



During the September 11 attacks in 2001, 2,977 were killed, and more than 6,000 were injured; 2,606 in the World Trade Center, 265 on the four planes and 125 at the Pentagon.

*We Remember Them Today and Everyday*

# Towns County Herald

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## Hiawassee to honor the fallen from 9/11 on Saturday

By Todd Forrest  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Saturday marks 20 years since the tragic events in New York City, Washington, D.C. and rural Pennsylvania played out on national television, wounding the country with an everlasting scar only deepened by the day's 2,977 innocent lives lost and two decades of war that culminated in the fall of Kabul in Afghanistan on Aug. 15, 2021.

This weekend, services in both Towns and Union counties will pay tribute to the nearly 3,000 victims and the heroic efforts of first responders on 9/11, as well as the servicemen and women killed or wounded in service to their nation during America's 20-year Global War on Terrorism.

Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales and others will host a Town Square Memorial

at 9:45 a.m., just minutes before the collapse of the World Trade Center South Tower at 9:59 a.m.

Approximately 18 minutes into Saturday's ceremony will mark the moment United Airlines Flight 93 crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers and crew stormed the cockpit and forced the plane to the ground at 10:03 a.m.

At 10:15 a.m., the Pentagon's E Ring collapsed, and the North Tower collapsed at 10:28 a.m.

"That was such a tragic incident that happened 20 years ago, and the crazy thing is, there are people that live here that weren't even born yet that didn't experience something that was such a life-altering moment in many of our lives," Ordiales said.

Continuing, "It's just a sad situation, and it's no fun

to get together to remember something like this. But it's the 20th anniversary, so we want to do something to make this one as special as possible."

The event will open with patriotic music provided by members of the Appalachian Saint Andrew's Pipes. Other groups scheduled to participate in the service are the North Georgia Honor Guard, the Georgia National Guard and the Towns County Fire Department.

Speakers include Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw; McConnell Baptist Pastor Danny Byers; Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby; retired Sunny Isles, Florida, Police Chief and Law Enforcement Officers Hall of Famer Fred Maas; and guest speaker Ryan McPherson with the Purple Heart Trail; plus pa-

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This photograph by David Monderer captures Lower Manhattan around 8:30 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001 – about 16 minutes before a plane hijacked by al-Qaida terrorists struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Photo/911memorial.org

## COVID hospitalizations, cases remain high in region

DPH now offering free local testing

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor



For another week running, the latest surge in the COVID-19 pandemic refused to let up as testing positivity and local hospitalizations remained high among predominately unvaccinated individuals.

Per the Georgia Department of Public Health, among people being tested for COVID-19 as of Friday, positivity was 31.5% in Union County and 24.6% in Towns County, pointing to an increased level of on-

going community spread.

Also Friday, Union General Health System Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett reported that the Blairsville hospital was treating 52 COVID inpatients, just shy of a recent record high of 56, with a still-elevated volume of COVID-related emergency room visits.

"We are strained but handling," Barnett said. "The vaccination rates remain above 90% any time I have checked it. Looks like other hospitals are seeing the same thing."

Union County added three new deaths in the month of August, with Towns adding three also, plus an additional death per county in just the first three days in September, per state data.

The number of confirmed

COVID-19 deaths in Georgia officially surpassed 20,000 last week, as highlighted by Georgia Health News, which reported that Public Health Commissioner Dr. Kathleen Toomey said "97% of the COVID deaths since vaccines became available have been in unvaccinated patients."

"These deaths are preventable," Dr. Toomey said.

Last week, DPH made available information regarding "breakthrough" cases, noting 32,168 COVID-19 infections in fully vaccinated Georgians versus 656,783 infections in unvaccinated or partially vaccinated people between Jan. 2, 2021, and Sept. 1, 2021.

Essentially, over that time period, only about 5% of infections occurred in fully vaccinat-

See COVID Cases, Page 3A

## Elected officials give thanks, discuss millage and more

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

On behalf of herself and Councilwomen Amy Barrett and Patsy Owens, who qualified unopposed last month for the Hiawassee Municipal Elections, Mayor Liz Ordiales expressed gratitude for the support of city residents in the monthly City Council work session Aug. 30.

"Thank you, Hiawassee, for the privilege of serving as your elected officials for one more term," Ordiales said. "Amy, Patsy and myself, I'm sure, thank you for not having to make us campaign – we love you so much for that. Thank you very, very much."

Added Ordiales later in the meeting, "(The liquor store

initiative) will be on the ballot in November. Our names will be on the ballot, because it's probably the right thing to do, but the only thing that's a true vote will be the alcohol referendum."

Ordiales also touched on the 2021 Millage Rate for the City of Hiawassee, which was set to receive a first reading in the Sept. 8 regular meeting that occurred after press time.

"Basically, we're going from a 2.067 to a (1.977) millage rate," Ordiales said, detailing her suggestion that the council accept the rollback rate this year.

Breaking down the five-year history of the millage rate, Ordiales highlighted that the rate has dropped every year since at least 2017, back when it was 2.258.



Liz Ordiales  
Hiawassee Mayor

"And one thing I did want to point out, if we wouldn't have the Local Option Sales Tax, that contributes 2.49 (mills) for Local Option Sales Tax from our visitors," Ordiales said. "If we wouldn't have that, then our

See City Meeting, Page 3A

## CHOA, Emory conduct COVID research and testing event

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

BLAIRSVILLE – Children's Health Care of Atlanta and Emory University School of Medicine teamed up with Union County Government last week to offer free COVID-19 drive-thru testing at the Union County Farmers Market Aug. 29-Sept. 2.

Testing was open to all North Georgia residents and doubled as a research event for the Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics Tech Program, aka RADx-Tech, a National Institutes of Health-funded initiative "designed to transform innovative technologies into widely accessible COVID-19 diagnostic testing."

The event also served to decrease some of the testing burden on Union General Hospital, which has seen a barrage of patients sick with COVID-19 since the beginning of August.

All told, 477 adults and 150 children took part in the testing, with a majority hailing from Union County, though many participants traveled from Towns, Lumpkin and Gilmer counties, as well as Cherokee County in North Carolina.

These 600-plus people joined the more than 7,500 Georgians who have participated in the RADx-Tech research.



An Emory University School of Medicine researcher takes a nasal swab for COVID-19 testing at last week's drive-thru event in Blairsville. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

COVID positivity over the five days of testing was about 30% among adults and 40% for children. These numbers were in line with recent Georgia Department of Public Health rates, which as of Friday saw Union sitting at 31.5% positivity.

Overseeing the event was Cheryl Stone, a nurse and clinical research manager with Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. Stone lives in Atlanta

but is from Blairsville, and she reached out to local government here to coordinate the event after being contacted by her sister, Christy Townsend.

Townsend is a teacher at Union County Primary School, which has suffered from high levels of positivity among staff and students to start the school year, resulting in the entire campus closing the second full week into the new semester due

See COVID Research, Page 8A

## North Georgia Tech names library after Linda Johnston

By Jeremy Foster  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – In a room filled with sheer love and admiration, Linda Johnston received the honor of having the North Georgia Technical College Blairsville Campus Library renamed for her in a heartfelt dedication program on Wednesday, Sept. 1.

Johnston was the first librarian to serve at the Blairsville Campus upon its opening in January of 1999, and she

saw it through to becoming the incredible resource for student-conducted research that it is today, assisting students from all over the region, including Union and Towns counties.

Among the guests in attendance were Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, NGTC President John Wilkinson, Blairsville Campus Director Matthew Mashburn, NGTC Foundation Director Cynthia Brown, first Blairsville Campus Director Dr. James Watkins, Director of Student Affairs Services Kristie Gibbs, Edu-

cational Technology Program Specialist Samantha Marchant, former Blairsville Campus Director Larry Culpepper, and emcee Charlie Johnston.

Many a kind word was shared to describe Linda Johnston in the program, with a clear picture imparted of a consummate and dedicated professional, as well as a compassionate person who cared for students and others.

For her part, Johnston was humbled by the occasion, and she thanked everyone pres-

See Johnston, Page 2A



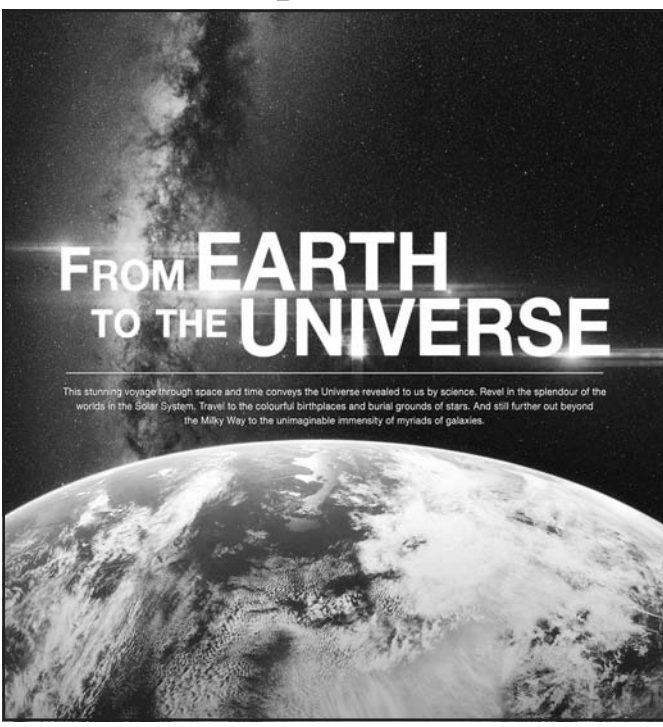
Linda Johnston was happy to have family present at her library dedication ceremony last week. L-R: Niece Elizabeth Marvel, sister-in-law Barbara Johnston, sister Dr. Patricia Gerber, Linda Johnston and Charlie Johnston. Photo by Jeremy Foster

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| <p>2 Sections 16 Pages</p> <p>Lake Levels</p> <p>Blue Ridge 1,685.78</p> <p>Chatuge 1,924.52</p> <p>Nottely 1,773.54</p> | <p>Inside</p> <p>Arrests 5A</p> <p>Church 4B</p> <p>Classifieds 6B</p> <p>Opinion 4A</p> <p>Legals 7B</p> <p>Obits 5B</p> <p>Sports 2B</p> | <p><b>SPORTS</b></p> <p>FOOTBALL</p> <p>9/10 @ Baconton Charter</p> <p>7:30 PM</p> <p>SOFTBALL</p> <p>9/11 @ Washington Wilkes</p> <p>DH 12:30 &amp; 2:30 PM</p> | <p>TCES</p> <p>Explorers of the Month</p> <p>See page 2A</p> | <p>Quilt of Valor Recipient</p> <p>See page 8B</p> | <p>College &amp; Career Academy</p> <p>Groundbreaking</p> <p>See page 1B</p> |
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## Young Harris College's Rollins Planetarium presents "From Earth to the Universe" September 17th

The O. Wayne Rollins Planetarium at Young Harris College will host "From Earth to the Universe" on Friday, September 17, 2021 at 8 p.m. The Planetarium is housed in the Maxwell Center for Mathematics and Sciences on the YHC campus, which is located at 1 College Street, Young Harris, Georgia. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for children, and is free for YHC students and employees.

"From Earth to the Universe" takes the audience through space and time and conveys the universe as revealed to us by science. Featuring a sweeping soundtrack and truly amazing images, this full-dome show allows audiences to revel in the splendor of the worlds in our solar system and the ferocity of the scorching sun. Travel to the colorful birthplaces and cataclysmic burial grounds of the stars. Then, journey further beyond our Milky Way to the unimaginable immensity of myriads of galaxies, as today's giant telescopes allow us to probe even deeper into the cosmos. This updated version of the show features improved image quality, higher resolution



star maps, new video footage of the Very Large Telescope, a new 3D model of the Milky Way, and much more.

Planetarium tickets may be purchased in advance at [yhc.edu/planetarium](http://yhc.edu/planetarium). From there, select the link to "Public Shows" for a listing of upcoming show dates and times. Each

show listing has an option to purchase tickets. Click or tap on the "Purchase Tickets" button to buy tickets through the corresponding Eventbrite page.

For more information about the O. Wayne Rollins Planetarium, please call (706) 379-5195. NT(Sep8,21)5CA

## Johnston...from Page 1A



North Georgia Tech held a ribbon cutting and library dedication Sept. 1 in honor of retired librarian Linda Johnston. Photo by Jeremy Foster

-sent for helping her to become the woman she is today.

Johnston's husband of 44 years Charlie was the one who nominated her to make sure that all the hard work and commitment she has put in over her lifetime, both to learning herself and helping others to learn, would never be forgotten.

Linda is an alumna of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Hawaii, and both she and Charlie are veterans of the U.S. Army, during which time she served as a Chinese linguist.

Her passion for libraries goes back to childhood and her love of books. She was very shy and quiet from a young age, and reading helped her discover an alternate reality and peaceful universe.

Prior to her time as a librarian at North Georgia Tech, she worked in the libraries of West Central Technical College and the U.S. Army libraries of Fort Shafter in Hawaii; Zweibrucken in Germany; and

Fort McPherson in Georgia.

She retired from North Georgia Tech in 2012 and has managed to keep busy since then with various downtime hobbies that include the Mountain Coin Club, knitting, reading and Zumba.

Johnston and her husband also volunteer at the Colwell Probation Detention Center offering drug and alcohol addiction counseling to those detainees in the Rescue Program. Additionally, she takes two classes per semester from the University of North Georgia.

Last week's gathering featured refreshments for guests to enjoy as they reminisced about their journeys together, and the dedication featured the presentation of a plaque officially designating the "North Georgia Technical College Blairsville Campus Linda Johnston Library."

The plaque reads: "Dedicated in honor of former librarian Mrs. Linda Johnston in honor of her hard work estab-

lishing the library facility on this site and in recognition of honorable service to her country and faithful dedication to the students, faculty, staff and community served by North Georgia Technical College."

Surrounded by family and friends, Johnston reiterated her appreciation for the college choosing to recognize her in this way. Being a librarian has been a lifelong dream accomplished, and she was excited to commemorate the momentous accolade with those in attendance.

Further, Johnston shared with attendees that, in all her worldwide travels, she decided to make Blairsville her home after working here because she loved the beautiful mountain life and friendly people.

As for her closing comments, her most powerful statement was to let everyone know that, "Although the library may have my name on it, the library truly belongs to everyone and always will - that is the greatness of a library."

## TCES announces August Explorers of the Month



Towns County Elementary School's Explorers of the Month are Ready to Learn: Joshua Krokonko, Makayla Banister, Veronica Milam, Ryleigh Green, Malachi Moore, Michaela Cosgro, CJ Mitchell, Blakelee Barrett, Aria Byrne, Emily Crawford, McKenzie Lance, Balin Cosgro, Brooke Mowrey, Bennett Lloyd, Sophia Bowling, Chance Floyd, Jake Roberts, Kylee Coggins, Bristol Rogers, James Stowers, Olivia Burnette, and Tristan Waldroup. Not pictured: Catie Marion and Jonah Baker. TS(Sep8,F1)5H

## Bureau of Land Management 75th Diamond Anniversary

The Pacific Northwest has 16.1 million acres of public lands that unfold into a rich tapestry of diverse landscapes, starting where the mighty Columbia River crosses into northeastern Washington from Canada and ending at the lush headwaters of the Chetco River near California.

I have been deep into this area for the past 2 weeks in Salem, Oregon on a 16-day Fire Prevention Team assignment with the Department of the Interior-Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM was established in 1946, but its roots go back to the years after America's independence, when the young nation began acquiring additional lands. At first, these lands were used to encourage homesteading and westward migration.

The General Land Office (GLO) was created in 1812 to support this national goal. Over time, values and attitudes regarding public lands shifted, and Congress merged the GLO and another agency, the U.S. Grazing Service, creating the BLM. With historical roots dating back to the earliest days of the nation, the BLM administers the lands that remain from America's original "public domain."

Created in 1946 through a government reorganization during the Truman Administration, the BLM is the successor to the GLO (established in 1812) and the U.S. Grazing Service (originally called the Division of Grazing and renamed in 1939).

In 2021, the BLM is commemorating two milestone events: the 75th diamond anniversary as an Interior Department agency and the 45th anniversary of the principal law defining its mission: the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA).

As the manager of more land (245 million surface acres or one-tenth of America's land base) and more subsurface mineral estate (700 million acres) than any other government agency, the BLM carries out a

dual mandate under FLPMA: that of managing public land for multiple uses (such as energy development, livestock grazing, mining, timber harvesting, and outdoor recreation) while conserving natural, historical, and cultural resources (such as wilderness areas, wild horse and wildlife habitat, artifacts, and dinosaur fossils).

In the language of FLPMA, the BLM's responsibility is to administer public lands "on the basis of multiple use and sustained yield" of resources. What this means, on a practical level, is that the BLM - except in areas specifically set aside for conservation purposes - must multitask to fulfill its duties. Nevertheless, consistent with the BLM's goal of good stewardship of public land resources, "multiple use" does not mean every use on every acre.

I have always seen pictures of the majestic Cascade mountains and Pacific beaches in this part of the country, but I never dreamed of how it really looks up close and personal (breathtaking to put it mildly). The Cascade mountains and the Willamette Valley are everything you see in pictures and much more.

Agriculture is huge here in the Willamette valley, with mountains on either side and lots of big Tractors (my favorite) tilling the large fields. There are also many large vineyards and fruit orchards in the valley. Our team (4 Georgia Foresters) are working on a fire prevention plan for the BLM and US Forest Service here in Salem to try to help them reduce the risk of more devastating wildfires that are currently all burning around us up here.

Our "work" consists of developing fire prevention plans and signs and then riding thru the majestic Cascade mountains and valleys with the huge timber and cascading water talking to campers about the extreme fire danger and then having lunch on the Pacific looking at the "Prudential "Rock" just off



Frank Riley  
Executive Director of RC&D

the beach. You can drive from the farms in the valley into the deep forests where the BLM and forest industry own most of the timberland covered with Douglas fir trees.

The BLM owns every other section (640 acres), and industry, US Forest Service, and private landowners own the rest, so the land looks like a checkerboard. The terrain is very steep, so modern mechanized loggers now using "tethered" machines where a cutting machine is tethered by a cable and winch to an "anchor" at the top and is winched down the steep slope to cut the timber that is then "skidded" up to the top with a long cable.

Tethered logging systems utilize cable winch systems on harvesters, feller bunchers, forwarders, loaders, and skidders to stabilize and assist equipment operations on steep slopes. The cable system allows the equipment to operate on slopes that would normally be considered unsafe for equipment or damaging to soils.

The use of tethered assistance enables enhanced equipment stability on steep or adverse soil conditions, while also enhancing traction on more gentle grades. Soon after harvest they replant the trees and since the rotation age is 60 to 80 years there is no time to waste.

On one of our treks deep into the forest, where I met an old campground host whose brother lives in Reynolds, GA which is 8 miles from where I grew up 2600 miles away...the world is getting way too small!

For more information on FPET, BLM, or wildfires, contact Chetatee-Chattahoochee RC&D [www.info.ccrd@gmail.com](http://www.info.ccrd@gmail.com) or go to BLM.gov.

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## Towns County Herald

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# City Meeting...from Page 1A

millage rate would be 4.4. So, pay visitors, in other words.”

In her Mayor’s Report, Ordiales commended Towns County for having achieved 51% vaccination with at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, up to 52% by press time.

“(That’s) better than a whole bunch of other places,” she said. “We’re doing OK (with COVID), but we’re clearly not doing well.

“(Councilman Jay Chastain Jr. is seeing a lot of hardship in his job as a paramedic). Many times, the patients that they pick up have to stay in their ambulance for hours before they can get into the hospital. So, try to be safe.”

Ordiales noted the high numbers of inpatients in the Union General Health System, which has remained over capacity primarily among unvaccinated people for more than a month during this latest surge of the pandemic.

“You can pretty much get the vaccine anywhere,” she said. “I know it’s controversial; people want it, people don’t want it. It seems to be working, and pretty much you can walk into Ingles right now and get it.

“So, again, wash your hands, wear a mask, and walk away if possible. From what Junior was telling me earlier, he’s seeing that it’s even worse than (before) with transporting people. So, be very careful if you can.”

Talking economic development, Ordiales revealed that the cities of Hiwassee and Young Harris along with Towns County had won the 2021 Al-iceann Wohlbruck Nado Impact Award for their 2021 Economic Development Strategy with the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission.

“Now, that doesn’t mean anything to us, but in the world of economic development, it’s a big deal,” Ordiales said. “(Joint Economic Development Director Denise McKay) put that together, and we won the award.”

According to nado.org, “The Impact Awards program honors (National Association of Development Organizations) members for their creative approaches to advancing regional economic development and improved quality of life.

“These projects have made significant impacts on their regions and demonstrate

the diversity of services and program delivery provided by regional development organizations across the country.”

The Georgia Mountains Regional Commission is hosting yet another public input session for the 2021 Joint Comprehensive Plan on Thursday, Sept. 9, at 7 p.m. in the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center.

Direction of future growth and development for the county and cities will be the topic of conversation, with land use specifically to be discussed on Thursday. A public input survey for the plan is available at [hiwasseeega.gov](http://hiwasseeega.gov).

Also in the work session, McKay detailed how the cities and county had submitted a joint application for the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing Program, and the application has been selected as one of seven finalists, with five to be picked to participate in the program.

The program lasts three years, and if the local joint application is selected as a winner, there’s a good chance that Towns County, Hiwassee and Young Harris will be able to bring “quality affordable housing” to the area, McKay said.

A 20-member team will make a one-hour presentation at Foster Park followed by a one-hour tour to highlight local housing for the GICH Selection Committee on Sept. 14, and a decision is expected by mid-October.

McKay also spoke on the City of Young Harris’ application – supported by the county and Hiwassee – to the Fanning Institute for the creation of a countywide Youth Leadership Program to be housed under the Joint Development Authority.

Towns County Schools and other community partners are involved in the project, and the venture will require plenty of support from local volunteers, so anyone interested in assisting the effort can contact City Hall.

“The goal is to start with fourth grade, and we know we would like to carry it through to young adults, up into the early 20s,” McKay said. “So that once they’re out of high school, we’ll still have something to offer them.”

Police Chief Paul Smith gave a few updates that Monday, revisiting the fact that the

city had hired a new officer, Ashley Osborn.

“She started recently,” Smit said. “With her hire, that makes our department 40% female. We hired the first female officer a couple years ago, and with two, we’re at 40% now. Sounds good, but that’s how it works.

“Traffic has been bad, as you have all noticed. I just want to throw some numbers out there. The tag readers at either end of town, on July 31 – that was our busiest day this summer – scanned 10,317 cars. Those are just cars entering town.

“The radar sign that’s there by Georgia Mountain, it scanned 13,302 vehicles. So, those are the cars that were back and forth through town ... I think it was about 7,000 unique tags, so we kind of get a good idea of how many vehicles are coming into town.”

Hiwassee will be hosting its annual “Heroes Tribute” on the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terror attacks, Ordiales said. The event will start at 9:45 a.m. Saturday on the Town Square and will feature new Hometown Heroes banners, the honoring of local Purple Heart recipients and more.

Councilwoman Anne Mitchell was honored in the meeting for having earned a Certificate of Recognition from the Carl Vinson Institute of Government Training Board. Ordiales is the chairperson for this board.

At the beginning of the meeting, Ordiales called for a moment of silence for recent losses of family members by city employees.

Losses include Mary Smith, the mother of Police Chief Paul Smith; Cordella Bowen, the aunt of Wastewater Operator Clint Royce; and Henry Jones, the grandfather of Water Distribution Operator Jarrett Milam.

Discussing the city’s annual Halloween event that provides trick-or-treating opportunities for hundreds of local children, Ordiales said that “we might have to pull the plug on that” this year due to ongoing COVID-19 spread. The council will revisit the matter closer to the holiday.

The Hiwassee City Council holds its regular business session the first Tuesday of every month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall.

## Get your Fall mums and help support Operation PUP



PUP has been selling mums on the square for many years, getting our last donations before winter. Thank you for your donations.

Fall is in the air and it’s time to do your outside Fall Decorating! Operation PUP (Prevent Unwanted Pets) will be on the square in Hiwassee on Friday and Saturday, September 10-11, 2021 from 9 a.m.- 2 p.m. We will be on the corner of the square by the traffic light at Hwy. 76 and River Street.

These beautiful mums have been lovingly grown by Mike Clark at his local nursery, English Country Gardens.

When planted in your yard in the fall, chrysanthemums usually come back the following year.

Operation PUP is a non-profit group that gives financial help to area residents to get their pets and doorstep cats spayed or neutered. If you need help, call 1-888-496-2387.

## COVID Cases...from Page 1A

ed people. Among those 32,168 fully vaccinated breakthrough cases, only 219 people died due to COVID, versus 7,086 in the unvaccinated group, making up about 3% of COVID deaths.

The data thus far is clear – getting vaccinated greatly diminishes a person’s chance of contracting the novel coronavirus in the first place, with a downstream effect of dramatically fewer deaths among those choosing vaccination, especially for those most vulnerable to severe illness.

Full vaccination rates in Union County have remained steady for the last two weeks at 43%, just behind the state average of 44%, with the rate in Towns County having gone up a percent to 47% last week, making Towns one of the most vaccinated counties per capita in the state as of Sept. 4.

As highlighted in a Sept. 1 post on the “Union County, Georgia Government” Facebook page, for the entire pandemic, last month was the worst to date in terms of new cases and hospitalizations.

“Historically, January 2021 was the worst month for increased COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations with the illness,” the post reads. “We added 389 cases in January 2021, and the highest number of hospitalizations were 31. In the month of August, there have already been 469 addi-

tional COVID-19 cases.

“Union General Hospital is currently well above capacity and has set a new record of patients in their hospital this week. (As of Sept. 1, there were 56 patients admitted) with a primary diagnosis of COVID-19. These are serious illnesses. The increase in cases throughout the state continues to make it difficult to find beds for critical patients in any of the surrounding larger hospitals.”

Fortunately, COVID metrics in the schools improved last week. As of Thursday, all five campuses of Union County Schools tallied just 139 students and 29 staff cases for 165 total positives systemwide, down from 200 cases the week before.

Over in Towns County Schools, numbers released Friday revealed just six students and two staff members with COVID diagnoses for all three schools, down from seven students and four staff the week before.

Both Towns and Union County school districts had to close campuses for their respective youngest grades the second full week of school due to staff shortages caused primarily by COVID-19.

In terms of testing, in order to lighten the community burden on Union General Hospital, District 2 Public Health is now offering free PCR testing

to anyone wanting or needing one.

“District 2 Public Health is partnering with LTS to provide FREE COVID-19 drive-thru testing at Union General Hospital in Blairsville,” District 2 Public Information Officer Natasha Young said Friday.

Continuing, “If an individual needs a COVID-19 test for work or school, or if they are feeling ill and would like to be tested for COVID-19 in Union County, the lab will offer Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests. These are not rapid tests, and it will take 36 hours for results.

“Testing will be available Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The testing site will be located at 35 Hospital Road, Blairsville, GA 30512. The testing site will not be open on Labor Day, Sept. 6.

“While no appointment is required, registration with LTS Labs is encouraged to decrease wait times at the testing site. Registration information can be found at <https://honumg.info/LTSGA015>.”

COVID vaccines are available for free and without appointment at the local Health Department, and people may also find them at any number of area pharmacies.

For more information on vaccination and the state of COVID in Georgia, visit <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

# COVID Research...from Page 1A



These health care researchers from Emory University School of Medicine are committed to improving COVID-19 outcomes during the pandemic, pictured here at the Farmers Market Testing and Research event Sept. 2.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard



Nurses and researchers from Children's Healthcare of Atlanta who worked to collect swabs from children for COVID-19 testing last week.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

to staff outages primarily from COVID-19.

When Stone heard from her sister how the hospital was struggling to keep up with the demand for testing, she decided the program she was involved in, RADx-Tech, could accomplish two things in the mountains: assist the local health system while benefitting from a rural research opportunity.

The crew that arrived on Aug. 29 had hosted many similar events in the past; however, this was the first time Stone and her hand-picked team had conducted such research and testing in a rural setting, so the event provided valuable information in that regard as well.

On top of COVID testing, research participants provided additional swabs to be used to assess the capabilities of diagnostic equipment currently under evaluation by RADx-Tech.

Kids even took part in the research process to see how well children of different ages can swab themselves, with the idea being to evaluate ways in which broad-scale testing can be safely and effectively implemented in schools. Pooled testing for schools is also under evaluation.

"Some of these kids always have a stuffy nose and always have a cough in winter, that's their baseline," Stone said. "To send all these kids home all of the time because they have a stuffy nose or a cough is not healthy for the child, because the child is out of school, trying to learn remotely, and then they come back negative (for COVID)."

"So, you sent them home for 10 days, mom had to take

off work and dad stayed home – and they had allergies. It's just this vicious cycle."

As discussed above, RADx-Tech is a major collaborative effort between Emory, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta and Georgia Tech.

The goal of RADx-Tech is to speed innovation in the development, commercialization and implementation of technologies for COVID-19 testing, ultimately for approval by the Food & Drug Administration, to get better devices faster to the market for both rapid and PCR testing.

It's a big deal, with results from the program paving the way for the mass manufacture of effective COVID testing equipment for use in homes, at schools, in businesses and office spaces throughout the Southeast.

Ensuring that reliable testing becomes increasingly available to public and private entities is important because, as the pandemic continues, the U.S. will require better ways to manage the spread of the disease amid the need to carry on the functions of society.

Testing can help to accomplish this by allowing people to know when, for example, to stay home from work or school following an exposure.

The testing last week was free, and those who took part in the research aspect received a gift card for their time.

Stone would like to thank the local partners who made the event possible, including the Commissioner's Office, the Farmers Market, Union County Emergency Management Agency and Fire Department,

which came together to provide the facilities and setup.

She is also grateful to the many restaurants and everyday residents who provided food and drinks during their time here, as was Emory University's Kristi Godbolt, the associate director of outreach for RADx-Tech in charge of coordinating logistics for such events.

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta handled the testing for kids while Emory focused on the adults, with samples from the latter being resulted at Grady Memorial Hospital under the supervision of Dr. Yun (Wayne) Wang, Director of Microbiology, Immunology and Molecular Diagnostics, another partner in the RADx research.

Godbolt said the team's job was made incredibly easy thanks to the assistance provided by residents, businesses and local government.

"This community has been amazing to us," Godbolt said. "You've been very welcoming. A lot of our lunches and dinners were actually supplied by the community, and when we came on Sunday, we called (David Dyer) from the Fire Department, and he brought the tables and chairs and let us use their refrigerators."

"Really, this is a joint effort, so the numbers that we can get are because of the community's help. That made this run so very smoothly."

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris said the county was all too happy to help, adding that everyone in Union was grateful in return for the testing and research event coming to town.

Additionally, Paris and the health care professionals conducting the event stressed the importance of vaccines in preventing COVID infections, noting that a greater percentage of the population getting vaccinated would help keep the hospital clear of the vast majority of severe cases.

Wilbur Lam, M.D., Ph.D., a Children's Healthcare of Atlanta attending physician who is one of the principal investigators of the RADx Center based at Emory, Georgia Tech, and Children's, said the work by Stone and her team this past week has been "nothing short of amazing."

"Their efforts truly exemplify the multiple missions of our RADx Center, as they've been able to serve the NIH and American public by evaluating the performance of existing and novel COVID-19 tests while also helping our own Georgia communities during this public health crisis," Dr. Lam said.

For more information on the RADx-Tech Program, visit <https://www.choa.org/about-us/newsroom/nih-awards-childrens-emory-and-georgia-tech-to-continue-verification-of-covid19-diagnostic-tests>.

# 9/11 Remembrance...from Page 1A

triotic performances by local singer Grace Worley.

In addition to the memorial, Mayor Ordiales, Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith and the Rotary Club of Lake Chatuge will place 10 new "Hometown Heroes" banners on the square to honor local heroes and retire last year's recipients will be recognized.

"It's important to honor our veterans, and it's something we plan on doing every year to thank them for their service and sacrifice," Ordiales said. "Of course, (the current events in Afghanistan) make this year's service a little more somber."

Over in Blairsville, starting at 8 a.m. on Saturday, Union

County will pay its respects with a memorial service at the flagpole at the upper ballfields in Meeks Park.

Local dignitaries scheduled to speak include Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley, Derek Hartley of First Baptist Church Blairsville, Union County Schools Administrator and retired Army Ranger Art McCann, and Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris.

Union County Emergency Management Agency Director David Dyer will provide the keynote address that day, followed by special music courtesy of Union County High School.

And while the Blairsville-Union County Cham-

ber of Commerce and Union County Fire Department have hosted a Sept. 11 commemorative event in recent years, this year's observance carries added significance.

"We started this ceremony a few years ago just to make sure there was a remembrance ceremony in Union County on 9/11," Chamber President Steve Rowe said. "With this being the 20th (anniversary), we will feel more strongly about this one."

"At the chamber, we also feel that in light of current events (in Afghanistan), it's even more important to have this ceremony and remember all of those that had their lives taken or have given their life in service to our country."