

Towns County Herald

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Brasstown Manor provides Easter Egg Hunt

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

According to some Towns County kindergartners, Good Friday on March 29 was “the best day ever” when Brasstown Manor Senior Living in Hiwassee put on its annual Easter Egg Hunt.

Some 1,500 eggs were laid out on the lawn, with several left accessible for children in wheelchairs. Among them was the coveted golden prize egg, hidden especially well in preparation for about 65 little egg hunters from Towns County Elementary School.

“The residents love seeing little children play and running around. It’s a fun event,” said Brasstown Executive Director Bobbie Rohr. “We did it for a long time, and then of course COVID hit us.”

The event made a comeback in 2022 and has been going strong ever since.

“It’s nice to be able to have events and let everybody out and (have) people come in,” added Rohr.

Staff and volunteers helped set up tables with snacks like Goldfish Crackers and spring-themed cupcakes decorated with Peeps rabbits, marshmallow bees, lambs and surprisingly lifelike flowers with petals of icing.

“I’m not Peter Rabbit, I’m Patti Rabbit,” joked Patti Bransford, who stood out wearing large pink rabbit ears among friends and fellow Brasstown Manor residents Carolyn Baker, Doris Wheeler and Virginia Tatum.

“Everybody gets excited to see the children,” Wheeler added. “We love to talk to the children when we get a

chance.”

Tatum, a former teacher, was reminiscing about her own past when she said, “There are drawbacks to teaching, but this is one of the fun moments.”

Indeed, there was plenty of fun to be had between both kids and Manor residents. The Easter Bunny made an appearance and received hugs from young and old Easter revelers alike, hopping around the field shortly after the egg hunt started at 10:30 a.m.

The kiddos were divided up by their classrooms, which were color coded. Pastel spring colors like blue, pink, green and purple matched the bright eggs hiding on the front lawn.

Noah Ayres got a little help when he was propped up for some Bunny snuggles out of his wheelchair, proudly holding his basket full of colorful eggs, See *Easter Egg Hunt*, Page 7



Brasstown Manor provided 1,500 colorful eggs filled with candy for delighted kindergartners on Good Friday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

VFW Post 7807 celebrates Vietnam War Vets Day



Pam Greene, right, of the Old Unicoi Trail Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, presented DAR coins to Vietnam Veterans attending the event, such as Joe Clemente, left. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Last Friday, March 29, the Hiwassee VFW Post 7807 tavern was overflowing with Vietnam War veterans who wanted to share stories of their time served and the bonds they forged during one of the United States’ most tumultuous eras.

The celebration marked the 51st year since the U.S. pulled its last military unit from the Southeastern Asian country, which many Americans didn’t even know existed until they

were inducted into the military to join the fight.

While many dodged the draft and protested the war, over three million Americans still served in and around Vietnam. Nearly 60,000 died during the war, and many more lost their lives afterward due to suicide, illness related to Agent Orange and several other conditions.

Friday’s celebration was meant to honor those who died and to “welcome home” the men and women who have, at times, been the victims of ridicule for risking their lives

at the insistence of their nation.

Along with giving Vietnam Veterans a chance to exercise their voices and bond over shared experiences, the VFW Post welcomed Daughters of the American Revolution Old Unicoi Trail Chapter member, Pam Greene, to honor them with coins from the National Society DAR.

In-country veterans also received imitation Vietnam Campaign Ribbons from Terry Howard, who served as a medic during the war in 1967 and ‘68. See *Vietnam Veterans*, Page 7

Great North American Eclipse coming on April 8

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

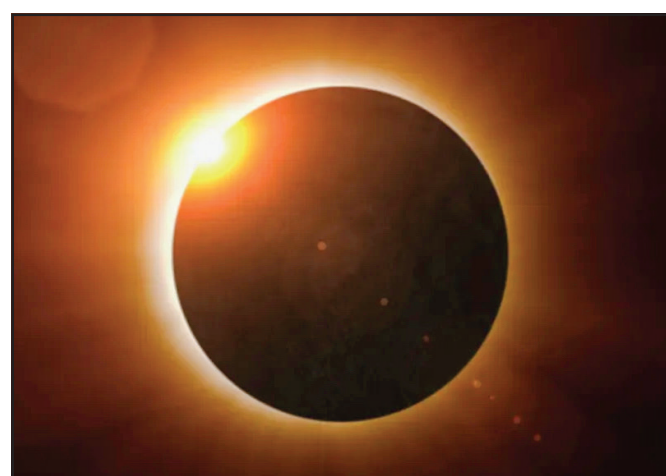
Mark your calendars and ready your safety glasses for this Monday, April 8, as a breathtaking celestial phenomenon returns to the United States for the first time since August 2017.

It’s hard to forget the total solar eclipse that turned out the lights in North Georgia that August; and while this area does not fall in the path of totality this time around, residents will still be able to view a partial eclipse if they follow the proper safety protocol.

A solar eclipse takes place when the moon passes between the Earth and the sun, blocking out a portion or the entirety of the sun from view. Solar eclipses are pretty common, occurring around two to four times a year.

Total solar eclipses – in which the entire sun is obstructed by the moon – are also fairly recurrent, although the path of totality is narrow and excludes most regions of the Earth. This makes viewing a total solar eclipse, even partially, a unique event.

In Blairsville, Young Harris and Hiwassee, the partial eclipse will begin around 1:47 p.m. and reach its most intense phase around



The solar eclipse on Monday will require certified safety glasses to view. Photo from blogs.nasa.gov/Watch_the_Skies/

3:06 p.m. The moon will cover roughly 87% of the sun at that point. For optimal viewing, residents should seek a place with open, clear skies.

Those who witnessed the 2017 eclipse may remember that a total eclipse is unique in the sense that viewers are able to remove their safety glasses during totality – the brief moment that the moon completely blocks out the sun. But that will not be possible here during this eclipse.

This year, the eclipse will pass over the South Pacific Ocean and cross Mexico, the United States and Canada. Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania,

New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine will be the only U.S. states to experience totality.

For viewers in all other states, including Georgia, it is necessary to wear ISO-certified eclipse safety glasses at all times while viewing the eclipse. While the sun will gradually be covered until only a crescent-shaped sliver is visible, its UV rays can still burn retinas beyond repair.

Professionals suggest purchasing either American Paper Optics or Rainbow Symphony glasses to ensure proper eye safety. Other ISO-certified glasses are available but to avoid falling victim to See *Eclipse*, Page 7

Bradshaw corrects road, names new Elections Board member

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw welcomed County Attorney Robb Kiker to his most recent regular meeting to explain a county road correction to fix an apparent decades-old clerical error that has become the basis of litigation against the county.

The litigation involves a property owner seeking extension of the county-maintained Hunnicutt Road to the North Carolina line, including construction and future maintenance of the new road section.

Specifically, the property owner has filed a petition for writ of mandamus against the county, which, if awarded, would compel the county to open and build Hunnicutt to the state line.

Doing so would require the county to cut across multiple other pieces of private



Comissioner Cliff Bradshaw in his March 19 regular meeting.

property, as the road, roughly three-tenths of a mile in its current state, would have to be extended by at least seven-tenths of a mile to reach North Carolina.

“We have opposed that petition,” Kiker said March 19. “As a result of that litigation, we have done our due diligence, done some research concerning

that road.

“And following some historical recollection – we had some locals who came forward to us and said they were familiar with the area and the road and gave us some information concerning the road.

“Following up on that See *County Meeting*, Page 6

Top of Georgia Speech Contest puts spotlight on student talent



In last month’s Top of Georgia Speech Contest, Union and Towns County students showcased the public-speaking skills they learned in the 2024 training program. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS – On March 20 at 6 p.m., the Top of Georgia Speech Contest

returned for its 14th year. In the Goolsby Auditorium of Young Harris College, students from Towns County and Union County Middle and High Schools competed for the

chance to win cash prizes.

Though the pool of participants was smaller this year, mentor and organizer Dr. Gerald Chotiner admitted that See *Top of Georgia*, Page 14

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SOCCER

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United
Community
Advisors

Smith's Legion Chapter #2699, United Daughters of the Confederacy welcomed Speaker Richard Smith



Ann Atchison, Chapter President, Young Harris; Richard Smith, Blairsville; Jeanette Earle, Vice President, Blairsville

Humanity is divided between those who love or hate the sound of the bagpipes — there's no middle ground. This isn't surprising given the characteristic sound of this unusual instrument, now identified largely, if not exclusively, with one nation — Scotland. They're a symbol of strength and the pride of Scotland. No other instrument has been so closely linked to a country, nor so loved by a people and yet so feared by their enemies. The sound of the bagpipe is so firmly associated with Scotland that many people quite naturally assume that the instrument was invented there. But six or seven centuries ago, bagpipes could be found in practically every country of Europe. Even today, pipers playing their own traditional bagpipes can be found in the traditional Celtic areas of England, Ireland, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Russia, Greece, the Slavic countries, the Baltic countries, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Tunisia, with 44 varieties of bagpipes being known in the world today. But the Great Highland Bagpipes of Scotland are easily the most widely recognized bagpipe.

The bagpipes, from its origins in the Middle East, Greece, and Egypt, likely evolving from a form of shepherd's pipes were crafted from bone with its simple finger holes. Over time, bagpipes evolved even further and were likely introduced to the in-

vading Romans, who adopted the bagpipe enthusiastically. The Roman legions, in their conquests, were probably responsible for their popularity in every far-flung corner of the empire. After the collapse of the Roman empire, bagpipes remained for a thousand years the most popular musical instrument in every country of Europe, with every European culture having their own native bagpipe. Further evolution through the Middle Ages resulted in the form of the bagpipes we know of today, with the height of its popularity being in the thirteenth century, at which the bagpipe was distributed over most of Europe. By the 17th century the popularity of the bagpipe began to decline. Pastoral lifestyles and instruments began to give way to more urban lifestyles and modern musical instruments.

That might have been the end of the bagpipe story, except for one nation — Scotland. The Great Highland Bagpipe has a special, perhaps unique, position in the modern world. It is unquestionably a 'folk' instrument, on the Pentatonic scale rather than the Chromatic scale like other Western music and is centuries old and not much different from its medieval ancestor. Its music's primitive origins can still be seen in its limited range — nine notes — one octave plus one note. Bagpipes were most likely introduced into the British Isles as early as 100 AD by the Roman legions.

There's evidence of their presence over the centuries since, and the earliest records date to the 14th century. The Great Highland Bagpipe reached its present stylistic appearance in the 1830s and has remained virtually unchanged. The Highlanders of Scotland maintained longer than any other place the older form of life, and all activities took place in the open air. In this way the Highland Bagpipe is today the one which everyone thinks of when they hear of piping, and this is the one which has spread throughout the world and superseded all other forms of the instrument. Other variations of bagpipes survived, yet the Great Highland Bagpipe of Scotland is by far the most dominant bagpipe and the one associated in most people's minds with that instrument. In the Scottish Highlands the bagpipe evolved as virtually a symbol of national existence.

After the final defeat of the Scots by the English at Culloden Moor in 1746, the subsequent wave of repression of everything identified as Scottish — tartan, kilts, Gaelic, the Clan system, and bagpipes — had a curious and opposite effect to what the victors intended for bagpipes. By the British Parliament declaring the bagpipe an "instrument of war", the English inadvertently created an underground movement that was fiercely determined to keep alive a national tradition. To this day, bagpipes are banned from the

British Houses of Parliament, as is the only musical instrument in history that was ever deemed a weapon of war. However, in the 18th century when Highland Regiments started being formed in the British Army, the Highlanders were allowed to wear kilts and tartan, and keep the very instrument the British were trying to suppress — the bagpipes. With the expansion of the British Empire in the 19th century, the Great Highland Bagpipe was carried to the far ends of the earth, and today, pipers and bagpipe bands, playing the Great Highland Bagpipe, can be found in such places as Egypt, Jordan, India, Pakistan, Burma, and Thailand. There are even bagpipe bands in the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Indian armies. It can be said that the British Army saved the Great Highland Bagpipes from oblivion.

Now, what about bagpipes in the War for Southern Independence? Since the vast majority of Southerners were of Scottish and Irish descent, and we know there were units in the Confederate army comprised mainly of these descendants, it's reasonable to think

that they had bagpipers. We also know that drums were used extensively to maintain discipline within the ranks, relay commands, and set marching cadences. In doing research, the first recorded instance is of bagpipers as part of the Union Army — the 79th New York Regiment, a volunteer unit, comprised of mostly Irish descendants. The Regiment was patterned after British Highland regiments, and in their muster parade many members wore kilts. There is also a photo of the 79th on parade that shows pipers in the front ranks. Reports of pipers in the armies are few, but we can infer that they must have been serving in the ranks of regiments in both armies in some capacity. We know there were a number of bagpipers in the South and have to believe some Confederate soldiers took their pipes with them when they joined the army. Also, since the winning side of any war writes the accepted history of the conflict, perhaps Confederate pipers were stricken from the record! This can only be inferred without proof, but we imagine the Confederate pipers of that

time are simply being ignored. Richard Smith is a member of the David W. Payne Camp, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Blairsville, and is the Pipe Major of the Appalachian St. Andrew's Pipes and Drums of Blairsville. The Smith's Legion Chapter meet most every 4th Saturday, 11 AM, at the Davenport Veteran's Building, Blairsville. Chapter members are from Towns, Union, and Fannin Counties of GA, and from Clay and Cherokee Counties of NC. Eligibility requirements for the UDC include women, 18 years of age and older, who have a Confederate Veteran in their blood line, lineal or collateral. If you are interested in joining the UDC and you are not sure of your ancestry, we can help you search your family lineage. Individuals interested in helping to preserve Southern Heritage, but have no southern lineage, can join as an Associate. For more information, please contact TARA62860@aol.com. There is also a local Sons of Confederate Veterans' (SCV) David W. Payne Camp #1633, SCV, Blairsville, should men be interested in joining their organization.

County Meeting...from Page 1



Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and Towns County Historical Society Vice President Jerry Taylor and President Tyler Osborn during a special recognition of Taylor's 25 years as official county historian. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

information, we had a title examination run to determine whether or not the historical recollection was correct, and lo and behold, it was."

According to Kiker, Hunnicutt Road, aka County Road 78, incorrectly referenced an old deed from 1939 that, at first glance, appeared to back up the property owner's petition that the county needs to open the road.

The old records showed that a road had been deeded to the county "for the construction of road to the North Carolina line." But upon further investigation, the county determined that the road number was incorrectly recorded as 78 instead of County Road 75, or Mull Road, Kiker said.

Historically, part of Mull Road became submerged when Lake Chatuge was completed in 1942, and as it turned out, the county discovered evidence that the deed in question was actually supposed to reference Mull for the purpose of relocating the roadway there to build the dam.

"We need to correct our record to then correct the record with the state," Kiker said. "The commissioner is the custodian of the records of the county."

"So, based on our research and information obtained from the historical record together with the title examination, I'm going to ask if the commissioner will direct the minutes to reflect that Deed Book Q, Page 372 — the deed from 1939 — be deleted as a reference deed for County Road 78, commonly known as Hunnicutt Road, and then (be) established as the source of Road No. 75, Mull Road."

Bradshaw officially authorized the correction of the county records related to the road reference, and he authorized Kiker and his staff "to contact the Georgia Department of Transportation to correct the records."

It remained unclear at press time how the correction to reflect the apparent clerical error in the county road map would impact the pending litigation, as the state accepting the correction would remove the deed basis for the petition.

Also in the meeting, Bradshaw appointed resident Steve Harper to the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration.

Commissioner Bradshaw reached out to me and told me that beloved former TCHS Principal Roy Perren was resigning his position as chair of the Board of Elections in order to run for a position on the School Board, and asked if I would be interested in taking over for him," Harper said after the meeting.

Harper, who has experience as an attorney and served as the program manager of the Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority until recently, said he prayed over the offer and gave it "careful consideration" before accepting the position.

"My father, who escaped Castro's communism with his parents and siblings in 1960 and became a legal U.S. citizen shortly thereafter, instilled in me a profound love for democracy," Harper said. "I am looking forward to working hard with my fellow board members to ensure that we continue to have free and fair elections here in Towns County."

Among other business, Bradshaw signed a proclamation recognizing April as Mountain Community Chorus Month to honor the singing group's 50th anniversary and its "positive impact on the wellbeing of people across various populations."

He also heard from Jerry Taylor and Tyler Osborn of the Towns County Historical Society for a presentation recognizing the county's recent 168th birthday. Bradshaw honored Taylor with an appreciation plaque celebrating his 25 years as the official Towns County Historian.

Additionally, Bradshaw adopted a 2024 budget amendment to transfer \$65,000 from the Towns County Jail Fund to the Towns County Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff's Office has eliminated a jail

position and will be using the money instead for capital expenses like a patrol car and cameras.

At the end of the meeting, the commissioner gave an update on the SPLOST-funded renovation and addition project at the Towns County Courthouse.

"We're getting very close (to finishing)," Bradshaw said. "I met with (the construction company) this morning, and their punchout list is getting very small now. This is just an estimate ... but they're thinking maybe the second week in April they will be able to turn that over to us."

"So, we will get with the newspaper and social media and contact everybody we can. We're going to have three grand opening days; we'll do a Monday, a Tuesday and a Thursday from 5-7 p.m."

"We'll probably do one day for invites — we've got a lot of people at the (State Capitol) that actually want to come ... and then we'll have two nights for the public."

Bradshaw will make the grand opening dates available as soon as possible, "and then after we do the grand opening, the following week we will move in."

"We are super, super, super excited about this," Bradshaw added. "I'm down there every day, I cannot stay away. We're talking about history — that courthouse is still standing. It did not get torn down, and it will be there a long, long time, because the courthouse is built for future growth."

Commission meetings are the third Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m. They have been taking place at the Temporary Courthouse Offices inside the Old Rec Gym due to construction at the county courthouse, though it won't be long until meetings resume in the renovated building.

AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation



AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Wednesdays from 10 a.m. — 2 p.m. beginning February 7 through April 10. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-515, Blairsville, GA.

This service is by appointment only. Please call (770) 403-7959 for reservations.

Other AARP Tax Aide locations are: Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10:00 - 2:00, February 9 - April 12 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge; Ellijay on Mondays from 10:00 - 2:00, February 12 - April 8 at the Gilmer County Library, 268 Calvin Jackson Drive, Ellijay.

Blue Ridge and Ellijay are also by appointment only. Please call (770) 312-2258 for reservations at these locations.

Easter Egg Hunt...from Page 1

though the giant rabbit headed back to the manor's lawn soon after checking out each group's haul.

Everyone got a little something to bring home, with every egg containing sweet treats. That said, three children came out on top. Brandt Lloyd found the lucky golden egg buried in leaf litter under a bush, so he got one of three big Easter baskets containing prizes and all sorts of toys.

Gabriella Benedict found an impressive 49 eggs, earning her the girls' prize for the most eggs gathered. Garrett LaShomb, meanwhile, won the same for the boys with his basket of 44 eggs. For their hunting prowess, both received Easter baskets with various goodies wrapped up inside.

After their hard work hunting eggs, the little guys and gals sat down for snacks and some juice pouches before loading up on buses and heading back to class. Most of the residents returned indoors to beat the windy day, but some, like Bransford and Tatum, lingered outside.

"Doesn't it make you feel wonderful to see them having fun? It just makes me feel happy," said Bransford with a smile.



Friends Patti Bransford, Doris Wheeler and Virginia Tate had a blast interacting with the children during the Easter Egg Hunt.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



The Easter Bunny posed with the three big basket winners from Friday's egg hunt at Brasstown Manor: Garrett LaShomb, Gabriella Benedict and Brandt Lloyd.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Vietnam Veterans...from Page 1

While many of the Veterans present on Friday had similar experiences, only Howard and Clarence "Butch" Underwood actually shared one.

"I was in Vietnam in '68," said Underwood. "I went over there at age 18 and turned 18 while I was there, (although) I only spent eight months there. I was wounded, and they medevacked me to Củ Chi, where (Howard) worked."

While under the care of Howard and his colleagues, Underwood was injured for the second time in only two days as a result of a North Vietnamese attack on Củ Chi, a rural district of Ho Chi Minh City.

Both men survived, and Underwood was finally sent back home on crutches after a four-month recovery in the hospital. Even though he was on a path back to physical recovery, like many Vietnam War veterans, he suffered with mental conditions for quite some time.

"I (made) about four or five trips to the VA and the PTSD minimum ward – one time for 54 days from flashbacks and getting hooked on opioids," shared Underwood, who has since recovered and married the woman he first loved at



Veteran Terry Howard handed out imitation Vietnam Campaign Ribbon keychains to any Vietnam Veterans that served in-country.
Photo by Daysha Pandolph

14-years old. "I kicked it and I got my first real sweetheart back. I'm lucky to be back; I'm glad to be back; and welcome home to me!" Underwood said triumphantly.

The struggles that Underwood faced upon returning from Vietnam were not his alone. After spending what felt like a lifetime witnessing and inflicting death and destruction, many veterans suffered from mental instability.

Mel Halfon, who had never even heard of Vietnam before he was drafted into the war, recalled his dramatic transformation into a soldier thrust into the violent jungle.

"They trained me – a little momma's boy – to be a killer, and they paid me to go to

Vietnam and kill," Halfon said. Most draftees underwent a similar transformation when they were stripped from their American homes and sent across the globe to face an unfamiliar enemy. Such a drastic lifestyle change can be detrimental to a person's mental health, and many veterans struggled with returning to their typical home lives after exposure to combat.

The wounds inflicted, both physically and psychologically, lingered long past withdrawal from the war on March 29, 1973, and last Friday's celebration honored the Vietnam Veterans who have pushed through so much hardship to return to a simple American life here in Towns County.

Towns County's United Community Bank Junior Board of Directors Tours State Capitol on March 27, 2024



On March 27th, the United Community Bank Junior Board of Directors traveled to Atlanta for a guided tour of the State Capitol. Pictured Back Row L-R: Kade McConnell, Brant Youngblood, Tanner Cunningham, Nick Pyrlík, Zane Floyd, Connor Chastain. Middle Row L-R: Brenlee Kitchens, Laura Mauldin, Haley Berrong, Cheryl Barrett. Front Row L-R: Brandon Grimsley, Jay Grimsley, Josie Poston, Dhriti Patel, and State Representative Stan Gunter.

Eclipse...from Page 1

unsafe counterfeit varieties like many viewers did in 2017, they advise sticking to those brands.

The Great North American Eclipse offers a rare opportunity for people from Mexico's Pacific Coast all the way to the Atlantic Coast of Newfoundland, Canada, to view an astronomical sensation from home, so don't miss out!

Another total solar

eclipse will not be visible from the contiguous United States until Aug. 23, 2044.

For more information on the eclipse, visit <https://science.nasa.gov/eclipses/future-eclipses/eclipse-2024/where-when/>.

To learn how to spot fake eclipse glasses, check out <https://aas.org/press/american-astronomical-society-warns-counterfeit-fake-eclipse-glasses>.

Towns County Fire knocks down blaze in Young Harris

News Special

YOUNG HARRIS – The Towns County Fire Department responded to an early morning fire off Georgia 66 on Monday, March 25.

Fire Chief Harold Copeland reported there were no injuries and that the homeowners were able to escape safely from the home that was destroyed in the fire.

The wind-driven blaze burned quickly, endangering two homes above it, but firefighters did an excellent job saving other structures when the fire was “to the walls of other homes,” Chief Copeland said.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, with no foul play suspected.

Chief Copeland offered many thanks last week for mutual aid assistance from the Union County Fire Department, Clay County Fire Department of North Carolina and the Georgia Forestry Commission.

Responding for Towns County were Fire Engine 2,



Towns County Firefighters and mutual aid partners had their hands full with this early morning fire off Georgia 66 last week. Thankfully, no one was injured.

Tanker 2, Engine 3, Tanker 1 and Towns County EMS.

Photo/Facebook

Top of Georgia...from Page 1



UCHS Freshman Adalyn Collins placed first in the High School Division of the Top of Georgia Speech Contest on March 20.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

the judges had their work cut out for them with such skilled orators.

And indeed, the crowd was moved several times, with some audibly gasping, laughing or standing up and clapping after the delivery of certain speeches.

Middle School Division contenders included Ella Chandler with “Dreams”; Josiah Kay with “How Our Way of Living Is Not Sustainable”; Eli Hancock with “Nuclear Fusion”; Grace Lacy with “‘Now and Then’ The Beatles”; and Caleb Taylor with “Why We Failed the First Amendment.”

The High School Division was made up of Leland Wilson with “AI in Sports”; Erin Beggs with “Why Is History Important to Learn”; Adalyn Collins with “Self-Defense for Abuse Victims”; Caleb Sheffield with “The Youth of America & Why They Need Help”; Joanna Kay with “Harmful Ingredients in Everyday Items”; Loftin Turpin with “Farm to Table Benefits of Local Farmers”; Sophia Gobin with “Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy;” and McKenzie Bourbeau with “What Is a Hero.”

Lily Cannon, who would have spoken on the history of women’s sports, was unable to attend due to illness.

But before the students presented their work, Keynote Speaker and Young Harris College President Dr. Drew Van Horn offered an inspiring tale of beating the odds at a young age to illustrate the importance of showing courage in the face of fear.

Rather than stage fright, Van Horn faced down undiagnosed deafness as a very young child, suffering ridicule by teachers and other students until one educator noticed how unresponsive he was to his own name.

The bones of his inner ear had been ruined by frequent ear infections and perforated his eardrum, requiring intensive reconstructive surgery. Van Horn did not accept the labels that had been put on him and went on to accomplish outstanding feats to finally stand before the crowd that day.

“Those of you who are going to speak tonight, are you going to join me on the team of being determined?” Van Horn asked, adding, “Looking at you and meeting some of you, I think my team just got a lot stronger.”

As it turned out, the students were determined. While it’s clear that each one was a winner in their own right, there could be only three who took home a combined total of \$3,000 in monetary prizes at the end of the night.

In the Middle School Division, Josiah Kay and Caleb Taylor earned Third and Second Place respectively. As for the High School Division, Loftin

Turpin once again went home with Third Place, and Sophia Gobin earned Second Place.

Grace Lacy’s stunning presentation won First Place in the Middle School Division. A die-hard Beatles fan, the Union County student even showed up wearing a shirt emblazoned with the Fab Four.

She shared with the audience that the band, despite long falling from their prime in the 1960s and losing two members, was still popular, and released a new song in November 2023, to boot.

But how could such a feat be accomplished? Artificial intelligence has come a long way, and that, Lacy said, was the answer.

John Lennon had recorded previously unreleased songs that were later revisited by the rest of the band in the 1990s, but one of them, “Now and Then,” was never released.

Using AI developed by Peter Jackson of “The Lord of the Rings” fame, Lennon’s vocals were lifted from the original demo of “Now and Then,” and archival recordings of George Harrison’s guitar were layered onto the audio.

Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr – still living members of the band – added their own touches, making the new song an authentic, awesome send-off for the band.

Another Union County student, Adalyn Collins, took home First Place for the High School Division. Collins passionately argued that in cases where victims of abuse murder their abusers, they should be treated with more empathy by the public and more mercy by court systems.

To do that, she had to set up a compelling debate, and she came prepared.

First, Collins introduced the audience to some of the victims-turned-suspects. Familiar names like Kiranjit Ahluwalia, Erik and Lyle Menendez, and Sarah Gonzales-McLinn were given backgrounds – reasons for their actions.

Each had suffered through cases of extreme domestic violence and abuse, and each escaped by killing their abusers.

To add merit, Collins explained laws that could have been used as defense in the aforementioned cases, like castle doctrines, and cited studies on the subject. Using philosophical questions and ethics, Collins called on the audience to consider that “we don’t have room in our prisons to hold victims.”

Congratulations to all the students and public-speaking mentors who participated in and made possible the six-week Top of Georgia speech training course and competition, which every year imparts invaluable life skills around public speaking.