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Students head back to school this Friday

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Summer break officially ends this week with the start of a new year for Towns County Schools on Friday, Aug. 9.

Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong, High School Principal Bryan Thomason and Elementary School Principal Dr. Crystal Beach attended the weekly meeting of the Mountain Movers & Shakers on Friday, July 26, to discuss the upcoming school year.

"We don't have as much going on this year as maybe we typically do, so I'll just touch on a few things that are happening," Berrong said. "There is a program for school nutrition called the Community Eligibility Program.

students in our system who qualify for free and reduced lunches, this year every student in our school system will have both breakfast and lunch completely free. There are no forms to fill out or anything.

"It is a very big burden lifted from our parents. School lunches are \$2.50, and if a parent has two or three children in school and you add the cost of breakfast on top of that, it's a large expense.

"I appreciate Becky Mullins, who is our school nutrition director, for applying for that program and getting us qualified for that."

Turning to the new agriculture facility that has experienced delays in construction, Berrong said that, after meeting with the construction manager for the project recently, it appears that the hold-up

has been due to the need for ground improvement at the proposed campus site.

"Because of the ground beneath the property, they're going to have to do some different kinds of footings, and that is holding us up," Berrong said, noting that he is hoping for a January 2025 completion date, but that "it will definitely be done by next summer."

"The other project we've got going on is the elementary recess bathroom - it was the old blue building that's falling apart," Berrong continued, adding that the facility will be moved near the fieldhouse.

"We're going to have a public section with that as well, since there is literally nowhere for the public to use a restroom. We'll have that completed by the time school

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Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong, Elementary School Principal Dr. Crystal Beach and High School Principal Bryan Thomason in a recent public meeting.

Photo by Shelly Knight

Pay attention, motorists: new school bus law in effect

News Special

On April 23, Gov. Brian Kemp signed a new school bus law to address a long-standing concern with school bus safety and the conduct of motorists around buses, according to the Towns County Sheriff's Office.

Also known as Addy's Law, the legislation amending state law went into effect July 1, 2024, just in time for the new school year that is starting in Towns County on Aug. 9.

Addy's Law is named after 8-year-old Adalynn Pierce, who was struck and killed earlier this year when a driver reportedly drove past the school bus with the stop arm out.

The Sheriff's Office wants residents to be aware of the key provisions for motorists to understand:

1. The new law imposes enhanced penalties for violations.

Previously, failing to stop for a school bus was considered a misdemeanor offense which carried a \$250 fine.

Under Addy's Law, this penalty has been increased to a high and aggravated misdemeanor, resulting in a fine of no less than \$1,000, 12 months in jail, or both.



A second or subsequent violation will allow law enforcement to notify the driver's car insurance company of the violations.

2. This new law permits the installation of stop-arm cameras on school buses.

These cameras capture footage providing clear evidence for law enforcement agencies to issue citations, meaning that, even if there is no law enforcement present, people can still be charged based on the camera.

The Hiwassee Police

Department has also spoken out about Addy's Law, noting that "the law regarding when you cannot pass a stopped school bus has not changed, only the penalties for doing so have gotten heavier."

Hiwassee PD advises drivers that if they approach a school bus with its stop arm extended and red lights flashing, they must not pass the bus.

"If you approach and the yellow lights are flashing, be prepared to stop," Hiwassee PD posted to Facebook. "Be sure to stop, or it will cost you."

Farmers Market preserves America's rural livelihoods



The Towns County Farmers Market is a great place to find produce and crafts - and support local farmers and vendors in the process.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Farmers markets date back to ancient Egypt, though the first in the United States opened in Boston in 1634. They have since become a long-standing tradition in rural communities across the nation.

By definition, farmers markets offer a plethora of produce, where customers can expect to find the freshest and most succulent fruits and vegetables for purchase from local

vendors. Markets can be as small as four or five vendors coming together to sell their products or as large as hundreds of vendors gathering to make sales.

This summer, the Hiwassee Farmers Market has had as many as 16 vendors, but organizer Joan Crothers is always hoping for more.

According to Crothers, the Hiwassee Farmers Market has been in place for about eight years now, and people can enjoy its offerings every Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon

during the warmer months, at the entrance to Towns County Beach across from the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

"Initially, we worked with the Extension Office to put this together," Crothers said. "But we didn't really need any sponsor at all because our county commissioners have always been so supportive - we've never had a problem."

"For example, our trash can lid was destroyed, so I called Commissioner (Cliff) Bradshaw, and a new trash

See Farmers Market, Page 6

SAFE Fashion Show raises money for abuse victims



Volunteer models had a blast showing off various modes of fashion for a good cause in the Aug. 3 S.A.F.E. fundraiser.

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE - The S.A.F.E. Fashion Show and Silent Auction returned for its third year on Saturday, Aug. 3, at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center, providing an afternoon of uplifting good times that put the "fun" in fundrais-

ing for a good cause.

S.A.F.E. is a local nonprofit with a mission "to provide support, advocacy, and emergency shelter for victims of Domestic Abuse, Child Abuse, and Sexual Abuse, regardless of gender and to heighten community awareness of such abuse in Towns and Union counties."

The organization was able to raise \$5,528 with this year's fundraiser, which opened around 11:15 a.m. on Saturday, giving attendees a chance to browse all the items up for grabs at the auction. Everything from paintings and plants to tattoo vouchers and gift baskets from lo-

See SAFE Fashion Show, Page 3

TCSO makes drug-related arrests in two incidents

News Special

On Thursday, July 25, Towns County Drug Investigators received a report of drug activity and opened an investigation.

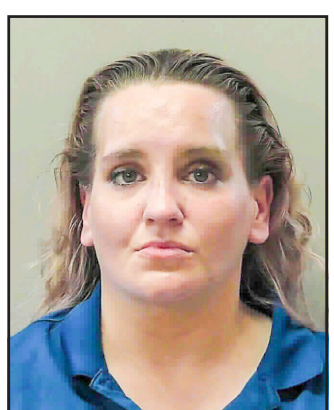
During the investigation at a residence on Dyer Road, probable cause was developed, and a search of the residence resulted in the confiscation of an amount of methamphetamine, which field-tested positive, as well as drug-related objects.

Ella Siobhan Nichols-Carver, 36, of Young Harris, was arrested and charged with possession/use of drug-related objects.

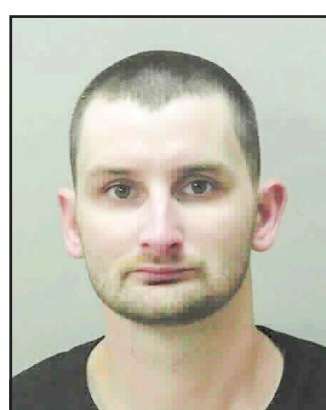
Dustin Wade Holcomb, 36, of Young Harris, was charged with possession of methamphetamine and possession/use of drug-related objects.

Holcomb is currently incarcerated at Clay County Detention Center in North Carolina and will be transferred to Towns County.

Sheriff Ken Henderson See TCSO Arrests, Page 6



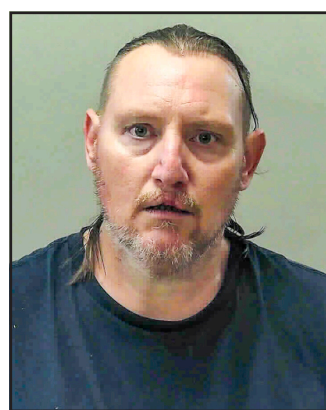
Ella Siobhan Nichols-Carver



Dustin Wade Holcomb



Samuel Jason Murrin



Timothy Alan Dockery

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Western artwork raffle to benefit childhood literacy



Ferst Readers of Union County volunteers are incredibly excited to be raffling off this unique piece of artwork, with tickets available at United Community Bank in Blairsville.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

**By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer**

BLAIRSVILLE – For the third year running, the Ferst Readers of Union County are collaborating with Western music legends the Sons of the Pioneers to make reading more fun and accessible for rural kids through an annual concert fundraiser planned for October.

The Ferst Readers discussed the upcoming concert – and a brand-new fundraising opportunity – in their regular meeting at the Union County Community Center on Thursday, Aug. 1.

Right now, just about everyone is gearing up for the start of a new school year, including the volunteers championing childhood literacy with Ferst Readers.

It stands to reason, after all, that a group dedicated to helping kids with literacy should be invested in the classroom, but they're already making a difference for children before they start their "first day."

Each child enrolled in Ferst Readers receives a free book every month until their fifth birthday, and Union County's branch in particular serves families all over the tri-

state area. In total, 340 books were sent out in July, and 339 have already been mailed for August.

While the concert does bring in a lot of cash for the effort, raffles have a reputation of putting the "fun" in funding. The concert will be no different, thanks to the persistent efforts of an artist sharing the same passions as event organizers.

Mike Carter lives in the suburbs of Branson, Missouri, but his artwork will be on display at United Community Bank in Blairsville until the Oct. 27 concert, when it will be raffled off to one lucky supporter of Ferst Readers.

Specializing in Western art, Carter used colored pencils as his medium to bring the famous stallion Trigger to life in scrubland beneath a perfectly blue sky. The piece fits in not only with the theme of the concert but is linked directly to the band's history.

Roy Rogers, a founding member of the Sons of the Pioneers, met "movie horse" Golden Cloud through his own career as an actor. The two developed a bond, and Rogers eventually bought the palomino, renaming him Trigger "for his quickness of both foot and mind."

Serving equal parts steed, pet and costar, Trigger was incredibly important to Rogers, and the two shared many appearances both on and off the big screen. Rogers even managed to houstrain the horse and take him to hospitals to bring joy to sick children.

After his death in 1965 at the age of 30, Trigger's hide was preserved and stuffed through taxidermy, then displayed at the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum. When the museum closed in 2010, Trigger's remains sold for \$265,000 at public auction by a television company that hopes to one day open a Western museum.



Mike Carter is not only a fan of the Sons of the Pioneers but is also a friend of the group, and he donated this original artwork of Trigger the horse to help raise money for Ferst Readers and childhood literacy.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Trigger's legacy lives on in Carter's art, where he rears up on his hind legs over cacti and the scorched earth of the American West. The frame comes from the same company that framed Rogers' family portraits in the old museum.

"(Carter) has donated the picture (and) he's donated the frame," explained concert organizer John Cochran, husband of Ferst Readers Co-Chair Janice Cochran. "He just wants to do it ... He's a nice fellow. He came to the concert the first year."

"He was impressed with our program, Ferst Readers," added Janice, with John sharing that Carter is good friends with Sons of the Pioneers Trail Boss and Bass Singer Tommy Nallie.

Tickets for a chance to win the artwork can be purchased for \$5 each, and the results of the raffle will be announced on the night of the concert. Proceeds will go toward the Ferst Readers program, specifically to purchase books for the families who sign up.

To participate in the raffle, head over to United Community's main Blairsville

branch where tickets are sold and get a look at the art. Ferst Readers members are also available for contact, especially Janice Cochran at 706-897-1259.

Questions about the

concert can be directed to John Cochran at 706-897-0486. Concert tickets can be found at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/ferst-readers-concert-with-sons-of-the-pioneers-tickets-933312973227>.

SAFE Fashion Show...from Page 1

cal businesses were available for guests to bid on before the show.

Speaking of which, that show was very well received, with all the chairs filled and several folks having to stand.

In all, there were four fashion categories: Every Day, Summer, Fall and Evening. And though there were fewer models compared to past years, they still consisted of women from a variety of backgrounds, ages and builds.

The clothing was sourced from S.A.F.E.'s thrift stores, which are another way the organization raises money for its causes. Thrift store proceeds add to the fashion show fundraising to benefit the S.A.F.E. shelter's upkeep and outreach programs.

S.A.F.E., aka Support in Abusive Family Emergencies, stands as a beacon of hope in what is often some of the darkest days an individual can face. As its name suggests, the organization helps anyone caught in an abusive relationship, whether they be a partner or a child.

Fashion Show Organizer Kathy Davis recognizes how difficult the road to freedom can be. She herself is a survivor of an abusive relationship, and she uses her experience to help others. Her resilience shows through a good sense of humor, which she used that day to open the program.

Fluffy high heels and a lacy thong were just some of the items Davis produced from a shopping bag as she discussed the fickle nature of fashion trends. Along the way, she included humorous stories about how they impacted day-to-day life.

"Back in the day when I was young, if you wore a pair of jeans or anything else with a hole in it, (people) would just make fun of you," Davis remarked, pulling out a pair of jeans sporting splashes of bleach and ripped legs that typically sell for \$100. "For a whole lot less, you can buy them today or go to the S.A.F.E. Thrift Store."

Between categories, raffles for jewelry and soaps, along with live auctions for things like boat rentals, golf rounds at Butternut Creek and even Coach bags and recliners, were received with varying levels of excitement, but all of the options kept the audience on their toes.

That said, the fashion



Donations to S.A.F.E. Thrift Stores ensured that runway participants had something elegant to wear on Saturday.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Ophelia Williams entertained guests of the 2024 S.A.F.E. Fashion Show with two dance routines at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center Aug. 3.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

show and prizes weren't the only things to liven up the event.

Twice, live entertainment graced the stage by way of Ophelia Williams, who hooked up her own music to belly dance. Wearing a special outfit decorated with sequins and flowers, Williams used a scarf as a prop for her first performance. During her "second act," she swayed up toward the stage from the middle aisle to a quicker tune.

A 20-minute intermission served as the cut-off point for the silent auction and allowed peckish guests to get something to eat. The selection came courtesy of Downtown Pizza and Melissa's Custom Cakes of Blairsville, and Ingles and Zaxby's of Hiawassee.

One of the traditions of the S.A.F.E. Fashion Show is selling the featured outfits at the end of the day. This year was no different, with a long line of folks waiting to purchase individual articles of clothing along with the items they scored from the auctions.

If you or someone you love is caught in an abusive relationship, call the 24-hour S.A.F.E. Crisis Line at 706-379-3000 for help getting out. The mission statement, shared on the back of the event guide, drives home that anyone can find support with S.A.F.E.

The two thrift stores are located at 27 Pinebrook Drive in Blairsville and 4134 Bonny Hill Drive in Young Harris. For more information, visit <https://safeservices.org/>.

Farmers Market...from Page 1

can was delivered by the afternoon. He provides the tents and the picnic tables, and his office does the set-up and clean-up for us. We so appreciate his efforts.”

Unlike other markets, vendors are never charged a fee to put their items up for sale at the Hiwassee market, and “most of these vendors are people doing something from their home or from their backyard gardens.”

“The number of vendors and customers vary each week, but we always have whatever produce is grown at the time,” Crothers said. “Early on we have the cool weather crops like lettuce and spinach and kale, but the warm weather crops such as corn and okra should be coming in now.” On a recent Saturday, the market completely sold out of tomatoes by mid-morning, so local produce certainly remains popular, despite fluctuation in attendance levels.

“It’s been slow so far this year because the weather makes a very big difference,” Crothers said. “We had a late spring, and we’ve had quite a bit of rain which makes a dif-

ference to what produce that can be offered. We’re always open to having new people.”

Food is undoubtedly the most important commodity sold at the Farmers Market. The idea behind farmers markets is that the middleman – the grocery store – is cut out of the equation, so people are buying fresh produce straight from the growers themselves.

And it’s not just produce. Vendors also sell prepared foods, plants, flowers, baked goods, and even craft items.

Case in point, Vendor Sheleila O’Neil offers plants alongside vegetables, fruit, sweets and pickles.

“I had a big garden, and I had a lot of stuff left over and I figured I might be able to sell some of this stuff,” O’Neil said. “I’ve been doing this about 10 years now.

“It starts a little bit slow at the first of June, but it takes off and gets very busy between now and September. I’ve met a lot of people here, and it’s so nice to hear their stories. I really like interacting with the customers.”

Patron Kimberly Layton of Greenville, South Carolina, said that she and her family

have a place here in Hiwassee and have made the Farmers Market a tradition.

“Every year we would all come, and mama always insisted we do the Farmers Market,” Layton said. “A few years ago, I bought two Japanese Maple trees from here, and they have just taken off. And the Hydrangeas I bought here have gone crazy. I love coming here.”

Farmers markets provide one of the only low-barrier entry points for beginning farmers. They can start small, test the market and grow their business. As a bonus, most vendors educate their shoppers about nutrition and how to prepare food.

Prices for conventional and organic produce at farmers markets are generally lower than grocery stores. Many low-income shoppers benefit enormously from having a farmers market available to them.

They also attract tourists who are excited to tour the stalls and find something unique. In this way they stimulate the local economy. In short, farmers markets are fun experiences that provide a great way to meet neighbors and to get to know members of the community.



The Farmers Market is located across from the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds on US 76, just outside Hiwassee City Limits. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Back to School...from Page 1

starts.”

Additionally, the schools have put a massive flagpole up at the football field inside Frank McClure Memorial Stadium.

“If you’ve not seen that, go by and see it, because it is impressive,” Berrong said. “It’s a 60-foot-tall flagpole, and the flag itself is 20 feet by 15. It’s lit up at night, and it is absolutely gorgeous.

“On another front, we’ve had a lot of turnover last year with many staff members retiring, but we have filled their positions and are starting off ready to go.”

Regarding recent student achievement, Berrong shared that the district had received preliminary testing data on July 25. And while the information was embargoed as of that morning, he had gone ahead and done “a full comparison for all three schools: elementary, middle and high.”

“This is the best student achievement Towns County has ever had,” Berrong said.

“As a system, we absolutely knocked it out of the park. I feel that once again we’ll be considered the best system in

the North Georgia region.”

Next, he introduced the new Elementary School Principal Dr. Crystal Beach, who is filling the shoes of retired principal Shannon Moss. She has come over from Union County Schools, where she served as Academic Specialist and Multi-Tiered System of Supports Coordinator.

“We’re super excited about her,” Berrong said. “The staff is really buying into her vision and what she is wanting to do. I’ve told her she’s got a little bit of pressure because the scores are so good, she’s got to try to keep increasing that.”

After a short Q&A, High School Principal Bryan Thomason took the floor.

“I love to get out and talk about the school,” Thomason said. “This is my second year, and I’m very proud of what we did last year. We had 72 graduates and 60 scholarships amounting to over \$700,000. To the best I can tell, that was a record for the school.

“Athletically, we had several teams make the playoffs. We had two teams make the Sweet 16; we had one

team make the Final Four. Our girls’ soccer is something else. Those senior girls made it to the Final Four every year they played.

“Academically, I was very pleased to see how well our teachers and our students bought the vision that I had. I have three pillars that I wanted us to focus on, and they were excellence, resilience and family. We’re going to continue focusing on those things because it really ties into our community.

“With those three things I wanted to make sure our kids were as prepared as possible to go into the real world. That is still going to be my goal, and I’m passionate about it. We’re going to focus on student engagement.

“We want to reach our kids and make sure they’re actively engaged in not only what is going on in the classroom but also by getting involved in all the different activities we have in school.

“I’m excited to be here. This place is uniquely special. You won’t find a better place, a better team, better teachers, or better students. We are blessed to do it here. I’m looking forward to year two. I can’t wait to see what we accomplish.”

TCSO Arrests...from Page 1

thanks the citizen who called in an anonymous tip and would like to remind everyone that tipsters will remain anonymous. People may call the office at 706-896-4444 or submit a tip at www.townscountysheriff.org/drug-crime-tips.

In a separate incident on Tuesday, July 30, Drug Investigators were working on drug suppression in the Crooked Creek Road area.

Investigators initiated a traffic stop, during which probable cause was developed, and a search of the vehicle resulted in an amount of methamphetamine that field-tested positive being recovered.

During a search of the individuals, an amount of methamphetamine was confiscated from their persons.

Samuel Jason Murrin, 44, and Timothy Alan Dockery, 48,

both of Murphy, North Carolina, were arrested and charged with felony possession of methamphetamine and possession/use of drug-related objects.

Sheriff Henderson said that the deputies, K-9s, and investigators of the Sheriff’s Office will continue their efforts to fight drugs in the community.

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