

Graduation...from Page 1A



L-R: TCHS Class of 2020 Valedictorian Chase Reece, Salutatorian Mackenzie Wallace and Historian Sophia Shook at their July 31 graduation ceremony. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

year earlier than expected. We were robbed of many goodbyes and last memories. Although we have been through tragedy and adversity, we have grown up in a generation that has made each of us innovative, vibrant, bold and adaptable.”

Salutatorian Mackenzie Wallace focused her speech around change, touching on adaptability as well and how the current times will impact her class as the now-graduates move forward in life.

“As we all know, our senior year was cut short due to a widespread pandemic,” Wallace said. “Safety precautions were taken and, fortunately, we all had the opportunity to be here today. Our senior year was one for the books, but we adapted and made do with what we had. We looked after the safety of not only ourselves but others as well by quarantining and mask-wearing.

“We all looked forward to prom, honors day and the last day of school, and while those are not memories that we currently share, we have something more special than that. We have a new appreciation for the health and safety of others, as well as an appreciation for classroom education.”

Of course, none of the graduates expected to miss their last nine weeks of school and attendant milestones, but as Valedictorian Chase Reece pointed out, these unprecedented times have served as valuable experiences highlighting the importance of being grateful for the here and now.

“Little did we know that as we walked into school on what seemed to be a regular Friday morning on March 13, we would all find out that the saying that Friday the 13th is unlucky turns out to be pretty true,” Reece said. “It would be the last time we would be together as classmates, the last time we would see our friends and teachers passing in the halls.

“While we were then locked away in our houses for two months, I had a lot of time to do some thinking. I realized how quickly and easily things

can change and be taken away. This truly made me realize to never take the time we have for granted.

“It made me realize to enjoy the little things in life more, and it encouraged me to look back on some of the unexpected memories in high school that we shared together.”

Looking ahead, Reece encouraged his fellow members of the Class of 2020 to pursue their dreams while trusting in God’s plan.

“My hope for all of you in the future is that you make the most of where you are in the time and opportunities that you might have,” Reece said. “As we have all seen this year, things often don’t go as we might plan, and we might not have as much time in doing something as we might have thought.

“Don’t be afraid to take healthy risks or be that friend that someone needs. Take time to sit back and enjoy the moment you are in instead of always wishing for something better. While each of us will go down separate paths after high school and our lives will look different from one another, God will place us in every situation for a reason.

“Every one of us has a specific calling and purpose in our lives, but it is up to you to find out what that might be.”

Principal Roy Perren concluded the ceremony by focusing on some novel accomplishments by the Class of 2020 before imparting

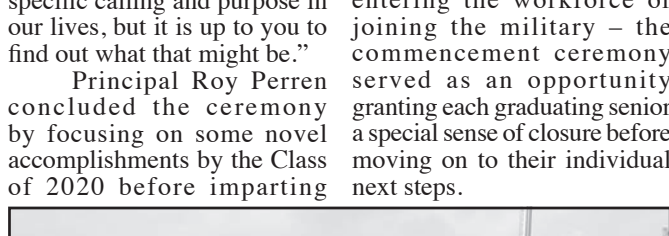
wisdom for the students as they make their way onto new and separate paths in life.

“What can I say that will be useful to you?” Perren said. “I know I could tell you how special you are. While I have not looked at past records, I think I can safely say you are the first group of seniors to miss the last nine weeks of school – talk about a Senior Skip Day record.

“I won’t remind you of the other things you missed, so let’s focus on the positives. I think I can safely say that you are the first class to ever graduate on July 31. I can say you are the first group to ever have your graduation ceremony here on the football field. I know this isn’t what we had planned, but this turned out kind of nice.”

Added Perren, “Some of you have your roadmap planned, some of you don’t. Knowing the road you want to travel is so important, because life will go on whether you prepare for it or not. The decisions you made here in high school and those you make over the next few years will determine much of what kind of life you are going to have. So, when you choose, choose wisely.”

Whatever lay ahead – be it post-secondary education, entering the workforce or joining the military – the commencement ceremony served as an opportunity granting each graduating senior a special sense of closure before moving on to their individual next steps.



Family members of graduates distanced themselves in the stands and around the new turf field at Frank McClure Memorial Stadium during Friday’s commencement. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

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Fires...from Page 1A

room watching TV and saw smoke entering down through the hallway, and her fire alarm soon notified her. She exited the house and activated 911.

“Our first privately-owned vehicle was on the scene within five minutes, reporting heavy fire coming from the basement area. Crews arrived quickly and contained the fire in the area where it began, with some extension into the bedroom directly above the fire.”

Structurally, the home sustained heavy damage downstairs, and Copeland said a determination by insurance adjusters may find extensive smoke damage throughout the house as well.

“Currently, this fire is under investigation,” Copeland said. “I’d like to thank the Towns County Sheriff’s Office for their assistance, and also the Georgia State Fire Marshal’s Office.”



A 90-year-old woman was at home watching TV when this fire broke out in her basement. Fortunately, she’s OK. Photo/Submitted

Copeland stated there’s a \$10,000 reward through Georgia Arson Control for information leading to an arrest and conviction in any arson cases.

The chief asks that anyone with information regarding the fire at 1500 Sunnyside Road contact him at 706-994-4934. Any tips on this fire or any others will be kept confidential and are potentially eligible for the \$10,000 reward.

None of the residents in either of these recent fires was hurt, though a firefighter was transported via Towns County EMS to Chatuge Regional Hospital for exhaustion following the July 24 fire off Sunnyside Road.

“He was later released and is in good shape at this time,” Copeland said.

The combination paid/paid-on-call Fire Department has tanker trucks and 1,000-gallon fire engines at all six of its stations in Towns; a 75-foot ladder truck; a Dive Team for search and rescue operations on Lake Chatuge; vehicle extrication tools in every rescue truck; and much more.

School Start...from Page 1A

school year, will go a long way toward making up for the budget shortfall caused by the state cuts to local funding.

In the public budget meeting that immediately preceded the July 28 called meeting, School Finance Director Myra Underwood reported that fiscal year 2020 revenues were looking to come in more than budgeted, with sales tax collections being up over the initial COVID drop, so it’s possible the schools won’t have to dip into reserve funds this coming year.

However, Underwood noted the uncertainty around the economy and COVID-19, so the schools will be as conservative as possible over 2020-21, just in case using reserve money becomes necessary.

“This year, if you look at the General Fund expenditures, the total of \$14,503,440 – that’s basically exactly what we budgeted last year,” Underwood said. “We are on target to come in \$700,000 under that.

“We always try to put in a cushion for maintenance or transportation, (etc.), and going into this next phase, we don’t know what we’re facing with a cost of making sure we can take care of everybody with the guidelines, with the online learning.”

The tentative FY21 budget itself was unavailable at press time, as the school board was still considering the figures. A second budget hearing will be held on Aug. 10 – rescheduled from Aug. 3 – at 6 p.m. in the Middle/High School Media Center.

In that Aug. 10 meeting, the board is expected to vote to advertise the tentative budget, at which point it will be made available to the public.

“The hearings are for the public to come and hear what’s being discussed and voice their concern,” Underwood said. “Once we advertise the tentative budget, which will show the time and place for final approval, we still have to wait two weeks for the public to review the proposed budget before final approval. The public is welcome at all meetings to the voice their opinion.”

Also in the July 28 called meeting, the board discussed the current state of COVID-19 and school policies based on ever-changing state and federal guidance.

For example, the schools had initially built into their reopening plan a protocol for closing campus and initiating online learning for all students in the event of a set number of active cases being identified within the system.

However, the Board Office updated its plan to reflect the changing nature of state guidelines, which include recently loosened



In the Towns County Board of Education’s July 28 called meeting, School Transportation Director Scott Hamilton commended retiring Bus Driver Noel Barnard for his 27 years of transporting children of the system. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

recommendations for when someone may safely leave quarantine after testing positive for COVID-19.

“At this time there are no specific confirmed case counts that require a closure,” the updated plan reads. “The decision to close school would be in response to guidance from the governor, state Board of Education, Georgia Department of Education, and the Department of Public Health.”

As previously reported, the schools are taking many virus precautions – available in full at towns.k12.ga.us – such as staff and student temperature checks to screen for COVID-19, and teachers will be asking students to wear masks in the hallways during class changes, among other measures.

It was established in the meeting that staff members would be alerted if they’d been in contact with a coworker whom the schools learned had tested positive, though due to HIPAA concerns, the identity of positive-testing employees will not be disclosed unless permission to do so is granted.

Caroleen Woods attended the July 28 meetings. She won election to the Towns County Board of Education in June, and she will be sworn into office in January 2021.

Referencing the relaxed grading standards implemented toward the end of last school year after the pandemic forced school closures, Woods made it clear that she expects students to be held accountable for completing all schoolwork, including students opting for completely online learning.

Berrong said that students would be held 100 percent accountable for the work they complete this year, assuring Woods that students who don’t do their work “are going to fail.”

In terms of online versus in-class instruction, the schools had asked parents to submit their preference for students no later than July 27 “so we can plan and allocate staff for

the number of traditional and online students that we will need to serve.”

Berrong reported that most of the system’s 950 families had answered the online survey, with 76 percent opting for in-class instruction of students, and 24 percent going with online only. This week, the system will be calling the 100 or so remaining families who have not responded.

Also in the meeting, Berrong announced the retirement of two long-time members of the Towns County Schools faculty and staff, saying both will be greatly missed: Middle School Science Teacher Jennifer Moss and School Bus Driver Noel Barnard.

Moss has 33 years invested in the system and children of the county, while Barnard has transported Towns County students for 27 years.

Elementary School Teacher Rollie Thomas will be moving to the middle school to serve as Moss’ replacement, with Elementary School Paraprofessional Jessica Walls filling Thomas’ spot.

Transportation Director Scott Hamilton said in the July 28 meeting that Barnard, 84, will be particularly tough to replace, as the difficulty schedules of school bus drivers, relatively low pay and strict certification requirements make it hard to recruit qualified applicants.

Mountain Regional Library Director Heath Lee also attended the meeting, saying that the libraries appreciate the support of the local Board of Education, especially during such trying financial times.

“Parents and children, they use the libraries all year round – kids don’t stop being students just because they’re not in school,” Lee said.

The next regular meeting of the Towns County Board of Education will take place Monday, Aug. 10, following the second budget public meeting at the school media center.

Election Day...from Page 1A

was also struggling to recruit poll workers amid coronavirus concerns.

However, following the lifting of statewide restrictions earlier this summer, the Elections Board decided to reopen all polling places for Election Day, as both private buildings are now open to the public, and recruitment efforts have proven successful in providing enough poll workers to staff the precincts.

Allowing Election Day voting at all three precincts should improve line conditions and voting wait times that impacted the June 9 election at the Hiwassee Precinct, which resulted in complaints and requests for reopening of the other precincts.

Elections Board members have retained the option of falling back on the emergency plan of hosting all voting at the Hiwassee Precinct should former statewide restrictions for COVID-19 be implemented once again.

Poll workers are following COVID-19 best practices, including social distancing enforcement, regular equipment sanitation and wearing of masks during voting. Voters are encouraged but not required to wear facial coverings, which are being made available alongside hand sanitizer.

Additionally, voters are not required to bring their mailed precinct cards, but they must show a valid photo ID to vote.

Registered voters who will be at least 18 years of age by Election Day are eligible to vote during early voting, though July 13 was the registration deadline for voters looking to participate in the Aug. 11 election.

People may request mail-in absentee ballots or inquire about their absentee status by

visiting the Secretary of State’s Office website at sos.ga.gov, calling the Board Office at 706-896-4353 or swinging by in person.

For the rest of the year, absentee ballots will be automatically mailed to voters who informed the Board Office they were elderly or disabled on a previous application, though all others need to apply for mail-in absentee ballots on a per-election basis.

People wanting to fill out their absentee ballots/applications and drop them off in person can do so using a specially marked box outside the Board Office, and this can be done up to 7 p.m. on Aug. 11.

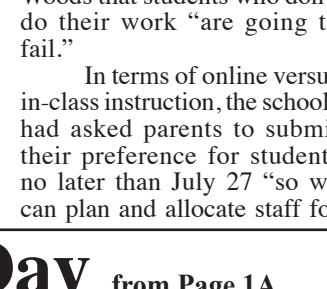
An absentee ballot/application must be submitted by the voter requesting one, except for a disabled person, who may have a relative by blood or marriage return

his or her absentee ballot/application.

Those who receive an absentee ballot by mail but decide to vote in person will need to have their absentee ballot canceled at time of voting.

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.

It should be noted that voters are not allowed to display campaign-related materials at polling places where promoted candidates appear on ballots. For example, for the Nov. 3 election, voters will not be allowed to enter polling places wearing clothing promoting Donald Trump or Joe Biden for president.



We want to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Don’t have a mask? No problem! We have masks for sale. Call us ahead of time and we’ll bring one to the door for you.

Practice Social Distancing: Please remember to stay a safe distance (at least 6 feet) from other customers. Let’s all be as safe as possible.

All of our classes are limited to no more than 10 persons. This includes one art instructor and up to 9 students per class.

In accordance with health safety protocols at the time of a class: Students may be required to wear a face mask upon entering the MAC, until departing the MAC.

Face masks may be brought to the MAC by the student or student may purchase one at the MAC.

Face mask fee is separate from class and supply fees.

We are back and we missed you! These past several weeks have been challenging for everyone, and we hope that you are all safe and healthy amid the COVID-19 pandemic. We feel extremely fortunate to be able to welcome our customers back to the shop. As the state of this public health emergency changes from day to day, we will remain focused on keeping our members and our customers safe, healthy, and informed. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

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