

Towns County Herald

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Wednesday, February 28, 2024

BOE reviews resignations, honors young scholars

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In their February regular meeting, the Towns County Board of Education reviewed the resignations of 10 staff members, educators and otherwise, who are stepping away from their positions.

According to Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong, the higher than usual number of resignations is a matter of difficult timing, as most of the departing personnel are leaving due to retirement; one is following a spouse's military relocation; and several are moving to care for family.

"Those jobs aren't easy

to replace," Berrong said, adding that he was "concerned" about the number of positions opening at once. He speculated that, due to the housing market and high cost of living, it'll be harder to draw in candidates.

"Instead of getting 10 to 15 applicants like you used to, you only get three or four," said Berrong after the meeting, clarifying that while he was sure they would be hearing from "good applicants," there wasn't a very wide pool to choose from.

That said, there's no concern about whether the positions will be filled; according to Berrong, there were already applications for each replace-

ment position.

School Finance Director Myra Underwood said that January saw Towns County Schools receive \$284,000 in sales tax receipts, up from last year.

Property tax collections for January came in at about \$3.7 million, down from last year's \$4.3 million, and \$81,000 for TAVT on vehicle sales came in during January compared to \$79,000 this time last year.

Two eighth-grade students who have shown exemplary dedication to grades and integrity were awarded the REACH Scholarship for use after high school graduation.

For two years now, Towns County has been offering the REACH Scholarship, which grants eligible students \$10,000 - \$2,500 per year, maximum - to help them attend any university, technical college or private post-secondary institution.

Tucker Wheeler and Maddie Walls were this year's recipients, and during the meeting, they signed a contract signifying their commitment to the goals of the program.

They must maintain at least a 2.5 GPA throughout high school; have good attendance and behavior; abstain from drugs and crime; meet with

See Board of Education, Page 7



Up and coming TCHS freshmen Tucker Wheeler and Maddie Walls showcased their commitment to education by signing for REACH Scholarships in the February School Board meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Local patriots remember fallen at Battle of Iwo Jima

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

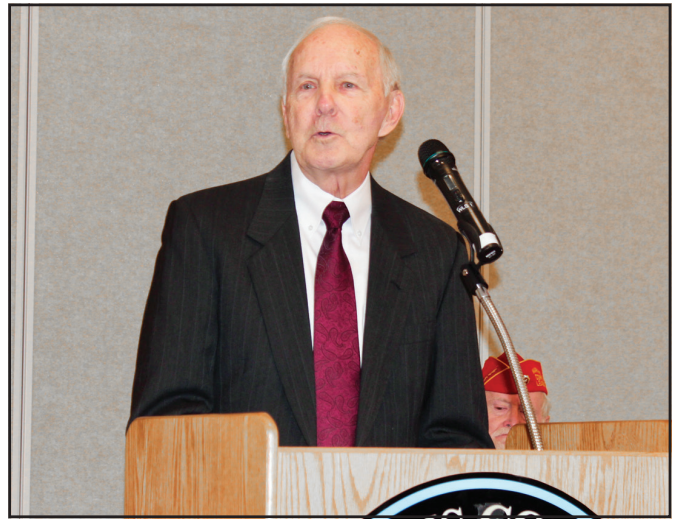
YOUNG HARRIS -

On Monday, Feb. 19, Marine Corps League Unicoi Detachment 783 hosted a commemorative service recognizing the brave souls lost in the fateful Battle of Iwo Jima.

The tribute marked the 79th anniversary of the battle, which commenced on Feb. 19, 1945, with patriotic guests gathering at 10 a.m. inside the Towns County Recreation & Conference Center at Foster Park.

Unicoi Detachment 783 Comdt. Alton "Doc" Coleman started the morning off, referring to the battle as "one of the most defining moments in both U.S. and Marine Corps history."

"Today, the Battle of Iwo Jima can be seen as a symbol



Retired Air Force Col. Roger Graham delivered patriotic marks as the keynote speaker of this year's Battle of Iwo Jima anniversary remembrance. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

to the world that when things were at their worst, Americans can be at their best," Coleman said. "Let's not forget the men

of Iwo Jima or the sacrifices that they made."

Retired Air Force Col. See Battle of Iwo Jima, Page 7

Parrot-feather, courthouse renovations discussed

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

During the routine signings of contracts and budget amendments at the regular county meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 20, Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw gave updates on a few county projects, including the parrot-feather infestation.

The invasive weed growing in Lake Chatuge threatens the community's welfare by reducing both the tourism appeal and the functionality of the lake. There are several treatment options available, but they all range from \$235,000-\$400,000.

And while the Commissioner's Office has contributed \$100,000 in hotel-motel taxes to deal with the problem, legally, the county has been unable to designate property tax rev-



Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw had nothing but good news to share about the parrot-feather issue and courthouse renovation progress in his regular county meeting last week. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

enues toward the project and in donations. With assistance from the large to make up the difference See County Meeting, Page 9

Students prepare for speech contest with cash prizes

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS -

A group of 15 eager students from Union and Towns County middle and high schools, along with one homeschool participant, gathered at the Young Harris College Goolsby Center last Thursday, Feb. 22, for the final session of a six-week public-speaking course.

Throughout those weeks, mentors and instructors have helped the young orators refine their speaking skills and construct a speech on a topic of their choosing for the annual Top of Georgia Speaking Contest.

Mentors Jeff Langley, Gerry Chotiner, Marsha Hyer, Madison Urquiola, Steven

Harper, Kathy Merritt, Mike Merritt, Betsy Young, Helen Seymore, Jeff Pierot, Cathy Andrews and Roy Perren come from various educational backgrounds.

From teachers to principals, attorneys, Air Force veterans, law enforcement officers and more, these mentors have been huge assets in guiding the students to success.

This year, Joanna Kay, Caleb Sheffield, Sophia Gobin, McKenzie Bourbeau, Erin Beggs and Adalyn Collins are representing Union County High School in the course and contest.

Four Union County Middle Schoolers - Josiah Kay, Eli Hancock, Grace Lacy and Ella Chandler - are also participat-

See Speech Contest, Page 9



Union and Towns County students will participate in the Top of Georgia Speaking Contest March 20. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

Candidate qualifying starts Monday, ends next Friday

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
editor@nganews.com

Qualifying for public office candidacy to participate in the 2024 elections begins next week, running Monday, March 4, through Friday, March 8.

Candidates will be able to qualify for county-level offices locally between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and from 9 a.m. to noon on Friday.

Republicans and Democrats who qualify will square off against candidates from their own political party in the May 21 General Primary Election to decide who will advance

to the Nov. 5 General Election as nominees for the various offices up for partisan election.

There will be a June 18 Runoff Election if no candidate receives majority support in their May primary race, and each winning candidate will proceed to the big General Election in November.

The outcomes of multiple races could be known this spring if, for example, only Republicans qualify for a public office, meaning the Republican primary winner would appear unopposed in November unless a write-in or petition candidate successfully makes the ballot later in the year.

County offices up for election of political party candidates include Sole Commissioner, Tax Commissioner, Probate Judge/Magistrate, Clerk of Superior Court, Sheriff, and Coroner.

A Nonpartisan General Election will also run on May 21, with winners to be sworn into office in 2025. The nonpartisan county offices to appear on the ballot will be three Board of Education posts: the Macedonia seat and two "At-Large" positions.

Democratic, Independent and Nonpartisan candidates for county office must See Candidate Qualifying, Page 5

PPP early voting continues through Friday, March 8

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
editor@nganews.com

In-person early voting for the Presidential Preference Primary began last week, with Towns Countians taking to the polls to select political party candidates for the office of President of the United States.

Election Day for the upcoming primary is Tuesday, March 12, to include three weeks of early voting that started Feb. 19 to run weekdays through Friday, March 8.

As of Friday afternoon, Feb. 23, 469 people had cast ballots in person at the Towns See Early Voting, Page 9



Registered voters can cast ballots now during early voting at the Towns County Civic Center. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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Lake Levels

BASEBALL

Towns Lions Club Events See page 3



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Blue Ridge 1,672.52
Chatuge 1,917.87
Nottely 1,761.63

@ Union 2/27 5:30 PM
vs. Union 3/1 5:30 PM

TCHS Student of the Week See page 5

Coroner, Tax Man to Speak See page 5



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Chamber Chronicles

The official source of Towns County Chamber News

Wednesday, February 28, 2024

Welcome to our Newest Member!

B&B Jerseys and More - Claudia Brewer- 3295 Dogwood Lane, Unit B, Hiawassee, GA 30546. 706-970-8996- Facebook: B&B Jerseys and More. Providing custom jerseys, your favorite sports teams and luxury bags, all at the right price. Grand opening March 8!

THANK YOU to our newest upgraded GOLD Member for 2024: Ridgeline Exteriors & Roofing. We appreciate the support!!

Chamber Events & Programs

“Wearing of the Green” – Coming soon- Saturday March 16 – at participating retailers- More information to come. Contact Mary Ann at 706-896-4966 if you are a retail member and want to participate.

Made in Georgia Festival 2024- Now accepting applications. For more information visit golakechatuge.com or call 706-896-4966. The event will be held on Saturday, June 29 & Sunday, June 30 at the Towns County Recreation & Conference Center. Look for our “Save the Date” cards & more info in the next several months.

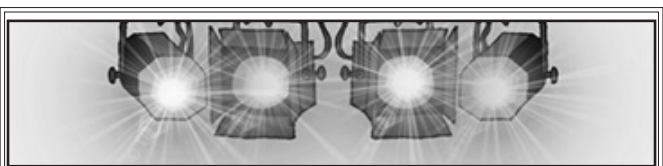
Check out our calendar at www.golakechatuge.com for all our member sponsored and community events.

Follow us: Facebook & Instagram: Visit Lake Chatuge
Thanks to all our members for their continued support!
Additionally, we’d like to thank these Platinum and Gold Members:

PLATINUM MEMBERS: Blue Ridge Mountain EMC; Century 21 Black Bear Realty; Hiawassee KOA Holiday, Lake Chatuge Lodge; Majestic Mountain Getaways, Inc.; Mountain Realty; Peach State Federal Credit Union, The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge; United Community Bank; Veteran Contracting LLC; Windstream Communications.

GOLD MEMBERS: Bennett Equipment; Blairsville Printing; Brasstown Manor; Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa; Brother’s Restaurant at Willow Ranch; Chatuge Regional Hospital; Chick-fil-A of Blairsville; Erlanger Western Carolina Hospital; Hiawassee Package Store; Homestead Hospice; Hughes Accounting; K. Boyer Photography; Little Bear Rentals & Property Management; Men on The Move; NeuroSport Physical Therapy LLC; Regency SouthernCare Hospice; Ridgeline Exteriors & Roofing; South State Bank; Tri-County Office Supply, and Young Harris College.

For information on becoming a member of the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce, visit www.golakechatuge.com or call Mary Ann at (706) 896-4966 or email her at LCChamber2021@gmail.com.



TCHS Student of the Week



Chris Bechtol and Art Cartee

The TCHS student of the week is senior Chris Bechtol. Science teacher, assistant football coach, and soccer coach Art Cartee states: “Chris was an awesome student 1st semester. He worked hard to complete his assignments on time and correct. He is a captain on the Varsity Soccer team and helps the new guys out when needed.”

Chris’s favorite subject in school is math as it comes easy to him. After graduation, he plans to attend North Georgia Technical College to pursue a career that leads him to work for Blue Ridge Mountain EMC. Outside of academics, Chris plays soccer including three years of rec soccer and three years on the high school team. Out of the TRIBE characteristics, he believes that he demonstrates teamwork the most as he chooses not to focus on himself but try to help others. He feels that it takes a team to accomplish anything. Some interesting facts about Chris is that he loves to fish and he has a thing for speeding.

The Cowhands introduce Moriah Owenby



John Cochran and Moriah Owenby

Join John Cochran and the Cowhands for an evening of good western entertainment and fun.

New artist to the group is Moriah Owenby from Mineral Bluff. She loves to sing western music and she plays the guitar. She will be joining John on March 1st at 6:30 at Stephens Lodge in Young Harris. The address is 135 Murphy Street.

John will be leading off with his favorite western classics from the songs of Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Rex Allen, Tex Ritter and The Sons of the Pioneers.

There is no admission charge for the concert.

For a fee Stephens Lodge will be serving a light supper for those who wish to eat. The money goes to their scholarship fund. NT(Feb28,Z10)CA

Towns County Rotary Club Meeting



The Rotary Club of Lake Chatuge met on Tuesday, February 20, at noon, at Brasstown Valley Resort, in Young Harris, GA.

The speaker for the meeting was Stephen Waggener, who is the head baseball coach of the Young Harris College Mountain Lions.

Coach Waggener came from Delta State as an assistant coach, working with that College for nine years. Last season, the Mountain Lions’ Baseball team had a record of 38-17, which is the best regular season record for the team.

The baseball season started this year in the first week of February. Recently, the Mountain Lions have moved up into the Carolinas Conference. This move changes the teams that they play



Stephen Waggener

against, and it also changes how far the team needs to travel to games (greatly reducing travel distances).

Single-game tickets and Season tickets are available at very reasonable prices. Come out and watch your Young Harris Mountain Lions Play! You can buy tickets at the College, or online at <https://yhathletics.com/sports/2021/8/4/hometown-tickets.aspx>. See you there! T(Feb28,A4)JH

Towns County Fire and Rescue are Seeking New Volunteers



Have you ever wanted to give back to your community or be a part of it in a special way? If so come join us at Towns County Fire and Rescue.

We are seeking new volunteers to become a part of our family; we are also looking for Explorer Firefighters to be a part of our explorer program (ages 14-18). No experience is required. We will provide all equipment needed and all training needed which will consist of firefighting training and basic first aid and CPR. You will assist with special

events in our community and respond to a variety of emergency calls from fires to medical calls and search and rescue calls.

There is a job for everyone in the fire service so come be apart of our great team of firefighters and family to help us better serve our community and county.

For more information and to meet us and check out our equipment come by Fire Station one in Hiawassee City limits at 156 Sims Circle or give us a call at 706-896-2090 anytime from 8 AM to 4 PM. Monday-Friday, we will be happy to speak to you and answer any questions you may have. T(Feb28,A1)JH

Education Scholarships Available

Towns County Retired Educators Association (TCREA) is committed to excellence in education and is pleased to announce the availability of two scholarships for Towns County college students and teachers to help them further their academic careers and fulfill their potential.

College students who are legal residents of Towns County currently enrolled in an accredited education program who will be at least a college junior in the 2024 academic year and have at least a 3.0 GPA are eligible for the TCREA Emerging Educators Scholarship. The amount of the scholarship varies by year; for 2024 the scholarship is \$1,000.

Current teachers who hold a Georgia teaching certificate and are legal residents of Towns County or employed at a school in Towns County and are pursuing an advanced degree or additional subject endorsement are eligible for the TCREA Advanced Degree Scholarship. Applicants must

be enrolled in or accepted into an accredited advanced education degree program or an endorsement program for additional subject specialty during the year in which the scholarship is awarded. Currently enrolled applicants must have at least a 3.0 GPA and be in good academic standing with their college or university. The amount of the scholarship varies by year; for 2024 the scholarship is \$500.

For more information or to request an application for TCREA scholarships, please send an e-mail to TCREA.SC@gmail.com.

Applications will also be available at the Towns County Board of Education Office. Completed applications for scholarships should be e-mailed to TCREA.SC@gmail.com or mailed to the address on the application form.

Applications must be received by April 8, 2024, to be considered. Scholarships will be awarded at the annual TCREA banquet in May. T(Feb28,M2)JH

Citizens For A Better America meeting

Are you happy about the way things are going in Cherokee County, NC, U.S. and the world? Lets work together for change! Citizens For A Better America are uniting to promote Freedom & Constitutional Rights, peacefully & patriotically.

Monthly meetings are the third Thursday of the month. Next meeting is March 21, at the Legends Steak House in the private meeting

room, 42 Tennessee Street, Downtown Murphy, NC. Meal orders at 5 PM, meeting is 6-7:30. This meeting is free & open to the public. United We Stand!

For more information: Website: <http://www.CitizensForABetterAmerica.com>; Email: Contact@CitizensForABetterAmerica.com; Call: (828) 361-5422. NT(Feb28,Z7)CA



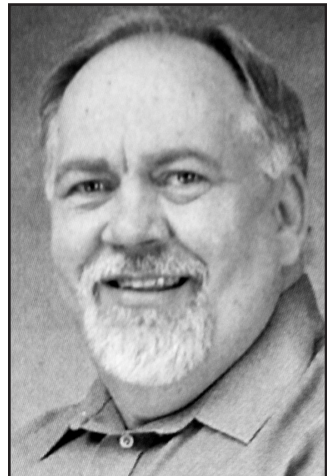
Movers and Shakers Welcome Towns County Tax Commissioner and County Coroner



Tamela Cooper

The old saying goes, “the only certainties in life are death and taxes.”

This Friday, March 1st we welcome to the charming Sundance Grill our county Coroner, Ms. Tamela Cooper, and Towns County Tax Commissioner Mr. Michael Anderson.



Michael Anderson

They will give updates on the latest ‘goings on’ in their respective departments, and answer any questions you may have.

Get there early to get a good seat to hear from two of your elected officials, and learn more about how our county government works. T(Feb28,F1)JH

Towns County Community Calendar

First Monday of each month:	School Board... HS/MS Media Center	6:45 pm
Every Tuesday:	Storytime for Children... TC Library	10:30 am
First Tuesday of each month:	Hiaw. City Council... City Hall	6 pm
	YH City Council... YH City Hall	6:30 pm
Second Tuesday of each month:	Conventions & Visitors Board... Civic Center	8:30 am
Second Wednesday of each month:	Board of Elections... Elections Office	4 pm
Third Monday of each month:	Planning Commission... Temporary Courthouse	6 pm
Third Tuesday of each month:	Commissioner’s Mtg... Courthouse	5:30 pm
	City of Young Harris Planning Commission... Meeting Room in City Hall	5 pm
	TC Water Authority Board Meeting	6 pm

Candidate Qualifying...from Page 1

report to Towns County Elections Supervisor Rachel Edwards at the Elections Office at 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiawassee to complete candidacy paperwork during qualifying hours.

Republican candidates will need to meet with Republican Party representatives inside the Towns County Temporary Courthouse at 900 N Main Street to go through the qualifying process.

All qualifying paperwork must be notarized, and fees should be paid at time of qualifying.

Qualifying fees for local offices are: Sole Commissioner, \$1,927.65; Tax Commissioner, \$1,660.34; Clerk of Superior Court, \$1,660.34; Probate Judge/Magistrate, \$1,660.34; Sheriff, \$1,927.65; County Coroner, \$72; Board of Education Posts 1, 4 and 5, \$36.

Once candidates have paid their fees and submitted

their paperwork, they will be entered into the state database by Elections Supervisor Edwards, and their names will be published for public viewing.

Qualifying locally is for county office candidates only. Candidates for state and federal offices will need to qualify next week with the Secretary of State’s Office at the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta.

State-level offices up for election in 2024 are: Enohah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge, District 8 State Representative, District 50 State Senator, Districts 3 and 5 Public Service Commissioner, Georgia Supreme Court Judge, Georgia Court of Appeals Judge.

At the federal level, area candidates may also qualify for Georgia’s 9th Congressional District of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Paperwork for qualifying can be obtained at the

Elections Office or on the Secretary of State’s website at <https://sos.ga.gov/>.

At the website, click on “Elections.” In the drop-down menu, select “Elections Division.” When the next page loads, click on the “Candidate Qualification” tab to find “Declaration of Candidacy” forms for local, state and federal offices.

For more information or to find out about obtaining qualifying paperwork locally, contact the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration at 706-896-4353.

Be sure to check out the March 13 edition of the Towns County Herald for coverage on qualifying candidates.

Nonpartisans will be elected in May. Independents – should any qualify – will not face election until Nov. 5, when they will go head-to-head with political party nominees who clear their upcoming primaries.

City of Young Harris adopts 5% sewer rate increase

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In their regular February meeting, Young Harris City Council members approved a 5% sewer rate increase to shore up cost of operations at the Wastewater Treatment Facility.

January's meeting featured the first reading for the increase, and the February meeting included the second reading and subsequent adoption. Council members held a public hearing on the increase immediately before the Feb. 6 regular meeting.

The increase was accomplished by revising the city's Master Fee Schedule, with the only change being the sewer

rate.

Sewer customers can expect to see the rate increase starting with their March bills.

In other business, the council unanimously approved spending \$61,000 for a new Ford F-250 SD XL for maintenance work to replace another city vehicle following a collision with a deer.

City Attorney Marvin Harkins explained the meaning behind the new Occupation Tax Ordinance.

The current Business License Ordinance for the city was passed in 1986. State law began to refer to business licenses as tax certificates in 1995, so the Occupation Tax Ordinance, for the most part,

updates the language. That said, there are still some changes conceptually.

"'Business license' implies that if you don't do something, we either have the authority to bulldoze or take (your business) away, whereas occupational tax is just that (tax)," Harkins said.

For example, a restaurant would still require a certificate of approval from the Health Department, and a cosmetologist must still follow licensing requirements from the State of Georgia in order to be granted an Occupational Tax Certificate.

Occupational taxes can be calculated by gross receipts or number of employees, but

the City of Young Harris will follow a flat fee. Feb. 6's meeting served as the first reading of the ordinance.

All of the City's new water meters have arrived, with replacement and installation expected to follow in March or April. Mayor Gibby assured the council there would be a couple of pre-construction meetings.

Mayor Andrea Gibby shared that she recently sat through a demonstration for a program called TextMyGov. The application allows local governments to communicate with residents and vice versa, making it useful to send out alerts and provide feedback.

A subscription costs \$2,800 yearly following a \$1,000 setup fee. Gibby said she would be glad to provide a demonstration to the council.

"It's very easy, it's very intuitive," Gibby said. "I want y'all to consider this."

The council seemed very interested in the prospect, so Gibby agreed to gather more information for an update at the March meeting.

City Clerk Nicolette Wade asked that the city write off water bills for five accounts totaling \$1,019.43 because



Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby and City Attorney Marvin Harkins in the February regular city meeting.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

"these people are gone; we don't know where they are."

While the council approved the measure, conversation followed regarding how to prevent such cases from happening again. Between city employees helping to keep an eye on the billing system and an upcoming software change,

a plan is in place.

The Young Harris City Council meets on the first Tuesday of every month at 6:30 p.m. inside City Hall located at 50 Irene Berry Drive, barring delays or rescheduling for holidays. These meetings are open to the public, and the community is encouraged to attend.

Battle of Iwo Jima...from Page 1

Roger Graham served as this year's keynote speaker. Having graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1963, Graham served as an A-26 navigator and co-pilot in 182 combat missions in the Vietnam War.

"One of my motivations for wanting a military career is my dad was killed in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II," Graham said. "I was only 2 years old at the time, so I never really got to know my father."

This, combined with an early fascination with flying, meant it was only natural he enlisted into the Air Force.

The first focus of Graham's talk was exploring why the Battle of Iwo Jima made sense not just from a strategic standpoint, but from a moral one. To do that, Graham first shared some context.

At about 60 miles south of Tokyo, the island of Iwo Jima held two Japanese airbases, with a third under construction. Japanese soldiers spent months establishing tunnels under Mt. Suribachi, and by the time of the battle, some 20,000 men were stationed on the island.

From Feb. 19 to March 26 of 1945, the Marine Corps and Navy fought the Imperial Japanese Army on Iwo Jima. American forces faced down 15-foot mounds of black ash just past the beachhead only to brave mortar and machinegun fire from heavy Japanese fortifications.

Victory was hard-won; Iwo Jima is considered the bloodiest battle in Marine Corps history, resulting in over 26,000 casualties. Approximately 6,800 of those were men killed in action.

Such knowledge, along with the well-known Joe Rosenthal Associated Press photograph, "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima," has stirred hearts for 79 years.

Graham then took a moment to explore what exactly the men on Iwo Jima faced in terms of the trauma of war. He used his own experience in Vietnam to consider what it meant on a mental level to face combat, and by proxy, so much death.



Marine Corps League Unicoi Detachment 783 Comdt. Alton "Doc" Coleman was happy to welcome guests last week to honor the fallen at Iwo Jima, Japan, on the 79th anniversary of the battle.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Back home, it was easy for Graham to wonder "if there was really a war going on over there." Training in Louisiana was different from riding in close quarters with other soldiers, destroying Viet Cong trucks from the air.

When he first arrived in the Pacific, Graham met two other combat pilots and was struck by their efficiency. One, from Puerto Rico, "got very excited when he was in the thick of combat and started yelling in Spanish." His copilot, from Pennsylvania, was "the calmest man I ever saw."

Recalling his first real taste of battle, Graham said, "I was thinking, 'Wow, there really is a war going on over here.'"

Not a month later, his fellow Airmen sent out a call saying they had been hit. When Graham's squadron arrived on the scene, "all we could see on the ground was a big, huge area of fire." Despite performing several flyovers, no other calls came in, and no survivors were located.

"After that, I think I became sort of numb for a while," Graham said, deciding that he would "do (his) best" for his country and fellow soldiers, with whom he says he developed a strong bond – and he can imagine the same being

true for the men at Iwo Jima.

In another story, Graham recalled some pilots in a damaged plane being trailed by another plane as an escort back to the base. The rescue team, seeing signs that the plane was about to explode, radioed their comrades to evacuate.

While the men in the damaged plane were able to parachute out, the ensuing explosion caught their defenders' plane and killed all the men inside.

"You get sort of a feeling of apprehension or anxiety when you're not directly in combat, when you're waiting for the next round," Graham added, describing that the only time he didn't feel on-edge was, ironically, getting ready for takeoff before combat.

"I think just about anybody that's been in combat, they never think of themselves ... I think they always think of the people who lost their lives," said Graham, tying the sentiment of empathy and brotherhood back to the Battle of Iwo Jima.

Inscribed below the statue of soldiers raising the American flag at the summit of Mt. Suribachi is a quote ascribed to Adm. Chester Nimitz. Graham used it to summarize his presentation: "Uncommon valor was a common virtue."

Board of Education...from Page 1



L-R: The Towns County School Board is David Phillips, Caroleen Woods, Stephanie McConnell, Sara Rogers and Brandon Grimsley, pictured here with Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong (seated).

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

their assigned mentor twice monthly; meet with their assigned academic coach once a month; attend REACH events, meetings and programs; and engage in activities to prepare for college.

Parents and guardians are also asked to sign commitment forms to support their scholars and ensure that they enroll in a HOPE Scholarship-eligible college down the line.

In other business, the five-year facilities review may have already been approved, but School Facilities Director Erica Chastain shared a slideshow with the board to give them an idea of how the update went.

how well the architecture has held up for the schools' age, and recent renovation work has been successful.

That said, the Elementary School is being evaluated for updates after the playground received a massive overhaul with shade structures, a motion play sidewalk, bongos, glockenspiels and more.

Future ESPLOST-funded projects include replacing the Elementary School's floors, additional campus-wide security upgrades, facility and technology upgrades, new renovations and modifications of facilities as needed, and eventually, new additions to the Agriculture Facility.

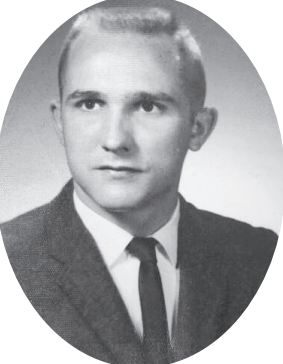
Berrong mentioned to-

ward the end of the meeting that one of three buses slated to be replaced will instead receive new life as a bookmobile.

"We're going to wrap it in literature characters, we're going to put heating and air in it, we're going to put bookshelves and seating, and make the inside look all cool like a little bookmobile," Berrong said. "That way, our Teaching as a Profession Pathway students can take that bus to daycares or into the library, and we can bring the kids on the bus."

The Towns County Board of Education meets on the first Monday of every month at the Towns County Middle and High School Library starting at 6 p.m.

Obituaries



GEORGE REEMAN LENT

Dr. George Freeman Lent, age 81 of Clayton, Georgia passed away Thursday, February 22, 2024 surrounded by family at his home. George was born March 28, 1942 to the late James and Sarah (Lord) Lent in Summit, New Jersey. He was a member of North Mt. Zion Church of God and a servant for the Lord through his Veterinary practice that he started June 1967 after graduating from the University of Georgia, school of Veterinary Medicine. His passion was to tell everyone about Jesus. He was the volunteer fire chief on the North end of Hilton Head Island from 1968-1976. After that he graduated from Evangelical Institute of Greenville in 1979. He and his wife wrote and published two books, My Precious Shepherd and Mount Up with Wings Like Eagles: Five lessons that Transformed Our Lives. They also were the original vision for the Hilton Head Christian Academy founded in 1979.

He is preceded in death by his parents; brothers, Douglas Lent, James Lent; sister, Donna Ziegler. He is survived by his wife of 57 years, Mary Winn Lent; daughters, Deena Maria (Charles) Gergeni, Rachel Anna (Todd) Williams; sons, George Edward (Birgit) Lent, David Joshua (Katrina) Lent, Michael Andrew Lent; adopted children, Camolyn (Gerald) Weeks, Olga Prodan, and five other Russian orphans; brother, Charlie Lent; sisters, Shirley Lent, Marti Anderson; grandchildren, James Gergeni, Andrew Gergeni, Christina Nichols, Marissa Gergeni, Lydia Gergeni, Nathaniel Gergeni, Savannah Williams, Sterling Williams, Morgan Williams, Adele Williams, Gwinnette Williams, Emily Lent, Tabea Lent, Samuel Lent, Daniel Lent, Arianna Lent, Felicity Lent, Manasseh Weeks, Madolyn Weeks, Gerald Jr. Weeks; one great grandchild, Harrison Gergeni; a number of nieces and nephews.

Visitation: Friday, March 1, 2024 from 6-8 PM at Tabernacle Baptist Church
Memorial Service: Saturday, March 2, 2024 at 2 PM at Tabernacle Baptist Church with Rev. Raburne Wilson, Ryan Wilson and Todd Williams officiating.

In lieu of flowers the family request to please donate to North Mt. Zion Church of God building fund: P.O. Box 62 Hiawassee, GA 30546.

Banister-Cooper is in charge of arrangements for Dr. Lent.

Mountain Presbyterian Food Pantry is open

The Ecumenical Food Pantry at Mountain Presbyterian Church is open every Thursday from 9:30 AM to 1 PM.

We are once again opening our doors to the pantry for people to come inside to fill their own boxes.

We are located right next door to the Catholic Church in Blairsville. Located at 3831 Hwy. 515 E.

Masonic Meeting

Unicoy Lodge #259 F & AM meets every 2nd Monday, 7:30 PM. Meals @ 6:30 PM. 60 N. Main Street, Hiawassee, GA 30546. All qualified Brothers urged to attend.



EARLENE SHOOK HOLCOMB

Mrs. Earlene Shook Holcomb age 82 of Holcomb Rd. Young Harris passed away peacefully on Saturday February 24, 2024 in the Chatuge Hospital following an extended illness. Mrs. Holcomb was born on January 15, 1942 in Young Harris, GA., the daughter of the late Andy Shook and the late Vera Justice Shook. She was a native and lifelong resident of Young Harris. Earlene had a Servants Heart. She loved helping others in any way that she could, especially cooking for her church family and friends. She loved taking care of her grandchildren, Eli and Easton and took great interest in children's baseball and other sporting activities. She was a loving and caring mother, sister and grandmother. She was preceded in death by her husband, Eugene "Bud" Holcomb in 2018, and three brothers, Arnold, Hoyt and Bill Shook. Mrs. Holcomb was a member of Cornerstone Baptist Church.

Surviving Mrs. Holcomb are two daughters and one son in law, Gail Day of Young Harris, Angie and Jason McNabb of Hiawassee, one son and daughter in law, Keith and Karen Holcomb of Hayesville, one brother and sister in law, Tommy and Brenda Shook of Young Harris, one sister and brother in law, Faye and R.L. Nichols of Young Harris, two grandchildren, Eli and Easton McNabb, her step grandchildren, Justin Duncan, Jamie (Melissa) Godfrey, Christina (Jay) Hiler, several nieces, nephews, many other relatives and friends also survive.

Funeral services were held on Sunday, February 25, 2024 at 3:00 pm from the Cornerstone Baptist Church with Rev. Mark Handy, Rev. Todd Flanagan and Rev. Ricky Rogers officiating. Special music was presented by the Shook Family. The following gentleman served as pallbearers, Frank Shook, Dexter Shook, Garry Holcomb, Larry Holcomb, Justin Duncan and Jamie Godfrey. Serving as honorary pallbearers were Benny Shook, Gary Shook, Bruce Nichols, Brent Shook, Lynn Shook and Richard Nichols. Interment followed in the church cemetery where she will rest next to her beloved husband Bud. Flowers are accepted or if you wish, the family requests that donations may be made to the Cornerstone Church Cemetery Fund in Mrs. Holcomb's memory. The family met with friends at the Cornerstone Church on Sunday from 1:30-3:00 pm.

Mountain View Funeral Home of Blairsville is in charge of the arrangements. You may sign the family guest book and send condolences online at www.mountainviewfuneralhome.com

What does the Bible say?

What does the Bible say? Free Bible Correspondence Courses, call 706-745-5997. Sponsored by Blairsville Church of Christ, P.O. Box 1665, GA 30514.

Opportunity to change a life

Do you know a loved one who struggles with addictions or strongholds?

Unity Farm, a biblically based, 12-step Men's Recovery Home is located in Union County. For more information please call 706-851-5390 or 706-455-9043.



CHARLES EDWARD HUGHES

Charles Edward Hughes of Alpharetta, GA passed away on February 18, 2024. He was born in Young Harris, GA on March 10, 1940. For many years, Charles owned and operated his own business, Apache Termite and Pest Control.

He is preceded in death by his parents and his wife of over 25 years, Diane Hughes. He is survived by his daughter, Missy Mize, of Gainesville, GA; his son, Timothy Taylor, of Alpharetta, GA; his son, David Taylor, of Gainesville, GA; his brother, Sammy Hughes, of Young Harris, GA; his only niece, Sabrina Thomas, of Young Harris, GA; 9 grandchildren and 2 great granddaughters.

His family received friends on Saturday, February 24, 2024 from 12 PM until 2 PM at Northside Chapel Funeral Directors in Roswell, GA. A funeral service officiated by a longtime friend, Chester Edwards, and the person responsible for introducing Charles and Diane, Tommy Seay, immediately followed visitation, beginning at 2 PM in the funeral home chapel.

Interment was at Green Lawn Cemetery.



VICTOR NEIL COKER

Mr. Victor Neil Coker, age 66, of Beach Cove Road, Warne, NC, passed away peacefully on Saturday, February 17, 2024 at his home surrounded by his loving family following an extended illness. Mr. Coker was born on May 14, 1957 in Hiawassee, GA, the son of the late March Coker and the late Etna Earley Coker. Mr. Coker was a loving and caring husband, father, brother, grandfather and great grandfather. He was preceded in death by his parents and also two sisters, Hope Reynolds and Lois White; and his brother, Archie Coker. Mr. Coker was an Elder and member of the Catalyst Church in Hayesville.

Surviving Mr. Coker are his loving wife and best friend of thirty-seven years, Karen Kay Kitchel Coker of Warne; five children: Jenna Coker of Warne, Chris and Melissa Coker of Brasstown, Tim and Amanda Coker, Christina Coker and Lauren Coker all of Warne; one sister, Laura Brown of Young Harris; seven grandchildren: Brad Jones, Austin Coker, Cody Coker, Shawn Jones, Emory Tucker, Saylor Coker and Ellison Tucker; two great grandchildren, several nieces, nephews, many other relatives and friends also survive.

A private family memorial service will be held at later date. In lieu of flowers if you wish, the family requests that donations may be made to Christmas With Catalyst c/o Catalyst Church in Hayesville in Mr. Coker's memory.

Mountain View Funeral Home of Blairsville is in charge of the arrangements. You may sign the family guest book and send condolences online at www.mountainviewfuneralhome.com.

New Beginnings - ours and yours!

Confidence Community Church (formerly UMC), a conservative, Bible-believing fellowship, is making a fresh start ... come join us as we begin a new 'chapter' together...

Same place: 96 Confidence Church Road, Blairsville, (turn at Valero on 325, church on right).

Same times: Worship at 11 AM; SS/Fellowship at 9:30/10:30 AM.

New Hope Fellowship Food Pantry

Our food pantry will be open the 4th Saturday of every month, 10 AM - 12 noon.

New Hope Fellowship Church is located at 1456 Blue Ridge Hwy., GA 30512.

God is good ALL the time.

County Meeting...from Page 1

grassroots SaveLakeChatuge.org, environmental nonprofit MountainTrue has partnered with the Commissioner's Office to collect public donations and select a treatment plan.

As of Friday, Feb. 16, MountainTrue was proud to announce that organizers had surpassed their \$300,000 goal.

"We are very thankful because now we have the luxury of picking whatever plan we want," said Callie Moore, who serves as the Western Regional Director for MountainTrue.

Moore shared that any money left over from initial treatments will stay in the parrot-feather fund to be used for future treatments.

"Regardless of the plan we pick, we will have to do a follow-up treatment next summer, but it will (cost) a lot less," Moore said.

She was hopeful that her team would be able to select a plan by Friday, Feb. 23, so that contract negotiations could begin.

For more information, Moore urged residents to visit SaveLakeChatuge.org and attend an educational TVA meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 27, which occurred after press time at 5 p.m. inside the Towns County Recreation & Conference

Center at Foster Park.

"They are not planning to have a public forum," shared Moore. "(It will be) an educational presentation about parrot-feather and other invasive plants."

"It is my understanding that they will be funneling questions about parrot-feather - specifically the Lake Chatuge parrot-feather - through an email address that they have set up through the TVA."

In other business, the county is working on several other projects such as the renovation of the Towns County Courthouse. Commissioner Bradshaw shared that the renovation is "completely on budget" and that the building should be open to the public sometime in April.

He has also taken initiative to update the county entrance signs. The first sign is already underway at the Highway 75-76 intersection. Next, new signs will be put at Foster Park and at the Union County line.

Some changes will also be coming to the county with the help of a few grants, such as the Georgia County Internship Program Grant.

With this non-matching

\$3,259.50 grant, the Commissioner's Office will be able to hire a summer intern for local database development and road-mapping purposes.

"We'll have the opportunity to hire some young persons to come in and work with us, and I look forward to it," Bradshaw said.

His office has also applied for federal funding through the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission for a Firefighters Grant Application Service. The Commissioner's Office is paying a \$500 fee to have the GMRC help the county find and apply for grants toward a new fire truck.

Bradshaw also signed the Child Development Center's Procurement and Purchase Policy for the USDA Food Program on Tuesday, which ensures that the county's daycare purchases its goods and services in accordance with federal procurement regulations.

Additionally, he approved 2024 budget amendments to account for a Sheriff's Office vehicle accident, approved \$861.87 worth of Board of Education Homestead Exemption checks and shared that the SPLOST is on target and running smoothly.

Early Voting...from Page 1

County Civic Center, and 39 absentee-by-mail ballots had been returned.

There are 11,731 total registered voters in the county, so combining the above in-person and absentee-by-mail voting totals, 4.3% of local voters had already cast ballots in this election by Friday afternoon.

Early voting also includes two weekend voting opportunities, one that occurred this past Saturday, and another coming up on Saturday, March 2.

All in-person early voting takes place from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. inside the Towns County Civic Center, located in the same building as the Board of Elections & Registration Office at 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiawassee.

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.

Towns County has two voting precincts: the Hiawasse Precinct at the Civic Center and the Young Harris Precinct in the Lodge Hall Building at 135 Murphy Street.

For people voting absentee-by-mail, ballots may be requested for this election at the Elections Office now through Friday, March 1. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, as an email attachment, or in person at the Elections Office.

Voters returning absentee ballots can use the official drop box inside the Elections Office 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 Elections Office through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Monday, Feb. 12, was the registration deadline to vote in this election. Voter registration takes place inside the Elec-

tions Office.

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/> 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.

Speech Contest...from Page 1

ing. From Towns County High School, Loftin Turpin, Cecelia Pizarro, Lilly Cannon and Leland Wilson took the six-week course in advance of the big competition.

And though there were no participants from Towns County Middle School, sixth-grade homeschooler Caleb Taylor represented area middle schoolers also.

Of the participants, 14 plan to speak at the upcoming Speaking Contest on March 20, which will begin at 6 p.m. inside the Goolsby Center Auditorium.

A panel of judges will determine a First-Place speaker, who will receive \$700; a Second-Place speaker, who will receive \$500; and a Third-Place speaker, who will receive \$300. Prizes will be award for both the middle and high school divisions.

Judges John Van Vliet, Jennifer Hallett and Rick Andrews will return this March to adjudicate speeches on a truly eclectic slate of topics such as American dilemmas,

healthy and harmful eating, artificial intelligence, sustainable living, sports, heroism, science, history and self-defense.

"This is the most advanced speaking group of students that I have seen (since I have been involved)," commented one of the mentors and organizers, Gerry Chotiner.

Chotiner has been involved in the program for nearly a decade and hopes to make a difference in an area of education where many schools fall short.

"The schools don't really have the budget for (public-speaking classes)," he said, "so this type of training and mentoring fills an important gap."

Chotiner shared that due to lack of proper public-speaking education, even many career professionals speak with poor technique. For example, they may use lots of filler words such as "like" or "um."

"The progression from where (these students) started in the beginning of our teaching sessions to the end

is just very gratifying," said Chotiner, who has seen students go from struggling to maintain eye contact in simple conversations to delivering seven-minute presentations to an audience with ease.

Joanna Kay, a freshman at UCHS, had a similar experience with the program. She joined last year with hopes of gaining confidence, then returned in 2024 to participate in the course again.

"It's a good experience, and you will become more confident and learn things that can carry you, not just through this, but into college and into your career," Kay said.

First time participant and sixth-grader Caleb Taylor has also seen the lasting impact of the program.

"Public speaking is a skill that not many people really know how to do, but this class has taught me how to do it," Taylor said. "(When I first signed up), I thought that you could just write (your speech) and say it, but I've learned to edit it and all that."

Loving Church

Blessed is our wonderful church, Day of Grace Baptist Church, 269 Saw Mill Road.

Our outstanding Pastor, Rudy Tribble, has a great message every Sunday; Sunday School starts at 10 AM; Church Service at 11 AM.

Please join us for God's love that will stay in your heart all week.