



HAPPY 4TH OF JULY INDEPENDENCE DAY

Towns County Herald

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Publication Number 635540 Volume 95 Number 36

Wednesday, July 3, 2024

GMF, Chamber to wish USA 'Happy Birthday!'

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Each year, patriots across the nation come together as proud Americans to celebrate their freedoms that came with the founding of this country. And as always, Towns Countians will have several opportunities to wish the United States a very happy 248th birthday.

Kicking off the Fourth of July festivities will be the annual Lake Chatuge Boat Parade, viewable from boats on the lake and many locations on land, including the Towns County Beach and inside the Georgia

Mountain Fairgrounds.

Applications are available now at the chamber office or online, and parade participants should line up at about 10:15 a.m. at Sunset Cove on Thursday. Once again, Aqua Tiki will be the grand marshal for the parade.

"There are two prize categories for the boats," said Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce President Julie Payne. "One category is the best use of red, white and blue, and the other category is the most creative decorations.

"Six-hundred dollars in prize money is up for grabs. A

good place to watch is out on the lake, so get in your boats, come out, have fun and celebrate the Fourth."

For over 40 years, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds has hosted a multitude of Independence Day activities for families to enjoy, and 2024 will be no exception, with festivities beginning at 3 p.m. on Thursday.

"Once again, Calvary Baptist Church is making a big effort to improve the number and selection of activities for the children," said Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason. "They are bringing big-

ger slides, and bouncy houses, and many other happenings for the kiddos.

"For example, last year we had lines of people waiting to play cornhole, so Coca-Cola donated four sets to us. We'll have more cornhole boards so everyone has a chance to play.

"There will be food booths and food trucks with everything from barbeque and ice cream to hot dogs. Pretty much anything you want to eat, we'll have it.

"At 6:30 p.m., the Vintage Vixens will start playing. They've been putting on a



Be sure to attend the patriotic Lake Chatuge Boat Parade, which will make its rounds starting at 10:30 a.m. on Independence Day. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2023

Five TCSO heroes honored for life-saving actions

News Special

On Wednesday, June 5, the Towns County Sheriff's Office received a domestic dispute call at a residence on Windjammer Drive. When deputies arrived, the complainant was outside and stated a family member was in her residence.

When deputies approached the door, they discovered the suspect had barricaded himself inside and was threatening suicide. The suspect had also set fire to the kitchen, and flames could be observed through the window.

Sgt. Justin Osborn and Deputy Keanu Nguyen, along with Lt. Ryan Forsyth, Sgt. Mike Franklin, Inv. Billy Brackett, and Inv. Darringer Barrett, forced entry into the

locked door.

The house was filled with heavy smoke, and the suspect was found lying on the floor unconscious having been overcome by the smoke. The suspect also attempted suicide by hanging himself with a belt.

Deputies dragged the suspect outside and administered CPR alongside Towns County EMS and Fire Department personnel, and firefighters extinguished the blaze.

The suspect, Graham Phillip McKay, was life-flighted to a hospital where he was later released and arrested.

McKay, 40, of Hiawassee, has been charged with felony arson in the first degree, felony criminal damage to property in the second degree,

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L-R: Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson, Lt. Ryan Forsyth, Deputy Keanu Nguyen, Inv. Darringer Barrett, Sgt. Mike Franklin, Sgt. Justin Osborn and Chief Deputy Gene Moss during last week's hero awards presentation. Photo/Facebook

Chastain helms meeting in Mayor Pro Tem role

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

With the resignation of Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales last month to honor a mediation agreement settling a dispute with the City Council, the June 24 work session marked the first official city meeting to be led by Councilman Jay "Junior" Chastain Jr. as Mayor Pro Tempore.

In this role, Chastain will not be considered a voting member of the council so he can temporarily lead the city until a new mayor is elected in November to finish Ordiales' unexpired term through 2025.

His first day replacing Ordiales was June 18, and Chastain shared in the work session that the past week had been filled with "all kinds of learning experiences," and he credited City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick with helping him navigate the ongoing learning curve.

"I can't brag on Bonnie enough. Bonnie has her thumb on the pulse of this city; everything that happens, Bonnie knows about. She's basically a superwoman," Chastain said.

Learning the ins and outs of city administration has involved better understanding the computer programs that go into storing and organizing information like payment history and



Junior Chastain was happy to begin filling his new role leading city meetings last week. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

official documents, Chastain said. Along with that, Chastain has had in-depth meetings with each department head to get everyone on the same page.

"I look at the job of mayor or as I am here to serve the citizens of Hiawassee," Chastain said. "The entire council, the staff, and the mayor - I look at it as a team. The current team we have is excellent, in my opinion."

As a paramedic of 37 years, Chastain explained after the meeting that he will be focusing on both his career and new municipal responsibilities by alternating working out of City Hall four days one week and three days the next.

Specifically, Chastain will remain a full-time paramedic in Towns County and cut back to part-time in Graham County, North Carolina, as

the job of Mayor Pro Tem only pays \$13,000 yearly, so he has no intention of giving up his "day job."

Referencing a heated public exchange from the June 24 work session, Chastain would like to "personally apologize to ... everyone who witnessed that meeting," saying that he would be implementing more rules regarding etiquette and social interaction.

This decision comes after a brief back-and-forth between Councilwoman Nancy Noblet and former Mayor Ordiales, who attended the meeting as a member of the public and appeared at one point to express disapproval over the tenor of the council discussion on the proposed Sign Ordinance update.

Moving forward, the up- See City Council, Page 6

Medical malpractice trial set to begin this month

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

BLAIRSVILLE - A former patient of Union General Hospital is suing the hospital and other parties for alleged medical malpractice that resulted in the need to amputate her left arm and leg, court records show.

Jury selection in the civil trial has been scheduled to begin July 15 inside the Union County Courthouse, with the trial expected to last between three and four weeks.

Upwards of 1,000 jury summonses were issued the week of June 10 here in Union County - a larger than usual

number given the status of the hospital as a well-known institution in the community.

Overseeing the case is The Honorable James E. Cornwell, a senior judge on the Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court.

Originally filed in 2017, the lawsuit has taken years to make it to trial due to "substantial discovery" by the parties involved - the case includes over 9,000 pages of filings - and judicial delays brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anna Giacomi, the woman bringing the lawsuit, suffered major injuries after being attacked by a donkey she was feeding at an undisclosed com-

mercial farm in North Georgia in November 2015, according to past reporting by Channel 2 Action News. Giacomi settled with the farm in 2017.

Her injuries reportedly resulted in the development of a flesh-eating bacteria infection, which her lawsuit alleges was not treated in a timely manner during her weeklong medical stay in Union County, thereby causing the need for her amputations in December 2015.

Giacomi first received treatment for her Nov. 26, 2015, injuries at Northeast Georgia Medical Center, which is not a defendant in the case. She was See Malpractice Trial, Page 6

Clarkesville man arrested for psychedelic mushrooms

News Special

On Tuesday, June 25, Towns County Sheriff's Office uniform patrol officers were conducting concentrated patrols, and a traffic stop was conducted on US 76 at Anderson Bridge.

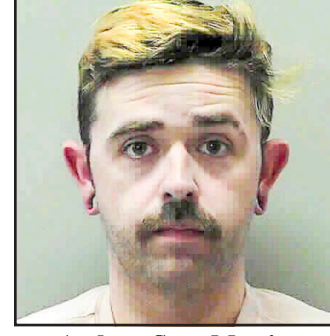
K-9 Drago was deployed to conduct a free-air search and alerted. Probable cause was established to search the vehicle, and an amount of psychedelic

mushrooms was located and confiscated.

Andrew Sean Martin, 29, of Clarkesville, was arrested and charged with felony possession of a controlled substance.

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

Sheriff Ken Henderson stated that these concentrated patrols will continue in an effort to keep the community safe.



Andrew Sean Martin

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United Community

City Council...from Page 1



Hiawassee City Councilwomen Nancy Noblet and Amy Barrett in the June 24 work session.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

dated ordinance should make it easier for the city to enforce temporary signage rules at businesses that do not follow the ordinance. The update was expected to get a second reading and adoption in the July 2 regular meeting that occurred after press time.

In other work session business, talks resumed on the mobile home provisions of the Accessory Structure Ordinance that have been under discussion for a proposed rehaul since January.

According to City Hall, currently defined limitations for mobile homes within city limits are, among other things, too contradictory, and the goal is to provide a streamlined document to define the parameters of pre-built homes and the

properties that can hold them.

“(Mobile) homes ... are a different type of dwelling, and they require a different type of taxation, and so it does require a different type of consideration,” Councilwoman Amy Barrett said.

Currently, mobile homes can sit on a third of an acre of land. In the work session, Chastain and the council talked about increasing the land requirement to half an acre, which would make it harder to install a mobile home, though further discussion was expected in the July 2 meeting.

“I think that by doing this, we’ll keep everything in balance,” Barrett said. “This makes sure we don’t get too mobile home heavy and everything becomes a mobile home

or trailer park.”

Also in the meeting, it was revealed that the Towns County Board of Elections had terminated its agreement with the City of Hiawassee to run local elections.

“It seems to me that it has to do with the (presidential) election in November,” said City Attorney Thomas Mitchell, offering to have a conversation with someone on the board to confirm the intent and the reasoning behind the notice.

“Once that is concluded, I would hope ... they are open to re-entering into a governmental agreement once the 2024 election is certified,” Mitchell said regarding future city elections.

Economic Development Director Denise McKay said the business previously interested in opening a restaurant in the Paris Business Center had decided to back out, but that the Downtown Development Authority is luckily not bound to have a restaurant take up the space.

Instead, McKay shared that she may have found another retail vendor to take the other business’ place, but it’s too early to share any details like a name or the type of items sold.

Malpractice Trial

...from Page 1

transferred to the Union County Nursing Home for physical rehabilitation on Dec. 4, 2015, court records show.

According to Giacomi, multiple delays in proper medical evaluation and care at both the Nursing Home and Union General Hospital resulted in her infection reaching a “point of no return,” amounting to negligence that led to her amputations after being transferred back to Northeast Georgia Medical on Dec. 11, 2015, for recommended surgery.

The defendants in the case deny all allegations of medical malpractice and negligence.

These defendants are Union General Hospital Inc., doing business as Union County Nursing Home, and Union General Hospital; Dr. Kathryn Blocker, The Southland Medical Group, LLC and Blocker Healthcare, LLC; and Dr. Jeffrey McIntire and Gainesville Imaging Associates, P.C.

Two other defendants are listed as “John Doe” and “ABC Corporation” to account for a medical professional involved in Giacomi’s care whose identity and affiliation were not known to the plaintiff when the Consolidated Pre-Trial Order was signed on June 20.

Former Blairsville physician James Heaton plays a key role in the case against the hospital, though he is not listed as a defendant.

Giacomi is alleging that, as medical director of the Nursing Home and her assigned physician in Union County during her time here, Heaton failed to evaluate her condition in a timely fashion, resulting in delayed intervention regarding her infection that subsequently spread.

Separately, Heaton and then-Union General CEO Mike Gowder were arrested in February 2016 and later tried and found guilty of federal prescription drug crimes.

Giacomi claims the hospital “at the very least had a reasonable suspicion” that Heaton and Gowder were the subject of an investigation by the Drug Enforcement Administration when she was being treated and was therefore negligent in keeping Heaton on as credentialed staff.

In the Pre-Trial Order, the hospital defends the credentialing of Heaton at the time and says there is no evidence that “any UGH employee or director was aware of Dr. Heaton’s involvement in any criminal activity prior to his arrest on February 4, 2016.”

Additionally, the lawsuit alleges that inadequately trained wound care staff improperly evaluated Giacomi’s wounds after she was admitted to Union General’s Emergency Department on Dec. 7, which led to further delays in appropriate treatment for the growing infection.

The claim pertaining to “negligent hiring, training, supervision, retention and/or credentialing of Dr. Heaton and other medical personnel is to be bifurcated from the medical malpractice portion of the trial of this case,” per the Pre-Trial Order, meaning the case will be tried in two parts.

Dr. Blocker was the emergency room physician who admitted Giacomi to the hospital when she came over from the Nursing Home. According to her defense brief, Blocker’s participation in Giacomi’s care “was at all times appropriate and complied with the standard of care.”

The lawsuit also says that radiologist McIntire failed to interpret a crucial X-ray in accordance with the “STAT” designation for highest priority, which showed “an abnormal, critical finding” that needed to be communicated quickly due to the fast-spreading nature of the infection.

McIntire’s defense brief states that he “fully complied in every way with the applicable standard of care,” and that nothing he “did or failed to do caused or contributed to cause Ms. Giacomi’s alleged injuries, including her amputations.”

Giacomi is seeking damages to cover medical expenses incurred to date and in the future, as well as recovery of legal fees, for pain and suffering, interference with normal living, and other grounds.

As noted in the Pre-Trial Order, the possibilities of settling the case are “poor”; however, Union General Hospital “remains willing to consider any reasonable resolution to the case.”



From the staff of the North Georgia News and Towns County Herald

Sons of Pioneers returning to Fine Arts Center in October

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – For the third year in a row, one of America’s longest-running bands has partnered with an organization that has helped local children develop a love of reading.

This October, the Sons of the Pioneers will return to the stage of the Union County Fine Arts Center to perform their annual Western-themed benefit concert to raise money for Ferst Readers.

According to organizer John Cochran, the event is extra special this time around because the Pioneers are celebrating their 90th anniversary.

The concert will benefit Ferst Readers of Union County, which raises money to pay for age-appropriate books to be mailed to the homes of children ages 0-5 – all for free to families.

With their concerts, the Pioneers have helped Ferst Readers raise enough money to just about cover each of the program’s last two years, according to Cochran’s wife Janice, who is the Co-Chair of the local branch of the literacy

program along with Martha Davenport.

As a former teacher, Janice can especially appreciate how important Ferst Readers is when it comes to learning foundational literacy and comprehension skills.

In June alone, the Ferst Readers Community Action Team mailed out some 380 books to children in Union County. It might sound like a lot, but that number represents a fraction of what kids signed up for the Ferst Readers program receive.

To date, Ferst Readers has sent out more than 40,000 books to 1,100 children of the county. Sponsors are what keep Ferst Readers going throughout the rest of the year and are a major reason why the program is free for the families who receive those books.

Every baby born at Union General Hospital gets a special packet so their parents can sign them up for Ferst Readers, which sends a book every month until their fifth birthday.

Even if the infant isn’t from Union County, they’re still eligible to receive Ferst Readers in the mail because

several counties are also part of the program.

For example, a little one born in Gainesville can be signed up for their monthly book so long as they live in the state of Georgia, although there are similar programs in other parts of the country.

Children in North Carolina can sign up through Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, and in fact, it was the Imagination Library that inspired Robin Ferst Howser to start up Ferst Readers in 1999.

Where Ferst Readers is a relatively new organization, the Sons of the Pioneers has represented the American West for almost a century. In 1931, Ohio-born Leonard Slye’s life of driving trucks and picking fruit in California was changed after his talent was noticed at a singing contest.

Later that year, Slye ended up leading a group known as The Rocky Mountaineers, through which he met Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer.

It wouldn’t be until 1933 that the trio would form their own group, the Pioneers Trio, and in 1934, gained bass singer and fiddle player Hugh Farr.

A cheeky radio an-



The Sons of the Pioneers

nouncer pointed out that the men were too young to be true pioneers, but that they could pass as the sons of pioneers. With good humor, the musicians accepted the remark as their new name – especially since they weren’t a trio anymore.

Leonard Slye would go on to become known as Roy Rogers. King of the Cowboys, and the rest of the group would earn so much notoriety that the Sons of the Pioneers were named a National Treasure in 1977 by the Smithsonian Institution.

While its members have changed over the years, the band’s sound is indistinguishable from the classic vocals of its founding members – or at least, they’ve been good enough to earn Cochran’s respect.

And Cochran knows what he’s talking about; one of his first memories is going to a Sons of the Pioneers

concert with his mother, and he’s loved them – and the lifestyle they represent – ever since.

Cochran has openly admitted that “in another life” he must have been a cowboy, as he “loves everything about the West.” Helping his heroes to collaborate with a local cause just strengthens his bond.

“They’re glad to help. They want to help Ferst Readers; they think it’s a good thing, a good cause. They’re always asking about Ferst Readers,” Cochran said, with Janice adding that the group has essentially “adopted” the local literacy organization.

There are still “some things to work out” with printing the tickets, but anyone who is interested in acquiring one can contact John Cochran now at 706-897-0486. It’s Cochran’s personal number, but he doesn’t want folks to feel shy about ringing him; Sons of the Pioneers

fans from as far away as Wisconsin and Mississippi have already been reserving their seats.

Cochran hopes to see the audience doubled this year, which is an ambitious order considering that last year, the concert drew in the most money it ever has for Ferst Readers.

But it’s important to remember that the event isn’t just about fundraising – Cochran says it’s also about raising awareness of an iconic symbol of living American history.

“I want to promote the Sons of the Pioneers and get their name around,” Cochran said. “Young people need to be exposed to the Sons of the Pioneers, that kind of music ... Everybody that’s known them over the years has fallen in love with them. They’ve tried and have kept this music alive for 90 years, and we want it to continue.”

Happy Birthday, USA...from Page 1



In addition to fireworks, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds will once again be hosting a full slate of family-friendly activities for the Fourth of July. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2023

show for us for the past several years, and people love them. They are an all-female band out of Atlanta, and their sound resembles Credence Clearwater rock ‘n’ roll.”

Visitors are assured the evening will feature a pyrotechnic extravaganza with more than \$10,000 spent on fireworks.

“We’ll begin shooting off the fireworks at 9:45 p.m.,” Thomason said. “We want to thank all of the sponsors who have contributed to the display, but we will be taking donations to help offset the cost of the show.”

“We’re doing this for the community to celebrate our Independence Day. We want

everyone to come out and have a good time, buy from all the vendors, take part in all of the activities going on and just celebrate our nation’s birthday.”

In case of inclement weather, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds will reschedule the fireworks to Friday, July 5.

Happy Birthday, America!

TCSO Heroes...from Page 1

battery (Family Violence), and criminal trespass (Family Violence).

He is currently being held at the Towns County Detention Center without bond and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

awards and ribbons.

An awards ceremony was held Friday, June 28, at which time Sheriff Ken Henderson presented Sgt. Osborn, Deputy Nguyen, Lt. Forsyth, Sgt. Franklin, Inv. Brackett, and Inv. Barrett with commendation letters, Life Saver

Sheriff Henderson commends these officers for their bravery and courage by risking bodily harm and placing their lives at risk by entering a smoke-filled burning house to save the life of another.

“They are true heroes,” Henderson said.