

Kevin and Cindy Bierschenk receive warm welcome at reception

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BLAIRSVILLE – Upward of 200 area residents, business owners, hospital employees and local government officials came together to welcome new Union General Hospital CEO Kevin Bierschenk and his wife Cindy at the Union County Community Center on Thursday, March 14.

“As you all know, the hospital is one of the cornerstones and one of the major stakeholders of Union County,” said Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe, acting as master of ceremonies for the reception.

Rowe introduced Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris and Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley in the gathering.

“I just want to welcome the Bierschenks to Union County,” said Paris. “They’re not settled in yet exactly – they’ve just started – but we are all extremely excited to have them. And wow, look at this support. This is just awesome. Thank you all for being here and the way you have supported and continue to support the hospital and the Bierschenks. Thank you.”

Added Mayor Conley, “Kevin, Cindy – welcome to the City of Blairsville and Union County. It’s good to have you here at the hospital. And Lamar said it best, this hospital means a lot to all of us, and it’s growing, and we’re going to need it more than ever.

“This is but a drop in the bucket that you see here tonight at your reception, but I think the whole county will echo our sentiments, also. So, welcome, once again.”

Rowe recognized former Union General Hospital Board Chairwoman Patsy Efird, who recently left the board after 12 years of service to the hospital, before introducing current Board Chair Myron Turner.

“Forty-five resumes came to our board,” said Turner. “Each of us had an opportunity to evaluate those and see what we had coming for us. And I think I evaluated all 45. We chose five.”

“Kevin was one of the five. So, we bring all those up here to Blairsville, and we sat down and talked to them. And our doctors even had lunch with them. After that, we wound up with two: Kevin and another good candidate.”

The board chose Bierschenk, according to Turner, partly because he came from a farming family in Nebraska, which meant that he was no stranger to hard work. It also helped that his wife was from Dahlonega.

“Kevin, Cindy – thank you for coming to Blairsville,” said Turner. “Thank you for joining our Union General family. We appreciate you much.”

Bierschenk, too, was thankful, expressing his gratitude that evening for those who gathered to meet with him and his wife.

“We’re honored, myself and Cindy. This has been a dream to come up to this neck

of the woods. You have a great hospital,” said Bierschenk, noting that the quality of care in this hospital system is well known in the Georgia Hospital Association, for which he is chair-elect.

Bierschenk also said he was honored to be following in retired Union General CEO Lewis Kelley’s footsteps, and that he already felt right at home, since his wife’s folks are from Lumpkin County.

“I am from Nebraska,” said Bierschenk. “I’ve lived down south since 1986, so I do talk with marbles in my mouth. You’ve got to slow me down sometimes. I do have two daughters; one of them is at the University of South Carolina, and my other daughter is in Charlotte. Thank you very much. We’re honored. This has been a great turnout.”



New Union General Hospital CEO Kevin Bierschenk at a reception held in his honor on Thursday, March 14, at the Union County Community Center. Photo by Mark Smith

Before closing out his remarks, Bierschenk made sure to compliment the hospital dietary staff members who prepared all of the appetizers for the reception.

“I’ve never seen this kind of food in a hospital setting, so thank you,” he said. “One other thing – the reason I am coming here is because of the staff. You couldn’t ask for a better team. And I have a great board to work with. Also, thanks to the Board. Thank you.”

Bierschenk’s first day as CEO of Union General Hospital was Feb. 25. As CEO, Bierschenk is responsible for both Union General and Chatuge Regional Hospitals and Nursing Homes, as well as the various clinics, physician partnerships, etc., under the hospital system’s health care umbrella.

Ralston...from Page 1A

civil procedures. Amending the law effectively extended the ability of lawyer-legislators to request continuances outside of regular and special sessions by allowing them to cite legislative duties for leave purposes at any time of the year.

The amended portion of the law has come under fire most recently for several reasons.

For starters, the law removes any and all discretion by judges when it comes to granting continuances in cases involving an attorney member of the General Assembly. As long as a lawyer-legislator certifies that he or she has a legislative conflict, continuances must be granted.

Furthermore, the law allows attorney members of the General Assembly to self-certify that they are tied up with legislative duties, requiring nothing more than an assertion of conflict.

Overuse of the law by lawyer-legislators can result in years-long delays in cases, which is exactly what Ralston’s critics claim is keeping many of his clients from having to face justice.

The speaker has filed form letters citing the legislative leave law in four cases that are still outstanding in Towns and Union counties: Georgia v. Alfred Bouchard and Georgia v. John Michael Gowder in Blairsville; and Georgia v. Paul Jason Brothers and Georgia v. Gwendalynn Fay Smith in Hiawassee.

Alfred Bouchard’s case involves terroristic threats

he is alleged to have made in November 2016, and his case is scheduled for a plea on April 24.

The state’s case against Mike Gowder, dating back to a February 2016 arrest, is on hold pending an upcoming federal trial regarding prescription drug charges.

Gwendalynn Smith was indicted in April 2017 on five felony counts of making false statements, in which she is alleged to have lied about a rape at Young Harris College in October 2016 that never actually took place.

And the most serious of Ralston’s four outstanding cases as outlined above dates to October 2012, wherein Ralston’s client, Paul Jason Brothers, is alleged to have raped a child in Towns County – a child who has had to grow up without seeing justice done.

In response to allegations of abuse regarding the state law, Ralston has stopped taking new clients until some of his bigger cases have been adjudicated.

He has also appointed a bipartisan advisory group “to examine the need for this law” and to recommend changes.

United Daughters of the Confederacy Smith’s Legion #2699

United Daughters of the Confederacy Smith’s Legion #2699 meet the 4th Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. at G and G Restaurant on Highway 515 in Blairsville, GA.

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Board of Ed...from Page 1A



Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong, center left, with Board Members Laura Banister, Tamie Bradley and Stan Chastain. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Both students did an excellent job and showed tremendous confidence and poise as they stood on stage and read their respective stories like true storybook writers.

The meeting wrapped up with some gifts for board members in recognition of School Board Appreciation Week.

“Words cannot express how blessed we are as a school system to have board members like you who are only here to do what is best for the students of Towns County,” said Berrong. “There is not a selfish member on this board and not a single one of you has ever tried to push a personal agenda on the school. We appreciate you more

than we can ever express.”

The Towns County Board of Education consists of Laura Banister, Dr. Kilee Smith, Tamie Bradley, Stan Chastain and Robert Williams.

School Board Appreciation Week started Monday, March 18, and runs through Friday, March 22.

Duff...from Page 1A



First responders at the scene of the fatal boat crash at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds boat ramp on Saturday, March 16. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

initial information is that two bass boats collided after a bass fishing tournament launched at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds boat ramp.

“One vessel turned into the path of the other vessel, causing the collision. The operator of the vessel that made the turn, Danny Duff of Dawsonville, was pronounced deceased by the Towns County

Coroner.

“The passenger in Duff’s boat received minor injuries and was transported to Northeast Georgia Medical Center. The operator and passenger of the other boat were uninjured. No charges were filed in the incident.

“The DNR Law Enforcement Critical Incident Reconstruction Team (CIRT)

will be investigating the incident. The investigation will take six to eight weeks to complete, and no additional information will be available until then.”

Both boats involved in the accident were taken to a secure location as part of the ongoing investigation.

Gowder...from Page 1A

million. There is no mandatory minimum sentence.

Before accepting the guilty plea, Judge Story asked Dr. Gowder if he understood that, while the government may recommend a downward adjustment of the sentence, the court is not bound by that recommendation.

Again, Dr. Gowder said he understood.

McKinnon stated that, as part of his plea, Dr. Gowder had agreed to cooperate with the government’s investigation, and the government had agreed that anything he told them would not be used against him.

McKinnon also said that the defendant had agreed to disclose matters of finance and to forfeit his Georgia medical license. In addition, he would pay a special assessment of \$100.

Sentencing will take place at a later date, following a pre-sentencing investigation by U.S. Probation. Dr. Gowder remains free on bond until his sentence is determined.

McKinnon added that the government would not pursue the other charges against Dr. Gowder, charges which were enumerated in an April 2018 indictment and a January 2019 superseding indictment.

In each of those indictments, Dr. Gowder was charged with one count of illegally obtaining a controlled substance, 45 counts of distributing controlled substances for no medical reason, and seven counts of

obtaining controlled substances by fraud or misrepresentation, for a total of 53 federal charges.

Appearing with Dr. Gowder in court that Friday were his wife Lita and attorneys Jeff Brickman of Atlanta and Jeff Wolff of Dahlonega.

“Dr. Gowder is a perfect example of the well-respected and successful doctors who, like many people in this country, are addicted,” Brickman said. “From the get-go, he has accepted full responsibility for poor choices.

“He has continued to express great remorse for his actions. Since his arrest, he has continued to cooperate with the district attorney in Union County and the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Dr. Gowder has done a remarkable job addressing his addiction and continues on the road to recovery with the support of his entire family.”

As previously reported, David Gowder, along with co-defendants brother Mike Gowder and Dr. James Heaton, pleaded not guilty to federal charges in both the original April 2018 indictment and the January 2019 superseding indictment.

Mike Gowder and Dr. Heaton are still set to appear in federal court for a jury trial that will begin on April 8. Both men are presumed innocent of the charges against them, according to the U.S. District Attorney’s Office in Atlanta, “and it will be the government’s burden to prove each defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at

trial.”

At the time of their alleged crimes, Mike Gowder was the CEO of Union General Hospital and Dr. Heaton ran a family practice clinic in Blairsville.

Dr. David Gowder was the emergency room director at Union General Hospital when he was initially arrested on April 1, 2015, for allegedly attempting to fill fraudulent prescriptions in Fannin County, according to authorities.

Back home in Union County, Dr. Gowder is still facing criminal charges in the state’s case brought by Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley.

In April 2017, Langley presented evidence to a Union County Grand Jury that resulted in Dr. Gowder being indicted on four counts of forgery and more than 60 counts involving fraud in obtaining controlled substances, as well as the unauthorized dispensing of narcotic medication.

“We will not make a determination upon what we are going to do with his state charges until he is sentenced in the federal system, and then I will consider whether or not that sentence is adequate,” Langley said following Dr. Gowder’s guilty plea.

Motions filed last year by the separate legal teams of Mike Gowder and Heaton to sever each other as co-defendants so that they may be tried separately were still outstanding at press time.

Hiawassee PD...from Page 1A

The city of Sunny Isles Beach, Florida, has a tax base of roughly \$12 billion, according to Russo.

In other city news, Hiawassee drained its million-gallon water tank over the weekend to perform several days’ worth of maintenance this week on the 13-year-old tank.

Such maintenance is supposed to be done every six to seven years, so this will be a long overdue first for the tank. No water interruption is expected during the process.



The donation included six laser speed guns, pictured here with Police Chief Paul Smith. Photo by Mark Smith