

Author Joe Collins discusses award-winning novel

By Mark Novak
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIWASSEE – Blairsville author Joe Collins discussed his award-winning novel, "The Boy Who Danced with Rabbits," with the Mountain Movers and Shakers group on Friday, June 22.

In print, Collins goes by J.R. Collins, and his latest book to hit shelves, "Living in the Land Where Rabbits Dance," is the second in a planned trilogy called "The Home from Choestoe Series."

Collins grew up in the Appalachian Valley of Choestoe, and he said writing was a way for him to communicate the Collins family heritage and legacy to his children.

"I don't know why I'm here – I follow the word of the Lord, I follow God's voice, I wrote a book," said Collins. "I tell people I didn't wake up one morning and decide I was going to write a book. I just woke up one morning and started writing a book, and it just came out."

"My purpose for that was so that I could talk to my children without using electronics. I have teenagers that were raised with cellphones and everything, and their world is a little different than mine."

"Being a local and (having) this heritage, it is important to me for my children to understand their heritage, their ancestry, where we came from and who their people are. And I submit that, if you have any ties to this country, to the Scots, Irish, you are as much a part of this book as I am."

Collins' first book – which won First Place at the Chanticleer Writing Competition in April – revolves around these Southern Appalachian Mountains during a time just after the American Revolution, when settlers and the native Cherokee Indians lived together in peace.



Joe Collins at the June 22 meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers at Hiwassee's Sundance Grill.

Photo by Mark Novak

For more information on Collins and his work, visit JRCollinsAuthor.com.

Also in the meeting that Friday, Towns County High School student Summer Rahn performed "Amazing Grace" for those gathered and shared a little history of her life.

"I moved up here when I was in fourth grade, and I started singing in front of people when I was 6 years old," said Rahn. "I sang in front of maybe a couple hundred people. Ever since then, I have been singing just about anywhere you could imagine."

"I've been singing at the Georgia Mountain Fair every year for about five years now. I have been asked back many times here at the Movers and Shakers."

And back by popular demand, TCHS alum and current Mercer University Class President Adam Penland spoke about his election to represent the student body at Mercer.

"Part of what I do, I was elected by the entire student body to represent us to the administration of Mercer University," said Penland. "That's a private college, so we set our own tuition. We set what needs we have, we set what needs we

don't have.

"That's something that every college student, I want to say, struggles with, or every college student and family is concerned about. If you are going to college, which is most students today, then you need to worry about where the money is coming from."

Penland went on to discuss student debt and the cancellation of a federally funded loan program called the Perkins Loan.

"I received the Federal Perkins Loan," said Penland. "It was \$4,000 a year. It helped me immensely through college. It helped me from having to get outside loans."

"The federal government, Congress voted to disband this program, and they said, 'Let's turn it over, let's privatize everything.' Because of that, more students are having to go to Discover, to Sallie Mae, to Wells Fargo to get these private loans."

Penland said that canceling this program increases the amount of interest a student must pay on their loans, and he is actively reaching out to members of Congress in an effort to bring back the Perkins Loan.

Veterans...from Page 1A

various abilities to get out and experience the Appalachian Trail.

Five American and two British former military servicemembers, all legally blind and some with no light perception at all, took up the challenge of striking out on BAT-1:

U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Danny Wallace of Missouri; U.S. Navy Chief Lonnie Bedwell of Indiana; U.S. Army Spc. Steve Baskis of Colorado; U.S. Army Sgt. Adam Rowland of Oklahoma; U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Larry Gunter of Alabama; British Army Cpl. Colin Pandaluna; and British Army Cpl. Richard Cruise.

These veterans started their six-day, 74-mile trek on June 1, working from Blue Ridge Gap in Towns County toward Woody Gap and Suches in Union County, then on to Hightower Gap before exiting the trail and heading to U.S. Army Ranger Camp Frank D. Merrill near Dahlenega on June 6.

After making camp each evening of the hike, the veterans, their trail guides and other volunteers would gather around for food and fellowship. They talked history, shared personal stories of service and war, and remembered their honorable military forebears.

The group completed its mission on June 6 by rappelling down a 60-foot rock cliff at Camp Merrill. It was a jubilant yet solemn occasion for the men, as the

74-mile trip was undertaken in part to commemorate the 74th anniversary of the Allied landings at Normandy on June 6, 1944.

And the completion of BAT-1 is only the beginning.

Over time, the blinded veterans plan to complete different sections of the trail organized around other historic military dates to memorialize the ongoing fight for freedom around the globe.

"We're doing this to hopefully show others it can be done, and to make a difference to other people, veteran and nonveteran alike," said BAT-1 participant Lonnie Bedwell.

Retired Army Ranger Danny Wallace not only took part in BAT-1 but also coordinated the program as chairman of the Operation Peer Support Committee, which is housed under the Blinded Veterans Association.

According to Wallace, who is National Treasurer for the Blinded Veterans Association, the BVA is just like the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion.

"It's a veterans service organization. We are the ones chartered by Congress to be able to go on Capitol Hill and talk for the rights of our veterans," said Wallace.

Planning for BAT-1 began about a year ago, when Wallace called up Joe Amerling here in Georgia.

The two men had served together as Rangers, and Amerling – a regular BVA

volunteer – happily agreed to assist Wallace as project coordinator for BAT-1.

Amerling utilized his local connections with the U.S. Mountain Ranger Association based out of Camp Merrill to map out the logistics of BAT-1, and he received help from fellow Army Ranger veterans Bob Williams, Tom Wilburn, Mike Ramsey, Kevin Connell and others.

"These guys may have had this dream at some point in their life, and now, with their blindness, it was like, 'Oh, we'll never do it.' Well, by God, we're doing it," said Amerling.

The Blinded Veterans Association has a hand in a number of other initiatives, including the Project Gemini exchange program, which is a joint effort of Blind Veterans UK and BVA.

The first exchange under Project Gemini occurred in May 2011, "when American blinded veterans traveled to England for a six-day educational exchange to share knowledge, insights and friendship with their British comrades," according to BVA.org.

In the spirit of cooperation similar to the Allied landings at Normandy, Project Gemini continues to this day, with joint efforts having formed around other enterprises like the Blind Appalachian Trail program.

For more information on the Appalachian Trail program and to lend support, visit BlindAT.org or check out the Blind Appalachian Trail Facebook page.

Moore...from Page 1A

Tickets are still available for the June 30 concert, which opens at 7 p.m. at The Hall.

Level 1 seats are selling for \$60 plus handling, and level 2 seats are going for \$50 plus

handling.

"I appreciate the support over the years, and I look forward to seeing everybody," said Moore.

July Fourth...from Page 1A

looking to celebrate the Fourth of July with their fellow Towns Countians, and folks should show up hungry, as there will be lots of food for sale during the festivities.

And don't forget to bring the kids.

"North Mt. Zion Church of God does a mission, and they will be set up in the parking lot next to the front gate," said Thomason. "They will have all kinds of children's activities, like face painting, games, and little swimming pools set up. The church will be giving away snow cones and cotton candy for the kids to enjoy."

What better way is there to participate in the time-honored tradition of celebrating the Fourth of July than with fireworks and fellow Americans, as the United States

of America – the greatest nation on earth – enjoys her 242nd birthday.

For additional information, people can either stop into or call the chamber at 706-896-4966 or the fairgrounds at 706-896-4191.

Drug Trafficking...from Page 1A

Hiwassee Police Chief Paul Smith. "These drugs came from Gainesville and were meant to be sold in this area. Stopping

the distributors will do the most good for our community and our fight against drugs."