

Ledford...from Page 1A



Caleb Ledford with the host and judges of "Forged in Fire."

Photo/Submitted

coveted title of "Forged in Fire Champion."

He just needed to convince the show's producers.

Ledford first caught the attention of "Forged in Fire" back in March 2019 after he completed the online application while still a senior at Towns County High School.

"After I applied, they sent back a long list of questions, and within a few days, they reviewed the questions and moved on to a phone call," he said. "The call was just a short little spiel of what they were expecting if I went on the show."

"From there, they went to a Skype interview, which was one-on-one with the producer. They wanted to talk to me in person, see some of my work and make sure that I'm comfortable being on camera."

Ledford waited until May to learn his fate, but the delay was worth it once he received the wonderful news.

"They said it would take a while before I would hear back, and I expected that," he said. "But when they finally contacted me, they said that after reviewing my information, they wanted me on the show."

In September, Ledford traveled to New York City to participate in the taping of the episode, which was titled "Baby Boomer vs. Gen Z."

Joining the 18-year-old Ledford was a 19-year-old named "Zach," 68-year-old "Jimmy" and the eventual champion, a 58-year-old man named "Forrest."

During the show's introductory segment, Ledford told the viewers, "As young as I am, I want to make a name for myself and prove to everyone that a small-town kid can do big things."

The show kicked off with the contestants building a Bowie knife with the option to construct a "new school" Bowie or an "old school" Bowie.

Ledford immediately went against the grain, choos-

ing the new Bowie, with the other three contestants going "old school."

"Two things went into my decision," Ledford said. "The old-school way was a lot more physically challenging. With the new school, I had already used a lot of the (modern) equipment and even own some of it."

"So, the choice came down to something that would be more physical or one that would be more mental, and I went with the mental."

Ledford added that the contestants are all unaware of the project until the taping is underway, forcing them to make quick decisions since they're dealing with a three-hour time limit to design and construct their blades.

"The making (of the knife) itself wasn't that challenging, because it's something I've done before, but the time limit really added to the difficulty of the entire process," he said.

One interesting story from Ledford's experience on the show that never made it off the cutting-room floor was an injury he suffered during the early rounds.

While sculpting the Bowie knife on set in New York, he caught his thumb in a grinder, ripping the nail away and cutting off his thumb tip. But with a three-hour time limit ticking away, Ledford chose not to seek medical attention, continuing the project while dealing with the pain.

"I ground the end of my thumb off twice on one of the big grinders," he said. "Same thumb both times."

In the final round, Forrest and a bloodied and bandaged Ledford returned to their home forges in early October to build one last blade, a replication of ancient China's "Sword of Goujian."

Back home in Towns County, Ledford went to work recreating a sword once wielded by nine different Kings of Yue between 510 BC and 334

BC.

Upon completion, Ledford returned to New York, where his sword, like his Bowie knife in the early rounds, underwent a series of strength and sharpness trials.

Despite crafting the better-looking blade, the handle on Ledford's sword became loose during the testing. After some discussion by the judges, they determined that Ledford's weapon was unsafe for further testing, resulting in his disqualification.

When asked about the judges' verdict, Ledford said he harbored no ill feelings and saluted Forrest, admitting that if he was going to lose, he was glad it came at the hands of such a nice guy.

"It was just a simple overlook on my part, but I want to congratulate Forrest, he did great," Ledford said. "I realize now that wood I used (for the handle) is just too brittle, but also, I don't test my knives quite to the extremes that (the show does)."

"Looking back, I would have used a different wood and maybe wrapped it with something. But then again, it could have just been a fluke thing."

After returning to Young Harris and to his friends and family, Ledford was forced to keep the show results a secret for seven months. The only people aware of the outcome were his parents, Jason and Larinda Ledford.

"I kept it a secret as best I could," he said. "Everyone had their guesses (at the outcome), but only my parents knew how I finished overall."

Once the show finally aired, everyone he knew, and even a few total strangers, began blowing up his phone and social media accounts. As a result, he spent the better part of the next two days responding to messages.

"It took me until Friday to reply to everybody, some I had no idea who they were," he said. "They were all really positive comments, and

everyone was telling me that I should have won. I appreciate everyone and their support, but I'm happy (for Forrest); he's a super-nice guy."

Caleb Ledford remains occupied juggling classes at North Georgia Technical College in Clarkesville while performing an apprenticeship at Blairsville's Corrugated Replacements.

He still mans his home forge during his spare time, filling knife requests from customers, and already, he's witnessed an uptick in orders since his television appearance.

"I'm still making knives and always looking for ways to get better," he said. "Since the show, I've had several requests. With school and work, I'm not filling them as fast as I'd like to, but I'm still out there in the shop, working pretty much daily."

For additional info or to contact Ledford, the public can reach out via Instagram at @ledford_works or visit his website at ledfordworks.com.

"Forged in Fire" airs Wednesdays at 9 p.m. on the History Channel. Past episodes, including Ledford's appearance in Season 7, Episode 29, may be viewed at history.com.

Businesses...from Page 1A

with safety precautions in place, like masks, increased sanitation and limited capacity for patrons, including Tom's Barber Shop, Glow Hair & Nail Salon, Head Shots Hair Salon and Galaxy Bowling, all in neighboring Blairsville.

However, quite a few closed Towns County businesses have decided to postpone reopening their doors until at least the first week of May. Hiawasse Hair Company, however, opened April 24, making sure to employ all of the safety measures required by the state.

And effective Monday, April 27, Kemp allowed theaters, private social clubs and restaurant dine-in services to open, provided these businesses adhere to "specific social distancing and sanitation mandates."

Fieldstone Cinemas Six announced on April 2 that it would be temporarily closing its doors, and the cinema's plans moving forward were not known at press time.

The governor released extensive guidance for restaurants and other businesses to follow on April 23, including guidelines compelling social distancing and frequent sanitation, limiting the number of people allowed in buildings, requiring employee health screenings, etc.

Area restaurants that have decided to stay open have been offering solely takeout and curbside service since before Kemp's April 3 shelter-in-place order went into effect, and it seems that most local restaurants will continue to keep their interior dining areas closed for the time being.

The Sand Bar & Grille announced last week that it would be reopening for business April 27, offering

spaced bench seating under a large canopy tent to allow for covered outdoor dining and social distancing, all while following the appropriate safety guidelines.

Kemp is also enabling health care facilities to voluntarily resume elective procedures "deemed essential," citing his belief that Georgia's hospitals will continue to be able to handle COVID-19 patients while maintaining appropriate levels of personal protective equipment.

"Bars, nightclubs, operators of amusement park rides, and live performance venues will remain closed," Kemp said. "In the days ahead, we will be evaluating the data and conferring with public health officials to determine the best course of action for those establishments."

"By taking this measured action, we will get Georgians back to work safely without undermining the progress that we have all made in the battle against COVID-19."

The governor's latest measures apply statewide "and will be the operational standard in all jurisdictions," he said, meaning local governments in individual communities may not take more or less restrictive action regarding the operations of businesses and facilities.

"We urge everyone to continue to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Department of Public Health guidance by sheltering in place as often as you can," Kemp said. "Limit your travel and limit who goes with you on errands to prevent potential exposure."

"If possible, wear face masks or cloth coverings when you are in public to slow the spread of coronavirus."

Since making his

announcement, Gov. Kemp has experienced both support and criticism at the local, state and national levels.

Notably, the president said multiple times last week that he disagreed with Kemp's decision to reopen certain businesses so soon, and many health officials outside of the governor's core Georgia Department of Public Health team have advised against early reopening.

And Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw said he felt Kemp was opening things up too soon as well.

"I truly understand that businesses need to reopen," Bradshaw said. "People are hurting and need to be working; I understand it completely. However, I think Gov. Kemp acted several weeks too early."

"We're looking at the numbers, they're growing in Georgia, they're growing in our area. Naturally, I worry about the whole country and the state, but I'm definitely more concerned about our area, and the numbers are increasing. So, in my opinion, he absolutely acted too early."

Ramping up testing in the coming days will be crucial to limiting the spread of COVID-19 and maintaining a flattened infection curve, as mass testing will allow health care professionals to quickly identify hot spots for aggressive contact tracing in the hopes of preventing widespread outbreaks.

Towns County's first reported case of COVID-19 was announced at the beginning of April, and the county has experienced a jump in cases over the last three weeks, including at least one resident at Chatuge Regional Nursing Home and one inmate at the Towns County Jail, and potentially multiple Detention Center officers.