

Towns County Herald

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School Board OKs off-campus Bible elective

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In the May 6 regular meeting of the Towns County Board of Education, it was revealed that a new option for religious learning will be available for students by next winter.

District Attorney Jeff Langley, as the Chair of the Appalachian Christian Leadership Council, first introduced the idea of released-time Bible education at last month's meeting. Although considered an elective, students could still earn credits for attending and completing a class.

Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said that, in his research conducted since then, Fannin County witnessed an overwhelmingly positive re-

sponse among students after implementing released-time Bible education.

"So, what we're going to do tonight is go ahead and approve it so you can start getting it on the calendar," said Board Member Stephanie McConnell.

In the meantime, the Appalachian Christian Leadership Council will work on putting together the specifics, like finding a teacher, and the School District will gauge student interest.

Jim Yohe, Deputy Chair of the Appalachian Christian Leadership Council, said that a curriculum would also be written up and shared with the board.

On a similar note, High School students will soon have even more options for elec-

tives. A new half-time position has opened for a teacher to cover one chorus class and one drama class. Both will be taught by Adam Trotman.

Trotman, husband of Towns County Elementary School Music Teacher Jordan Trotman, has five years of experience teaching both subjects and is a graduate of Young Harris College.

For the moment, the low population of Towns County Middle School means that the two classes will only be available at the High School.

"We just don't have the student population right now to support a full-time person," Berrong said after the meeting. "Our hope is that Mr. Trotman will come in, get some excitement behind the program, get



School Board Members Stephanie McConnell, Brandon Grimsley and Sara Rogers in a recent meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Connor Chastain signs to play baseball at YHC



TCHS senior baseball player Connor Chastain, third from left, with his dad Michael, mom Erica and twin sister Hope during his Young Harris College signing ceremony last week. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Baseball's Connor Chastain is staying home after the senior catcher inked a scholarship with Young Harris College on Wednesday, May 8.

After deliberating where to spend the next four years, Chastain selected the Enchanted Valley over Truett McConnell and Emmanuel.

"It was a big decision in my life," Chastain said. "I talked to my family and friends about it; I also prayed about it. I had two other options, and after a lot of thought, consideration and prayer, I felt that (Young Harris) is where I was

called to be."

While location contributed to his choice, academics played a significant role for Chastain, who will major in education and pursue a career as a teacher or coach.

"Academically, it worked out perfectly," he said. "I've already taken some dual-enrollment classes (at YHC), so academics is definitely one of the first things I looked at."

During his four years on the diamond under Towns County Head Coach Shannon Floyd, Chastain spent most of his time behind the plate, and he doesn't expect that to change as he jumps to the next level.

However, he was strai-

ghtforward that his top priority is winning games for the Mountain Lions.

"The plan is to be a catcher, but I will play wherever they need me to help the team," he said. "I don't know what (Young Harris') expectations are for me in year one, but I feel like it's a great atmosphere where everyone pushes each other to get better."

Chastain served as Towns County's everyday catcher on two Sweet 16 squads that included an Elite Eight appearance in 2023, gaining him valuable experience as the Indians' backstop. And he was behind the plate during Kade McConnell's season.

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Eight senior students commit to careers in education

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Eight bright young people set to graduate from Towns County High School this month committed to going into teaching on Future Educators Signing Day May 7.

Typically, only one or two students are involved in the event each year, but 2024 was the most the system has ever seen according to Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Director Melissa McConnell.

"We've been doing this for about five years now," said McConnell during the introduction before explaining that the students were only signing a certificate stating their intention of going into the field of education; no contracts

were involved.

Cheyenne Doche plans to attend Truett McConnell University and teach second grade.

Josie Poston wants to go to Young Harris College, after which she'll teach health care science or elementary education.

Haley Berrong will go to the University of North Georgia's Dahlonega campus in the fall before settling on teaching second or third grade.

Zane Floyd will also attend UNG to earn a degree in education and specialize in speech pathology.

Connor Chastain plans to attend Young Harris College and major in education.

Hope Chastain will head to Young Harris as well

See Future Educators, Page 8A



L-R: Emma Dale, Anabella Willson, Hope Chastain, Connor Chastain, Zane Floyd, Haley Berrong, Josie Poston and Cheyenne Doche are the future of education. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Hiawassee man arrested for out-of-town burglaries

News Special

On March 17, Cobb County Police Officers took a report from a resident in the 600 block of Sunshine Trace. Someone had broken into his home while he was out of town and stolen 12 firearms from within, including handguns and rifles.

Despite an extensive neighborhood canvass, no productive leads were generated.

The victim installed an interior security camera and, on April 8, caught video of

the suspect returning a second time. Ofc. Gentry and Ofc. Reynolds responded to the scene and took a second report where an additional 10 firearms were stolen, including one NFA-restricted rifle.

Detectives recovered a headlamp from the scene with blonde hair inside, but other than the video, no further leads were generated.

On April 21, Hiawassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker took a call from Greenwood

See Leech Arrested, Page 4A



James Daniel Leech

ICE places hold on illegal immigrant booked for DUI

News Special

On Sunday, May 5, Alfonso Esteban Botista was booked into the Towns County Detention Center, having been charged with driving under the influence, driving without a valid license, and brake light/turn signal violations.

Sheriff Ken Henderson notified detention officers to contact officials with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to verify Botis-

ta's immigration status.

It was discovered Botista is an undocumented immigrant. ICE placed an immigration hold on Botista and will be picking him up.

Botista also has warrants out of Florida for failure to appear.

Sheriff Henderson stated that he is committed to "keeping our community safe."

All individuals are innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.



Alfonso Esteban Botista

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Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,687.40
Chatuge 1,925.65
Nottely 1,776.29



NOTICE NOTICE NOTICE
Next week's newspaper delivery will be one day late to accommodate May 21 Election Results.



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Leech Arrested...from Page 1A



These weapons and more were seized in the arrest of James Daniel Leech. Photo/Facebook

County Sheriff's Office in reference to a recent burglary. Chief Parker and Investigator Conway began working closely with the Greenwood County Sheriff's Office, and Hiwassee Police executed a search warrant on a home in the City of Hiwassee related to the residential burglary that occurred in Greenwood County, South Carolina.

During the execution of this warrant, Chief Parker, Investigator W. Conway and Officer J. Carvajal recovered items identified in the burglary in Greenwood County and ar-

rested Caitlin Robertson, the wife of James Leech, with two counts of theft by receiving stolen property, one count of theft by bringing stolen property into the state, one count of theft by receiving stolen property from another state, and one count unlawful possession of a dangerous weapon.

During the execution of the search warrant, Chief Parker located a short-barreled rifle and a lower receiver in a resident's bedroom. Both of these firearms were later confirmed as stolen from the Sunshine Trace break-ins in Cobb

County, Georgia.

Detectives from Cobb County Police were notified and then traveled to Hiwassee the next day and served a follow-up search warrant on the same home located within the City of Hiwassee.

During the initial search warrant conducted by Hiwassee Police, multiple suspicious animal parts were also located within the residence. Department of Natural Resources Ranger J. Turner was notified. Through his investigation it was determined that these animal parts were illegal to pos-

sess. Turner also was able to execute his search warrant at the same time as Cobb Police. During this second search, detectives with Cobb Police located several more pieces of evidence relating specifically to their case: pawn tickets for firearm parts, a black backpack, ammunition, receipts from Cobb County, and a cardboard box for a weapon accessory.

The black backpack was later matched back to the case by a video comparison. The pawn tickets led detectives to shops in Cleveland and Blairsville, Georgia, where detectives were able to identify, confirm, and recover additional firearm parts, all stolen from Sunshine Trace and pawned by the suspect James Leech.

Ranger Turner seized the items indicated in his search warrant and took them for identification. Ranger Turner secured warrants for James Daniel Leech with 19 counts of illegal hunting/possession of bird parts.

Caitlin Robertson has since been released on bond for her charges.

On May 9, while continuing to work closely with the other agencies, detectives discovered recent license-plate recognition hits for the

suspect's black Tundra in the Canton Road area of Cobb County. Cobb Police Officers and Detectives responded to the area and located the truck driving on Jamerson Road.

Upon the truck's arrival at a residence, officers took James Daniel Leech into custody from the passenger seat of the vehicle. A search incident to arrest yielded additional stolen weapon parts and ammunition on his person and within the vehicle.

Leech was transported to Precinct One. During a recorded interview, Leech provided the location for three more weapons which were recovered from a pawn shop in Cobb County.

James Daniel Leech was booked into the Cobb County Adult Detention Center and held without bond for the following charges: two counts of first-degree burglary, two counts of possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, and unlawful possession of firearms or weapons.

He will soon face additional charges related to the unlawful pawn of stolen firearms in Cobb and is further being held on detainer for charges in Blairsville, Georgia, White County, Georgia, Greenwood County, South Carolina, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

es, all stemming from these incidents.

Chief Jeremy Parker would like to commend the diligence of all of these agencies working together.

"Working together and sharing information has brought justice for these victims, and got weapons, which were illegally possessed, off the streets of our communities, and out of the hands of criminals," Parker said.

Chief Parker would also like to mention that the innovation of ALPR technology has served as a force multiplier to many agencies to assist in locating and apprehending criminals.

These investigations are far from over, and charges are expected from other jurisdictions including Union County, Georgia, and White County, Georgia.

All suspects are innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

"All officers are to be commended for their diligent efforts in bringing these cases to a successful resolution," Parker said.

This press release is in conjunction with information received from Cobb County Police Detectives, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and the Hiwassee Police Department.

School Board...from Page 1A

students enrolled, and we can hopefully, within the next year or two, make that a full-time job."

And speaking of new positions, someone has been found to fill the role of behavioral specialist. Haley Garcia is currently a Behavior and Autism Leader and has experience in helping special needs students as well as general education students.

After being presented in a public hearing earlier that evening, the board moved to advertise the Fiscal Year 2025 Towns County Board of Education Tentative Budget, one of the steps necessary toward final adoption expected on June 3.

The FY25 Proposed Budget for all funds is \$33.5 million, or roughly \$9.6 million more than the FY24 Original Budget of \$23.9 million

for all funds.

For FY24, the General Fund budget to cover day-to-day expenses for the year was \$18.3 million, and the Special Revenue Funds consisting of federal monies, School Nutrition Programs and remaining 2016 SPLOST budget was \$5.6 million, making up the \$23.9 million total budget.

The tentative FY25 General Fund budget is \$23.3 million, marking a projected increase from FY24 to FY25 of roughly \$4.9 million. To help cover the increase, the Board Office will be transferring about \$2.8 million more from reserves than it needed in 2024.

This will allow the General Fund to pay for the new Agriculture Facility, but importantly, these funds will be reimbursed with collections from the 2024 E-SPLOST tax that began April 1.

The remaining \$2.1 million budgetary uptick in the General Fund is to account for salary and benefits increases, three new positions, and new buses that will be partially funded by the state.

"All expenditures, even though they are funded by the state, must be listed in the expenditure column of the budget," School Finance Director Myra Underwood said.

Regarding Special Revenue Funds, the FY25 budget is projected to be \$10.3 million, up about \$4.7 million from FY24.

"This is mainly due to the new Ag Facility and budgeting for allowable SPLOST expenditures to be paid with the new 2024 SPLOST funds," Underwood said. "We will begin collecting the first SPLOST payment at the end of May for April collection."



Leech has been charged with 19 counts of illegal hunting/possession of bird parts, specifically, wingspans and talons of native birds of prey: red-tailed hawks and vultures. Photo/Facebook

YHC Baseball...from Page 1A

mell's postseason no-hitter at Glascock County on April 23.

"That was definitely an exciting game," Chastain said. "It was a playoff game with a playoff atmosphere, so it was already a fun experience. But that no-hitter made it even better; it's a great memory."

"I was around a lot of great coaches and teammates (at TCHS) that pushed me to be a better player and a better person. That's really what will stand out most from my baseball career at Towns County."

While acclimating from a 30-game high school season to 50-plus at college is the most challenging adjustment for a catcher, Chastain said he will be working to upgrade his ability to limit would-be base stealers.

"I really want to see an improvement in my pop time

before I get to college," he said. "I hope to be the best player I can be when I step on campus this fall."

In closing, Chastain demonstrated gratitude for everyone who has helped him on his journey.

"None of this would be possible without my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," Chastain said. "He has blessed me with an opportunity to play collegiate baseball and with the talent to play this great sport."

"I want to thank my parents and my family for driving me countless hours to practices and travel ball tournaments. I want to thank my coaches for all the hours spent with me before and after practice to make me a better player."

Chastain, the son of Michael and Erica Chastain, sported a .370 batting aver-



Connor Chastain was happy to have the support of his baseball teammates to witness his signing with Young Harris College May 8.

age during his senior season at TCHS with a .458 OBP, .565 SLG, 34 hits, 20 RBIs, 15 doubles, a homer and 11 BBs.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Future Educators...from Page 1A

before going on to teach kindergarten.

Anabella Willson isn't sure which college she wants to attend, but she is pretty sold on teaching elementary school and specializing in special education.

Emma Dale will go to North Georgia Technical Col-

Young Harris College Class of 2024 Commencement

The Young Harris College 2023-2024 academic year has come to an end, and members of the Class of 2024 have completed their final year in the Enchanted Valley. After celebrating YHC seniors at the annual Senior Reception and Baccalaureate Service, the College held its traditional Commencement ceremony on Saturday, May 4, in the Harp Recreation and Commencement Center. The graduates celebrated with family, friends, faculty, and staff on their achievements.

Alyssa Bantum, Alec Youngblood James Basham, Kevin Petty, and Kelly Ryals of Young Harris; and Valerie Crowe, Emma Gilliland, Sophia Shook, and Jackson Taylor of Hiwassee.

lege in Blairsville "to start off," and while she hasn't settled on which grade level she wants to teach, she is likewise interested in elementary education.

State School Superintendent Richard Woods recorded a message for the districts he couldn't attend in person on the statewide day of recognition.

"To all the students signing commitment letters, know that you are embarking on a journey that will shape lives and inspire generations," Woods said in a video played from a projector in the TCHS library. "Your decision to pursue a career in education is a testament to your dedication, compassion and love for learning."

"As you take this step forward, remember that you are not alone. You are joining a community of educators committed to excellence, innovation and the success of every student."

Along with Woods, Education Training Instructor Maureen McClure addressed the students - many of whom she has known since they entered high school.

Emotional with pride, McClure believes that "the future of education in Georgia is in excellent hands in this group."

Up next was TCHS Principal Bryan Thomason, who said he would be "absolutely proud" to have them as teachers in his school, adding some lightheartedness to the event by joking, "I'm trying not to be offended that nobody said they wanted to be a high school teacher."

On a similar note, Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong invited all the students back after they complete their degree programs, saying that they had a "great shot now" of finding a job in their home system.

"This is a very fulfilling field that you're going into," Berrong said. "You don't always get a lot of credit for what you do, but when that little student comes back to you five years after you taught them and tells you that you made a difference in their life, that little bit is what keeps you going."

There to cheer them on were their own educators and of course family, but also retired teachers, who helped serve cake and punch to everyone who attended the signing.

One supporter seemed to voice everyone's thoughts when shouting out to the students at the end of their ceremony: "We love you."