

# Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

www.townscountyherald.net

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1928

75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 94 Number 12

Wednesday, January 18, 2023

## McConnell named 2023 STAR Student at TCHS

By Jeremy Foster  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Congratulations to Towns County High School Senior Will McConnell for being named 2023 STAR Student.

McConnell has earned the prestigious title by obtaining the highest score among his classmates on a single test date for the SAT while being at the top of his class based on GPA.

The Class of 2023 graduate said he is grateful for the honor and for being encouraged to strive for his best academically.

"I want to thank my parents Richard and Stephanie," he said. "They've pushed me to take as many hard classes as I can and work myself to a point where I could achieve

that SAT score and my status in the Top 10% of our class."

Indeed, McConnell's family takes education seriously, as his mother Stephanie serves as chairperson of the Towns County Board of Education.

He prepared for his top score by taking multiple rounds of Preliminary-SAT and SAT tests, and even his extracurricular activities have been geared toward academics, with membership in the Robotics Club and Academic Team at Towns County High.

Following graduation in May, McConnell will attend Georgia Tech in the fall to work toward a degree in computer science.

"The robotics (at Towns County) got me involved with computer programming and

the engineering side of things, so that's where my interest started and something I've wanted to pursue as a career and academic interest, too," McConnell said.

Of course, for every STAR Student, there's a STAR Teacher. After all, STAR stands for Student Teacher Achievement Recognition, and students are tasked with naming an educator who has "made the most significant contribution to the STAR Student's scholastic development."

For McConnell, that teacher is Ken Camp, whom he selected to serve as his STAR Teacher after benefiting from his instruction in four classes throughout high school.

"He's always been a big supporter who pushes me," See 2023 STARS, Page 6A



Julie Payne of the Towns County Lions Club with 2023 STAR Student Will McConnell and STAR Teacher Ken Camp at TCHS last week. As the local STAR Program sponsor, the Lions Club will officially honor the pair in February. Photo by Jeremy Foster

## Roy Perren to retire at end of 2022-23 school year

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

After 31 years in education, including 19 at Towns County Schools, Elvis is leaving the building.

The retirement of Towns County High School Principal Roy Perren was announced in the Dec. 9 School Board meeting, effective at the end of the 2022-2023 school year.

It was a bittersweet occasion for all in attendance, as everyone was sad to hear the news but happy for the departing educator, who stayed on one year longer than full retirement eligibility.

"I love these kids and am so proud of their achievements while they're in school and what they go on to become after they graduate," Perren said, looking back over this long career. "A lot of great people who are contributing not only to society in our area but throughout the nation have come out of this little school."

Added Perren, "We've got kids who are entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, college professors, airplane pilots — just a whole gamut of success comes out of this school. And schoolteachers, there are probably seven or eight on staff that I was their principal. I'm just blessed to have been able to be part of that."

As for why he has finally



Roy Perren  
TCHS Principal

decided to retire, Perren said, "If I waited for a class that I didn't like, I would never retire; it's just time. I'm 66, and there are things that I want to do, and I think it's time to pass the torch, so to speak."

Known for a lively Elvis Presley impersonation and soulful gospel singing, Perren will focus on his live music bookings once retired while also doing home improvements, horse-riding and traveling with wife Kim, spending time with family, and maintaining his Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board role.

He plans to stay active in the community — the Villa Rica native considers Hiawassee his adopted hometown — and attend school functions

moving forward, and he might even return to Towns County Schools as a substitute teacher one day, as he noted that there always seems to be a shortage of subs.

"This was a tough decision, I tell you what," Perren said. "I love what I do, love working here and love Towns County."

"A bunch of the kids in (the current) junior class wrote me letters asking me to stay another year, and that really was tempting, but I just know in my heart that it's time."

Perren started his education career in the early 1990s at Paulding County Schools, beginning as a middle school English and math teacher before transitioning to administration. He spent 12 years at Paulding before applying for and being hired as TCHS principal in 2003.

He has worn multiple hats at Towns, including an initial 9-year stint as high school principal followed by six years as Federal Programs Director and Facilities Director, during which time he secured \$5.8 million in modernization grant monies to completely renovate the High School/Middle School building, to include crucial technology updates.

Additionally, he served for six years as the Union site administrator of Mountain Education Charter High School, See Perren Retiring, Page 6A

## Blairsville man mourned after Young Harris crash

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Facebook lit up with prayers over the weekend for the family of Orlando Lara Noyola, a 27-year-old Blairsville man who died in a single-vehicle crash in Young Harris early Sunday morning.

Noyola graduated Class of 2014 at Union County High School, where he wrestled and played in the Panther Band. His friends described him on social media as "a beautiful, kind soul who lived for his family and faith" and "a reliable, honest and great friend."

He worked at Georgia Mountains Health of Blue Ridge, which also called for prayers Sunday, remarking that his "work family is grieving at the loss of a caring, loving, compassionate co-worker" who will be missed "by all who he touched, and he touched many."



Orlando Lara

Georgia Mountains Health honored Noyola as "Employee of the Year" in December, about a week after his birthday.

The fatal accident occurred the morning of Jan. 15 as Noyola was heading westbound along an area of US 76 that is well known for wrecks, according to the Towns County

Coroner's Office, in a part of the county historically known as "Jacksonville."

"The young man was traveling toward Blairsville from the Hiawassee direction where he lost control in the curve at Gibby's Furniture. Speed was a factor," said Deputy Coroner Sarah McClure, who responded to the scene.

Towns County Coroner Tamela Cooper said her office has worked several fatal accidents in that exact spot over the years, including one of her very first coroner cases involving a motorcycle death in 2013.

"And there have been numerous serious accidents in that location as well," Cooper said. "The curve between Gibby's Furniture and the old fire house is part of the project that the Georgia Department of Transportation will be straightening and widening, and we

See Orlando Lara, Page 6A

## Nat'l Tech Honor Society inducts 25 TCHS students

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Twenty-five Towns County High School students were recently inducted into the National Technical Honor Society.

The National Technical Honor Society is an educational honor organization that exists to honor, recognize and empower students in Career & Technical Education.

As the honor society for Career & Technical Education, NTHS serves over 100,000 active members annually in both high school and college chap-

ters across the country.

Since its founding in 1984, nearly one million students have become NTHS alumni.

NTHS honors the achievements of top CTE students, provides close to \$300,000 in scholarships annually, and strives to help connect education and industry to build a highly skilled workforce.

Members must be nominated by their CTE teacher, be a high school junior or senior in good standing, have a high academic overall GPA, successfully completed at least one CTE pathway and be an active leader

in their pathway Career, Technical Student Organization.

2023 NTHS inductees are Haley Merritt, Grace Giles, Morgan Pierson, Tabitha Barnes, Caleb Berrong, Kade McConnell, Nick Pylrik, Zane Floyd, Layne Rouse, Zion Calhoun, Jay Grimsley, Dhriti Patel, Haley Berrong, Anessa Speck, Emma Lalllement, Eden Hill, Sarah Shook, Laura Mauldin, Jayden Taylor, Jacey Wood, Maycee Garrison, Eli Philips, Brooke Murrell, Will McConnell and Andrew Wells.

Congratulations on this great achievement!



National Technical Honor Society 2023 Inductees from Towns County High School

## Sheriff's Office continues pursuit of drug suspects

News Special  
Towns County Herald

On Friday, Jan. 6, Towns County Sheriff's Office Investigators began pursuing a Chevrolet Cruze that had traveled down North Carolina Highway 69 into Georgia.

Having just crossed the state line, the vehicle abruptly turned around and fled back into North Carolina with Towns County Investigators in pursuit.

The investigators had "probable cause" to believe illegal drugs were within the vehicle and were fully justified in pursuing and stopping

the car in North Carolina, said Clay County NC Sheriff Mark Buchanan.

"A few minutes after this vehicle was stopped, about a mile into North Carolina, Clay County Officers arrived on scene," Buchanan said. "A search of this Chevrolet Cruze yielded approximately 23 grams of suspected methamphetamine."

Resulting from the seizure of the suspected methamphetamine, three individuals were arrested and taken to the Clay County Detention Center: Patrick James Sizemore, 26, of Murphy, NC; Jonathan Dewayne Newton, 29, of Marble,



Ronny Lynn Sanders

NC; and Lilyaunna Helen-Kiff Hall, 22, of Murphy. See TCSO Drug Pursuit, Page 6A

## Historical Society honors past leadership, talks bridges

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Towns County Historical Society members once more bridged the gap between past and present with their first meeting of the year on Jan. 9, which included special recognition of past officers Frances Shook and Sandra Green for their invaluable contributions to the organization.

December's meeting saw the election of 2023 officers, which ushered in some new leadership: Tyler Osborn as president; Jerry Taylor as Vice President again; Brandy Cox as Secretary; Patti Wilson as Treasurer; and Mary Ann Miller continuing as Membership Secretary.

Osborn welcomed Shook and Green to the front of the room in the temporary



Sandra Green is "Sheriff of the Old Rock Jail."

Photo/Facebook

meeting place of the Civic Center last week, presenting them with special gifts in the

form of lifetime memberships to the Historical Society and a couple of gorgeous potted bouquets.

"From time to time, the Historical Society has given out lifetime memberships to people in our community who have served the Historical Society greatly," Osborn said. "And so, we decided that Frances and Sandra are more than due for that award."

But Green, the outgoing society president, was in for another gift, courtesy of Taylor and Miller especially. To the amusement of the audience, she was named "Sheriff of the Old Rock Jail," which currently stands as a museum instead of a slammer.

Green's new title came with a gift bag that contained a cowboy hat and a shiny golden sheriff's badge, which See Historical Society, Page 6A

2 Sections 12 Pages  
Lake Levels  
Blue Ridge 1,668.71  
Chatuge 1,917.76  
Nottely 1,761.40

Inside  
Arrests 2A  
Chamber 5A  
Church 3B  
Classifieds 5B  
Opinion 4A  
Legals 5B  
Obits 4B  
Sports 2B

**SPORTS**  
BASKETBALL  
Tues. 1/17 vs. Greene Co. 6 PM  
Sat. 1/21 vs. Lake Oconee 5 PM

Commissioner  
Bradshaw  
Movers & Shakers  
Jan 20th  
See page 2A

Civic  
Association  
Meeting  
Jan 19  
See page 2A

Cervical  
Cancer  
Awareness  
Month  
See page 3A

# TCSO Drug Pursuit...from Page 1A

All three suspects were charged in Clay County with felony possession of methamphetamine and felony maintaining a vehicle for the use, storage or sale of a controlled substance. For their "dancing" back and forth across the state line,

the suspects were also charged in Towns County with felony possession of methamphetamine, felony possession of meth with intent to sell or distribute, and misdemeanor possession of drug-related objects, Buchanan said.

"The Clay County Sheriff's Office is grateful for the dedicated and professional work by the Towns County Investigators in initiating this vehicle stop that resulted in these serious drug violations," Buchanan said. "As a warning to those who would try to use our state lines to traffic drugs," he continued, "they should know that the Towns County Sheriff's Office and Clay County Sheriff's Office are solid partners in the war against the drugs that plague our communities."

In a separate incident on Thursday, Jan. 12, Towns County Sheriff's Drug Investigators, Uniform Patrol and K-9 units initiated a traffic stop on Hwy 17 and Hwy 69.

The vehicle was searched and Schedule I Mushrooms, drug-related objects and three handguns were confiscated.

Ronny Lynn Sanders, 32, of Murphy, was arrested and charged with possession of a controlled substance, possession of firearm by convicted felon, possession of firearm/knife during commission of a crime, possession and use of drug-related objects, and driving too fast for conditions.

All persons are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

# Perren Retiring...from Page 1A



The Towns County Board of Education accepted Perren's retirement resignation on Jan. 9. (L-R) Sara Rogers, Brandon Grimsley, Stephanie McConnell, Superintendent Darren Berrong, Caroleen Woods and David Phillips. Last week's meeting was Phillips' first as a School Board member after being elected in 2022. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

though he gave up that post four years ago to again lead Towns County High in 2019.

In his first year back at TCHS, the returning principal oversaw the tremendous challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Perren said learning losses among many students who opted to continue online classes after the 2019-20 school year remain a challenge to this day, mirroring the national landscape.

A bright spot in the pandemic, when schools across the country completely canceled their Class of 2020 commencement exercises, Towns County welcomed graduates back for a midsummer graduation outdoors on the football field, and graduation ceremonies have taken place there ever since.

Perren has many highlights over his long career, including getting the modernization grants that he hopes will take the 40-plus year-old

building another 40 years into the future.

He also cherishes the 2008-2009 school year when Towns County High received the Governor's Cup for greatest increase in SAT scores among all Class A schools, presented by then-Gov. Sonny Perdue himself. And that was the same year the Indians were chosen as the Fox 5 Atlanta Team of the Week.

His guiding philosophy has always been to put students first, and he has confidence that the School Board will hire a successor who will carry on that tradition.

The job posting went live last week after the School Board accepted Perren's retirement resignation, and Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong looks forward to interviewing the candidates who apply both internally and externally, with a recommendation hopefully in February.

"This is a very difficult

one for me," Berrong said of Perren's retirement; a former math teacher, Berrong got his start in administration as assistant principal under Perren. "He's been a tremendous asset to our school.

"Everything you see in our facilities is a big part because of him ... He's been a fantastic mentor to me; anything that I've been successful with in this school I can tie directly back to him either through his mentorship or friendship.

"It's sad to see him go, but it's bittersweet, because I want him to go and enjoy his retirement. (Again), he's been a great asset for Towns County Schools, and we'll miss him."

Perren said the feeling was mutual, noting how much he has appreciated Berrong and his support over the years. And while he will certainly miss all the teachers, staff and students, Perren said he does not plan to be a stranger at Towns County Schools in the years ahead.

# 2023 STARS...from Page 1A

McConnell said.

For Camp, who teaches science, coaches the Academic Team and is also an athletic coach at Towns County High, being chosen by McConnell is "a great honor."

"There's not a lot of professions where you immediately get to see the impact of what you've done, and I'm proud of Will, and it will be interesting to see as he goes into adulthood," Camp said. "It's kind of like planting a seed and watching a big tree grow.

"To me, the measure of

high school success is not all these accolades when (students are) here - it's where are they five years from now and what we set them up to do and the kind of adults they become.

"It's common to think that, for these kids, it all just comes naturally and it's easy, and it couldn't be further from the truth, because he works his butt off. His work ethic matches his IQ, and that's something I've always respected; he has not wasted a minute he's been here.

"He's done a great job of using the talent that he has,

and he is going to continue to do that. He works all the time and is always learning something and trying to better himself and the people around him, so it's - why not the next Elon Musk?"

Helping to honor the STAR Student and Teacher locally will be the Towns County Lions Club, which sponsors the STAR Program for the PAGE Foundation. The Lions will host a celebratory dinner for the pair on Tuesday, Feb. 28, at 6 p.m. at Daniel's Steakhouse in Hiwassee.

# Historical Society...from Page 1A

she donned for a couple of celebratory photos before retreating back to her seat along with Shook - but not before a few parting words.

"Thank you," Green said, referring to her involvement as the former president of the Historical Society as a "labor of love." She has confidence in Osborn's ability to take up the mantle as the new leader.

The presentation of the night was "The Bridges of Towns County & Other Memorials," although the topic was shortened to cover just the bridges, as, in Osborn's words, "We're (going to) kind of rush through, as we know there's a very important game tonight (with UGA vs TCU)."

Taylor took to the podium to first acknowledge an important - and recent - update to Towns County's memorials. New gravestones were placed at the Old Burch Cemetery for 17 of the 30 plots, giving a name to those who formerly only had stones to mark their final resting grounds.

The gravestones were credited as one of Green's many projects, and Taylor recognized the workers who volunteered their time to erect the markers, including Green herself, Gordy Jones, Jesse J. Cook and Jeff King.

Moving on to his presentation, Taylor highlighted the forgotten history behind many of the county's bridges. Credit was given to the workers identified from black and white photos of the (mostly) stern-faced men who built them.

With his trademark sense of humor, Taylor made the presentation with ease, interacting with the audience by asking questions or pointing out descendants of prominent historical figures.

"I always believed substitute teachers should be summoned the same way," Taylor - himself a former educator - joked after reviewing a slide of an old letter that his grandfather received in the early 20th century that called for his help

in building a bridge.

Unfortunately, some situations were unable to be handled with humor, like the story of Abe Hooper, who was a former member of Hiwassee's African American community. Taylor began Hooper's story by pointing him out among a group of workers in an old photo.

A descendant of slaves, Hooper worked alongside other residents of Hiwassee building bridges among other projects, until he left the community for nearby Hayesville, North Carolina.

"I visited some of Abe Hooper's descendants at Hayesville, and I was always curious why they left," Taylor began, saying that, initially, the reasoning was to "make a living" finding cheap labor, but that wasn't the full reason.

Frank Lloyd, Hooper's grandson, informed Taylor of the segregated Ebenezer School that stood alongside the likewise segregated Ebenezer Church and Cemetery.

One year, an extraordinary storm threatened Hiwassee with flooding, and the teacher at Ebenezer School released the students early so they could get home safely before the river swelled out of its banks.

Hooper's daughter fell from the foot-log over that river that would have otherwise led her to safety. Her body was recovered days later at what is now known as the Dyer Bridge,

and Hooper "could not stand to live in a place with such sad memories, so he packed up and went to Hayesville where the Herberts provided land (for his family to live and work on)."

Dyer Bridge was covered by Taylor during the presentation along with the well-known Berrong Bridge, which marks the historical location where generations of Berrongs have made their home.

"The first (Berrong) that came to Towns County was Henry," Taylor said, proceeding to tell how, in the 1880 census, people were asked about the birthplace of their father.

As it turned out, Henry Berrong's children had varying answers regarding his origin. One believed it was France, another Spain, while yet another said Germany, and one claimed Holland.

"So, I guess he came from Europe somewhere," concluded Taylor regarding the history of Towns County's storied Berrong family.

The actual consensus? "They generally say France," claimed Taylor with a chuckle that echoed through the audience.

Because the meeting was cut short for the College Football Championship, it was agreed that the "Other Memorials" aspect of the presentation would be covered in February's meeting, which will be held as usual at the Towns County Civic Center on the second Monday at 6 p.m.

# Orlando Lara...from Page 1A

believe that will make a hard-to-navigate stretch safer.

"We will be in prayer for the family of this young man over the coming weeks. Life is fragile and precious, and my heart aches for a mother who lost her son and his extended family.

"As always, all departments who worked the scene were incredibly helpful, kind and compassionate. That's one thing that never fails; our com-

munity has men and women with the biggest hearts helping individuals on every call.

"From the dispatchers who take that initial call for help, the deputies, state patrol, fire and rescue and the wrecker service gentlemen - everyone's hearts are a little heavier when a life is lost in tragedy."

Services for Noyola, who went by Orlando Lara, will be Jan. 19 at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church.