

TCES Graduation...from Page 1A



L-R: Incoming Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss, SRO Donnie Jarrard and retiring Elementary School Principal Dr. Sandy Page had a blast during last week's "commencement" exercises for their young students.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

"Everyone was just so dedicated to that. Teachers were worried about not getting in touch with the children, or they wouldn't know if a child was missing or left... we don't know what we don't know."

"That's why a celebration like this is important. It gives us a positive end to the school year and lets everyone know that we are still here."

Overall, it's been a challenging time for everyone, as teachers labored to make the new digital classroom environments engaging and comfortable for students to work.

"It was horrible for the students not being able to come

back," Kindergarten Teacher Lisa Cole said. "We did paper packets, and we did Zoom four days a week. We did subjects, and they still got to do their show and tell, and they loved that. We have been able to see each other on Zoom and stuff, but it has been hard for all of us."

"Having this graduation for them was great. I sent them home with little graduation hats. They answered questions for me in a video, and I had my assistant edit them together, and we sent that out for them today. This was just the best we could do."

Some of the challenges experienced by teachers have

come from the lack of in-class activities, which allow students to interact with material and learn for themselves. As such, teachers had to adapt learning experiences into videos that were enjoyable for students and accessible by parents.

"It has been a challenge because everything is so hands-on," Kindergarten Teacher Susan Poston said. "You are trying to sit with them and their parents and trying to do math."

"I did several little science experiments that they could watch and see the reactions, but it is just hard, because you don't really know everything that they know, so it is harder to help them learn what they need."

"I think the kids loved this graduation idea, and it gave them a more one-on-one end to the school year. Usually when we do this, we have all the grade levels have little parties in the classroom, and for this, we are speaking to each student individually, so we get to say goodbye."

Towns County Elementary is thankful for parents who have put in the work to help students connect with teachers this school year, including for the graduation event.

The school will continue drive-thru graduations this week, with third grade having occurred on Tuesday, May 26. Fourth-graders will say goodbye Wednesday, May 27, with fifth-graders set for Thursday, May 28.



Third, fourth and fifth-graders will get their own drive-thru graduation ceremony this week as elementary school teachers do what they can to make students feel special.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Rodeo...from Page 1A

and the fairgrounds as they plan accommodations to keep guests safe during all the excitement.

"We are bringing extra hand-sanitizing stations with soap for people to wash their hands," she said. "We will have restrooms, and we will bring in extra portajohns."

"We are trying to be as safe as possible and keep everything safe for everyone, because we want everyone to come out and have a good time."

Camping options are available, too, for families wanting to enjoy an extended stay alongside Lake Chatuge and the Hamilton Gardens while they're here.

"We are just trying to make a big weekend out of it," Thomason said. "The campgrounds have been very busy since we have opened up, and people are wanting to go out

and enjoy the outdoors instead of being home all the time."

"We were closed down for a month, and we have been sold out every weekend since we have opened back up. People just want to get out and about."

According to Thomason, a major goal for the weekend will be to bring business back to Towns County while providing people from around the area with some much-deserved entertainment.

"I know everyone has been inside, but it is a time to get out and enjoy life and get back to normal as much as possible," Thomason said. "We want everybody to be safe, and if they want to bring their own chairs in then they can."

"We are going to have bleachers of course, and we are bringing in extra bleachers as well, but we want everyone to

feel safe and come out and have a fun weekend, because we all need one."

For more information on the rodeo and pre-purchasing tickets, visit the newly redesigned GeorgiaMountainFairgrounds.com.

And people will want to stay tuned for the renowned Georgia Mountain Fair, scheduled for later in the summer.

"We are most known for our Georgia Mountain Fair that we host each summer," according to the GMF website. "From Aug. 14-22, you can enjoy nine days of arts and craft vendors, mouth-watering fair food, live demonstrations and shows, a fantastic lineup of musicians, the Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Beauty Pageant, and a midway with rides that will delight both the young and young at heart!"

Habitat for Humanity Towns/Union Counties and other local businesses provide a Helping Hand

Cleaners, Chris Wheeler, was called to a home that had recently been flooded. It was there that he met this elderly couple who were in a dire and unhealthy situation. Both husband and wife, nearing their 90s, were facing serious water damage throughout their basement. Flooding from recent rainstorms had added to an already problematic and barely operable sump pump. It was a perfect storm that caused damage to the drywall, insulation, and carpets. Signs of mildew and mold were prevalent as the problem had been ongoing for some time.

After meeting with the owners, Chris knew that this was a time for volunteers to come together and help this family. With a few phone calls to the Habitat team and Jeff Van Mill with ServPro of Union, Towns, Fannin and Gilmer Counties; a plan was made, and the cleanup and restoration began. Bryan Thomas and Richard Daves of Habitat repaired the damaged sump pump. Queens of Clean owner, Angela Roberts with Eric Hughes and David Hughes,

cleared closets and removed furniture and debris from the area. With water extraction completed by Seth Solomon and Chris from Deep South Carpet Cleaners, the damaged carpets and baseboards were removed and ServPro's dehumidifiers and mass air movement fans were brought in to dry the area and finish the first step of fixing their home.

There is still work needed at this family's home, but the repairs made will prevent any further damage. This is just another Habitat project, but it is one that is so important to these families. When we hear or see of adversity in others' lives, it only takes one person who will care enough to call. It is even better when so many others will answer that call and offer the gift of a Helping Hand to someone in need. That is what makes a healthy community succeed and thrive.

For more information about Habitat for Humanity Towns/Union Counties, Inc. and its programs, please contact Bryan Thomas, Executive Director at 706-745-7101.



Habitat for Humanity Towns & Union Counties is recognized by many in our community for the ReStore in Downtown Blairsville or building homes for local families in need. Many people are not aware that we have a "Helping Hands Program" for current homeowners. We offer repair services to owners who cannot afford repairs through normal commercial means, thus allowing them to continue to live in safe and decent homes. Some of our home repair work includes painting; building ramps, decks, or stairs; weatherization; and minor repair services to preserve the home and revitalize neighborhoods.

An example of just such a project would be when Habitat Board vice president and owner of Deep South Carpet

Berrong...from Page 1A



J.C. Berrong, center-left in back, attending his Towns County High Class of 1960 reunion in 2011.
Photo/Submitted

March in advance of the 60th reunion. "It's also painful to think that 78 years of my life have elapsed; where did all of the time go? Days are often long, but life is so short."

Earlier this year, Berrong qualified to run as the sole Republican candidate for the office of Towns County Tax Commissioner in the 2020 General Election. Now, longtime Tax Commissioner Bruce Rogers will run unopposed for that position in November.

"Having experience in ad valorem taxes gained from serving as field appraiser, experience on the Board of Tax Assessors and serving as a member of the Board of Equalization, J.C. was seeking the position of Tax Commissioner in the 2020 election," according to his obituary.

"He was a man who was always looking out for the best of the county. He was friends with many and made you feel like you were important when

you talked with him," his obituary continues.

After graduating high school, Berrong spent more than 40 years living and working in the Atlanta area in the banking industry. He retired and moved back to Hiawassee in 1998, where he and his late wife Sarah built a new home across the road from where he grew up.

Berrong is preceded in death by his wife, Sarah Nerren Berrong, who passed away in 2014. He is survived by daughter and son-in-law Ceci and Heath Hunt; daughter Vickie Berrong; son Ray Lovins; sister and brother-in-law Becky and Ron Beal; sister Jimmie Dailey; and grandchildren Ethan and Joy Drawdy.

In the above-mentioned letter to his Class of 1960 classmates written in March, Berrong said he had "a wonderful lady, Brenda G. Franklin, in my life that I enjoy so much," going on to describe Franklin and himself as "pretty much inseparable."

Celebration of Berrong's life will be held at a later date. People are encouraged to leave messages in memoriam for Berrong and his family on the Banister-Cooper Funeral Home website: <https://www.banisterfuneral.com/obituary/JamesJC-Berrong>.

Already, dozens of people have left messages on Berrong's tribute wall, including longtime friend Betty Phillips.

"The best way to be wealthy is to make and keep friends" was J.C.'s 1960 senior yearbook quote," Phillips said. "His legacy will long be remembered for his volunteering and willingness to make Towns County a better place, (with) Clean Sweep, VFW Thrift, SPLOST, Board of Elections, etc."

"I appreciate his service to our country so we can continue to enjoy our freedoms. He would have been an excellent Tax Commissioner. May the Good Lord continue to give his family strength to make it through this difficult time."

Early Voting...from Page 1A

The absentee initiative has experienced a number of misfires to boot, including many undeliverable ballot applications and the inclusion of incorrect mailing instructions in ballots, though the state supposedly fixed those instructions after initial ballot mailings.

Voters, poll workers and election officials across the state have expressed concerns about in-person voting during the pandemic, so the increase in absentee voting is welcomed by many in 2020.

And now that the state is finally ready to resume electoral proceedings amid one of the strangest election seasons on record, people who do decide to vote in person should expect longer than usual wait times, as social distancing measures will be implemented.

For the General Primary, voters will be selecting candidates for various local, state and federal offices to lead their party of choice in the Nov. 3 General Election, and winners of the Nonpartisan Election will be sworn into office in 2021.

Sample ballots listing all candidates in the June 9 election can be found at mvp.sos.ga.gov.

It should be noted that the Special Election to fill the remaining term of retired U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson will occur in November. As such, people will not see this race on their General Primary Election ballots.

Early voting for the June 9 elections runs weekdays between now and Friday, June 5, during which time locally registered voters can cast their votes at the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration Office next to the courthouse from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., even during lunchtime.

Due to social distancing constraints, the Board Office will be limiting the number of people allowed inside at one time, with lines expected to go outside the building.

All election equipment will be regularly cleaned during early voting. Hand sanitizer, gloves and masks will be provided as available, and people are more than welcome to bring their own personal protective equipment.

Voters who find themselves too busy to vote during the scheduled weekdays can participate in one weekend day of early in-person voting on Saturday, May 30, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Board Office, also during lunchtime.

Since this is a primary, voters will need to declare a political party to receive a ballot.

Those who voted early for the Presidential Preference Primary will receive a ballot without presidential candidates, while people who didn't get to vote in that election will receive a ballot with presidential candidates.

Registered voters who will be at least 18 years of age by Election Day are eligible to

vote during early voting, though May 11 was the registration deadline for voters looking to participate in the June 9 election.

Absentee Ballots marked for the May 19, 2020, General Primary Election are good for the June 9, 2020, election. The election date was changed after the ballots were printed.

The state has worked to fix instructions that came with many absentee ballots saying that each voter should have received two envelopes with their ballot: one to place the ballot in for privacy and another to place the enveloped ballot in for mailing.

However, the ballots don't actually come with two envelopes. Instead, people should fold the included piece of paper around the ballot for privacy before inserting the ballot into the mailing envelope.

By the end of last week, the Board Office had received and entered around 3,300 absentee ballot applications out of some 10,500 active registered voters, with about 1,009 absentee ballots having been cast at that time.

Election Day voting on Tuesday, June 9, will take place from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with absentee ballots due to the Board Office by 7 p.m. at the latest.

If people want to fill out their ballot applications/ballots and drop them off in person, they can do so using a specially marked drop box located outside the Board Office.

People who did not receive an absentee ballot application due to either having a P.O. Box or experiencing an address change since initially registering to vote can call the Board Office at 706-896-4353.

For more information on applying for an absentee ballot, visit the Secretary of State's Office website at sos.ga.gov, or call/swing by the Board Office at 67 Lakeview Circle, Suite A, in Hiawassee.

Voters can access mvp.sos.ga.gov ahead of the election for information on voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county office, sample ballots and more.

Two countywide referendums and a city referendum will also be decided in the June 9 General Primary Election: the SPLOST and Freeport Exemption brought

by Towns County Government, and Hiawassee's Fluoride Referendum.

As previously reported, concerning the SPLOST referendum, the county is calling for voters to decide on an estimated \$12 million SPLOST to be instituted starting Oct. 1 to finance renovations and possibly an addition to the Towns County Courthouse, which dates to 1964.

Voter approval of the SPLOST, to be collected over six years, will also constitute approval of the issuance of a General Obligation Bond not to exceed \$8 million to facilitate courthouse renovations and a possible addition.

The current Education-SPLOST, which makes up 1 percent of the 7 percent sales tax in Towns County, will expire on Sept. 30 this year, so the sales tax rate will simply remain the same at 7 cents on the dollar should voters approve the county's 1-cent SPLOST referendum on June 9.

Regarding the freeport exemption referendum, such an exemption would allow businesses to temporarily store certain goods and raw materials without being subject to property taxes on those goods and materials, at least for a time.

If passed, the freeport exemption would aid existing small manufacturing businesses in Towns County and help to attract new ones, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw said.

As for the fluoride referendum, Hiawassee will be asking city voters whether or not they want to add fluoride to the drinking water supply produced by the city for many city and county residents.

Fluoride is not currently being added to the city's drinking water, though the Georgia Environmental Protection Division requires water treatment facilities to add fluoride to drinking water unless a referendum is passed and a subsequent ordinance is enacted to exclude it.

The city originally reported that the referendum, which met city petition requirements last year, would be countywide, as many Hiawassee City Water customers live outside city limits.

However, the city has since said the referendum will be for city voters only after clarifying a misunderstanding with Georgia EPD.