soccer region player of the year, Lara Turner was selected by all UCHS coaches to receive the All Star Panther Award on Thursday.

Other outstanding students included Caidan Tanner and Dixie Lee, who received Shining Star Awards.

Tanner accepted the honor for Union County as the region player of the year, football team captain and the first quarterback in school history to win back-to-back playoff games.

Lee accepted the honor for Woody Gap as the creator of the Woody Gap Dispatch, an extensive school newspaper.

The final award was meant to show each student a real-world example of the value of hard work and persistence.

Caleb Gessmann received the Alumni Pacesetter Award for exemplifying Union County Schools' mission to generate graduates who will find success in their careers.

Gessmann attended Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University for a bachelor's degree in aeronautical science and a master's in business administration.

After college, he became the 13th youngest pilot in the history of Delta Airlines and is currently the first officer of Boeing 757 and 767 vessels with over 3,700 hours of flight time spanning 30 countries.

Gessmann, who has been featured in numerous aviation magazines and worked for many different companies, left the class of 2024 seniors with a few words of advice: invest in yourself, seek mentorship, don't be afraid to change your path and have fun.

Several local businesses offered scholarship money at the banquet. The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, who also serves as the event sponsor for the Chamber of Commerce Shoot for the STARS Golf Tournament, wrote a \$3,500 check to Union County Schools.

SouthState bank offered \$2,000 in scholarship money, and Granddaddy Mimm's presented a generous sum to North Georgia Technical College.