

Towns County Herald

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75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 94 Number 14

Wednesday, February 1, 2023

Top of Georgia kicks off student speech training

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Organizers of the Annual Top of Georgia Speaking Contest held their first of six speech development training sessions for students at the Towns County Senior Center on Jan. 19, focusing on the aspects of constructing a speech.

This year, the number of entrants has grown nicely, with 24 students participating from various grades and area schools for a chance to win up to \$400 in cash prizes.

The students are Noah Lynch, Georgia Cyber Academy, eighth grade; Jolie Schmitt, Union County High, ninth grade; Sophia Gobin, Union County Middle, eighth grade; Olivia Cramer, Hayesville High, 12th grade; AJ Edwards, Towns County High, 12th grade;

Madilyn Walls, Towns County Middle, seventh grade; Abby Pate, Towns County High, 12th grade; Loftin Turpin, Towns County High, 10th grade; Caleb Sheffield,



2023 Top of Georgia Speaking Contest student participants and mentors.

Photo by Jeremy Foster

Union County High, ninth grade; Cooper Church, Home School, seventh grade;

McKenzie Bourbeau, Union County Middle, eighth grade; Katelyn Walls, Towns County Middle, eighth grade;

Will Walls, Towns County Middle, seventh grade; Madilyn Walls, Towns County Middle, seventh grade; Sarah Shook, Towns County High, 12th grade;

Joash Kay, Union

County Middle, seventh grade; Joanna Kay, Union County Middle, eighth grade; Owen Devereaux-Liebros, Union County Middle, sixth grade; Nolan Evans, Towns County High, 11th grade; Hudson Ev-

ans, Towns County High, ninth grade;

Margaret Evans, Towns County Middle, sixth grade; Esther Kusch, RW Home School Academy, ninth grade; Lincoln Kusch, RW Home

School Academy, sixth grade; and Adalyn Collins, Union County Middle, eighth grade. Steven Harper is the Downtown Development Program Manager for Hiawassee. See Top of Georgia, Page 6A

Sheriff's Deputy OK after 'accidental discharge'

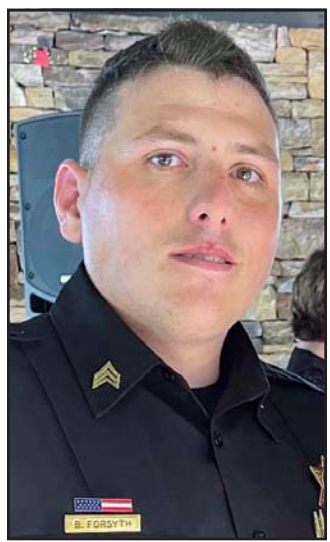
By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

A Towns County Sheriff's Deputy accidentally shot himself in the leg on Saturday, Jan. 28, requiring medical transport for injuries that were not life-threatening, according to the Sheriff's Office.

No one else was injured in the incident.

The "accidental discharge" occurred around 8 a.m. as Deputy Bryan Forsyth was inspecting his backup weapon, a revolver, while sitting in his patrol car outside of the Sheriff's Office and Jail.

Forsyth, who works part-time for Towns County Sheriff's Office and full-time for Clay County Sheriff's Office in North Carolina, had just come on duty when the firearm "accidentally discharged,



Bryan Forsyth
TCSO Deputy

striking him in the leg," TCSO Chief Deputy Gene Moss said. The Sheriff's Office was

still looking into the incident at press time, and the exact circumstances of the discharge were not available for publication. Also unknown were the extent of Forsyth's injuries and if/when he would be able to return to active duty.

Moss said Saturday that he was unaware of any policy violations that may have occurred as a result of the discharge, though the situation remains under review.

Describing Forsyth as "a super deputy and a great person," Moss said he did not foresee any forthcoming disciplinary action against him, as preliminary information points to the discharge as indeed being an accident.

"When he comes back, he'll get some remedial training for handling weapons," Moss said. "We do have train-

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Superior Court Clerk Dye announces FANS system

News Special
Towns County Herald

The Towns County Superior Court Clerk's Office, in conjunction with the Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority, is pleased to offer the Filing Activity Notification System, or FANS, providing Georgia citizens with tools to monitor activity regarding their property and records.

FANS is a free, voluntary, opt-in program that can be used to send electronic notifications of filing activity to individuals who create notifications in the system.

The consumer-friendly process notifies property owners any time filings are made related to their registered property, including filing activity related to personal property, liens and plat filings.

"With our Clerk of Superior Court partners, we are excited to roll out FANS," said John Earle, GSCCCA Executive Director. "We believe the Filing Activity Notification System gives property owners tools to monitor filing activity which could help prevent property fraud."

The notifications generated by this system are not guaranteed to be accurate or complete, and use of the system is subject to an acknowledgment of these conditions.

To get started, go to <https://fans.gsccca.org> and follow the prompts. Citizens can register with an email address or telephone number. After submitting a name, the user will receive an email and/or text notification whenever a filing related to that name is filed in the selected records. If you have any ques-



Cecil Dye
Superior Court Clerk

tions or concerns regarding FANS, please contact the Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority. See FANS System, Page 6A

Gunter talks appointment as House Judiciary Chair

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

ATLANTA – After winning re-election to the Georgia House District 8 seat in November, State Rep. Stan Gunter is honored to be starting his second term in office as chairman of the bipartisan House Judiciary Committee.

The appointment came by way of the Georgia House of Representatives' Committee on Assignments led by House Speaker Jon Burns of Newington in Southeast Georgia. Burns succeeded former Speaker David Ralston of Blue Ridge for the 2023-24 legislative session.

Ralston announced Nov. 4 that he would not seek nomination for another term as House Speaker due to health challenges from which he passed away on Nov. 16.

Gunter, who lives in Blairsville and represents Union, Towns and parts of White counties, was vice chair of the House Judiciary Committee in his first term, and

his quick rise to chairmanship allows for greater legislative representation for North Georgia following Ralston's passing.

"The people of our area, the folks that I represent, will definitely have a voice down here (at the Georgia State Capitol) with the type of legislation that runs through this committee," Gunter said. "It also gives me a more respected voice in the (Georgia) Senate as well."

"So, when I go over there to shepherd a bill through, it'll get attention when I'm there talking about it," he said, noting that his relationship with Senate Majority Leader Steve Gooch, whose district overlaps with some of his own, will also benefit North Georgia residents.

It is unusual for a representative to make chair of a committee in just his or her third year in office, however, the Committee on Assignments considered Gunter's past judicial experiences as District Attorney and Superior



Stan Gunter
State Representative

Court Judge in the Enotah Judicial Circuit.

On the Judiciary Committee, Gunter will be overseeing "a wide variety of measures relating to law, courts and judges, and constitutional amendments." Furthermore, any legislation "that carries a possibility for civil penalties can be referred to the Judiciary Committee."

Gunter likened his role

See Gunter Appointment, Page 6A

Chamber readies launch of 'Ambassadors Program'

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer



YOUNG HARRIS – On Feb. 23 at 1 p.m., the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce will be hosting a meeting at the Welcome Center to re-launch its volunteer-based outreach initiative among the business community.

The meeting will serve as a head start for a reworked program that was previously dedicated to expanding the chamber's reach and impact in the community as well as its support for local businesses.

Before the advent of COVID-19, the chamber had a recruit program that played an important role in – surprise, surprise – recruiting business-

es to join the chamber.

"We're just kind of bringing it back to give us a little more exposure as well as letting our members know we care about them," explained Chamber Membership Coordinator Mary Ann Miller, outlining the revival of what is now known as the Ambassadors Program.

The decision to restart the program is based on a need for socialization, which was hampered during pandemic-era "social distancing." After all, a community can't grow when its members isolate, just as residents have a harder time working together if they know nothing about each other.

Being neighborly is a boon for emotional wellbeing and stimulates development on an individual level, but for a more wide-scale impact, it also helps businesses to know about the Chamber of Commerce.

To facilitate this process, Chamber Ambassadors will be tasked with approaching business owners that are

not familiar with the chamber to introduce them to what the organization has to offer.

In so doing, ambassadors will learn about the expectations of potential member businesses and relay that information to the chamber to create an improved experience for all involved.

"Sometimes we don't know what (businesses) want us to do," Miller said. "We have our certain structure as far as a membership, but if there's something out there that they think we should be doing, maybe we can be doing that."

"So, I think there's just that need for a one-on-one contact for individuals (who) are part of businesses, too."

In short, everything boils down to starting up conversations and making connections, especially when it comes to county organizations and involvement with the chamber in an effort to better meet the needs of local businesses.

To this end, the Ambassadors will be

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BASKETBALL
Friday 2/3 vs.
Warren Co. 5PM
Sat. 2/4 @
Lake Oconee 6 PM

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The Towns County Herald Office is moving to the front of The Mall on Main. Starting next week, please find us out front at 518 N Main Street, Suite 3.



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Accidental Discharge...from Page 1A

ing for that, but sometimes, accidents happen.”

Moss has been in law enforcement for 43 years, having worked with multiple agencies over the decades. During his long career, he has seen

several accidental discharges – which usually do not result in injury – but this was a first for TCSO under Sheriff Ken Henderson’s administration.

“We take accidental discharges seriously, and we

do investigate them,” Moss said Saturday. “Gun safety is of the utmost importance to us or any agency. I don’t yet know all the details of what occurred, but it was an accidental discharge.”

FANS System...from Page 1A

ity customer support at 1-800-304-5174 or help@gsccca.org.

We hope you find this service to be beneficial as the Towns County Superior Court Clerk’s Office, under the leadership of longtime Superior Court Clerk Cecil Dye, continues to explore and imple-

ment new ways to improve services delivered to the citizens of Towns County.

The Georgia Superior Court Clerks’ Cooperative Authority was created by an act of the Georgia General Assembly in 1993.

GSCCCA’s purpose is to provide a cooperative for

the development, acquisition and distribution of record management systems, information, services, supplies and materials for Superior Court Clerks and Georgia’s citizens, while providing cost savings to local governments and the state of Georgia.

Gunter Appointment...from Page 1A

as committee chairman to “being a judge in court.”

“I run the meetings, keep things organized and under control (and decide what bills we hear),” Gunter said. “And I call for a vote when we have a bill in front of us and have heard all the testimony about it.”

The 2023 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly kicked off Monday, Jan. 9, and Gunter said the 40 nonconsecutive days of the session will be bringing a lot to the table, though it’s still too early to offer many specifics on what the Judiciary Committee will consider.

“I’ll be looking at the bills that are assigned to the committee,” Gunter said. “I have an attorney on staff that will be reading through the bills with me, and we’ll discuss what bills have merit and which ones don’t or shouldn’t go forward. Then, we’ll decide which ones to call for a hearing.”

And even though it’s early in the session, Gunter said one upcoming bill proposal he has heard about is from a Democratic member of the committee. The bill “requires judges to show their work,” and he is looking forward to learning more about it as the session continues.

“Judges would have to make a presentation of how many criminal cases are pending, how long they’ve been

pending, any motions that are pending in any case,” Gunter said. “Just a whole list of things so that people can see what that judge has been working on or what’s in that circuit.”

State court judges are primarily elected in Georgia, so requiring them to “show their work” would be a good thing in terms of transparency and accountability, Gunter said, to enable voters to hold judges accountable should they repeatedly fail to make meaningful progress on cases.

“For judges that are doing their job, it’s actually pretty easy to do,” Gunter said. “But those that are not getting the job done, it’ll expose what they’re doing.”

Added Gunter, “The author of the bill had the experience of having a motion pending for two years, and the judge suddenly assigned it to another court, which basically starts the clock over.”

Gunter sits on eight House committees total, including the Rules Committee that oversees what bills are debated on and ultimately voted out of the House each year, and the Appropriations Committee, on which he has been assigned to the important Public Safety Subcommittee.

His work on the subcommittee is to make sure that public safety initiatives around the state are appropriately funded, dealing with things

like budgetary concerns of the court system and state law enforcement.

Separately, the North Georgia News asked Gunter to address the fate of the Mountain Education Charter High School, which is facing potential closure at the end of this school year following unintended consequences of Senate Bill 153 that became law July 1, 2021.

MECHS is a “student-centered, self-paced, evening public high school” with 18 campuses across North Georgia, granting nontraditional students, including those from Union and Towns, the ability to earn an accredited High School Diploma.

Gunter is not directly involved in any legislative fixes, but after recent conversations with House colleagues who are working on the issue this session, he feels confident that “the school’s going to survive – it’s not going to shut down.”

“It may be funded a little differently, there may be some other changes to it, but it’s still going to be there and is still going to serve the people that it’s been serving in the past,” Gunter said. “What’s being worked out, I think it’s a good compromise.”

Added Gunter, “Not all the details are finalized yet, but there is an agreement in the works that I think will make everybody happy.”

Ambassadors...from Page 1A

sadors Program will also be a great way for the chamber to enhance its image with better branding, as “Ambassadors Program” sounds much more friendly than simply “Program,” the name of the former iteration.

With that in mind, the requirements to become an ambassador are straightforward: belief in the chamber’s mission and enjoyment in interacting with people. Moreover, there’s no need to become a member of the chamber to serve as an ambassador or vice versa.

“We don’t want people to think, ‘Oh, I’ve got to go out every day and do this,’” Miller added, stressing that, ideally, volunteers shouldn’t feel pressured into seeking out and talking to everyone on the street about potential business ventures and partnerships.

It really can be as simple as encountering somebody in the grocery store or passing a newcomer on the street. From there, the ambassador could introduce the gist of the chamber while also explaining what and where certain businesses, organizations and resources are in the county.

“Of course, I’m hoping that we’ll increase membership and just increase awareness of our chamber, what we do,” Miller said.

Because of what the position entails, there are no ma-

job time constraints and plenty of wiggle room to make different schedules work. Ambassadors need only volunteer about three or four hours a month, with attendance at half of all ribbon-cuttings and ambassador meetings.

An ambassador might be a retiree looking for something to do in their spare time or someone working several jobs. At the bare-bones level, being an ambassador is just being somebody who wants to see their community thrive – somebody who cares about Towns County.

But it can seem like a daunting task, staring down a growing community with hopes of making things even bigger and better. So, where does a newly fledged ambassador start?

Every volunteer will receive a folder with a physical copy of their pledge sheet to sign along with a handy information packet.

At the front of the packet is a personal statement of thanks from Chamber President Julie Payne, along with a list of benefits like increased networking opportunities with new and existing chamber members, taking part in potential media coverage at chamber events, and gaining an insider’s perspective as to what goes into helping local businesses flourish.

Other pages from the

packet offer clear definitions of what the chamber is and isn’t used for, what ambassadors can expect at meetings, and how ambassadors can make new connections and maintain current ones with courtesy calls to chamber members.

The Ambassadors Program will also provide volunteers with a special badge to wear at meetings and events, as well as business cards to hand out to potential new chamber members.

Additionally, ambassadors can expect to carry around application forms and membership packets to leave with prospective chamber members.

“Our big thing is people,” Miller said. “People sell people, you know? I mean, we can advertise all we want, and we can put stuff on a website (or) on Facebook and all, but I think it’s that one-on-one contact.”

After the first meeting on Feb. 23, special ambassador meetings will take place on the last Wednesday of every month at 1 p.m. in the Chamber Office.

For more information, call the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce at 706-896-4966, email lcchamberpres@gmail.com, visit www.golakechatuge.com, and/or swing by for a visit at 1411 Jack Dayton Circle in Young Harris.

TCSO confiscates more fentanyl-laced meth, cocaine

News Special
Towns County Herald

A Towns County Sheriff’s Deputy made a traffic stop on the evening of Monday, Jan. 23, on US 76 at Friendship Road.

Probable cause was determined, and the driver consented to a search of the vehicle, which resulted in the confiscation of methamphetamine laced with fentanyl as well as cocaine; both field-tested positive.

Karen Cheryl Bryant, 56, of Morganton, was arrested and charged with felony possession of methamphetamine, felony possession of a controlled substance (cocaine), felony possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime, DUI – Drugs, possession and use of drug-related objects, and failure to maintain lane.

She is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.



Karen Cheryl Bryant



Drugs and paraphernalia seized by the Sheriff’s Office in the above arrest. Photo/Facebook

Top of Georgia...from Page 1A

and one of the new mentors in 2023.

“I first heard about (the contest) through the Movers & Shakers breakfast,” Harper said. “I go to those regularly, and I befriended (lead Top of Georgia organizer) Gerry Chotiner. He knows what my position is with the city and knows my background as an attorney, and he invited me.”

“I thought it was a wonderful idea. I’m a graduate of the school of moot court competitions and that kind of thing, and I’ve participated in all of that, so I think speech development skills are one of the most important things one can learn.

“We love the kids here and want to see them succeed. They’re not going to be kids their whole lives; they’re going to work and become leaders. In order to effectively lead, you

have to be able to effectively communicate, and if you don’t know how to effectively communicate, you’ll never get to that next level, and we want our kids at that next level.

“To me, that’s the essence of what this is all about. It’s the perfect time for these kids to learn these skills, and the earlier the better. It serves you so well later in life, and with this being my first year involved, I’m looking forward to seeing how it’s going to work myself and everyone learning together and about each other as well.

“The day you stop learning, you might as well hang it up.”

Union County eighth-grader Sophia Gobin is returning to the competition this year after winning her category in 2022.

“I’m excited to compete

again and be back at it because we always have such a great group of people to work with who are very supportive,” Gobin said. “My topic this year is still a work in progress, but I’m thinking about doing a court case that was super important and revolutionized things – maybe *Miranda v. Arizona*, but I’m still researching more.

“I am trying to compete just for the experience, and it also looks good on a college application, so that’s a plus. For now, I am thinking I want to be a nurse anesthetist in my future.”

The students will continue to train with mentors every Thursday in February to hone their skills and perfect their speeches on chosen topics before the official contest, the date of which will be announced later.