

# Towns County Herald

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## Schools announce 2021 TOTY recipients, system winner

By Mark Smith  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

It's that time again, when Towns County Schools honor their Teachers of the Year and announce the System Teacher of the Year, with 2021 recognitions having taken place at the regular Board of Education meeting on Oct. 4.

The Elementary, Middle and High School Teachers of the Year are selected by their peers in the spring of the previous year. Of those three teachers, one is selected at the beginning of the current year by an impartial outside panel to serve as the System Teacher of the Year.

For the 2021-22 school year, Towns County High

School Teacher Rachel Surles was chosen as the System Teacher of the Year.

In the meeting, Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong presented Surles with her Towns County School System Teacher of the Year plaque and said that she may now compete for the coveted Georgia State Teacher of the Year title.

High School Principal Roy Perren also presented Surles with the High School Teacher of the Year plaque.

In explaining their selection, Surles' colleagues said that she represents "all that a teacher should be."

"She goes above and beyond for all students at Towns County High School while maintaining a respectful, engaging and successful learning

environment," the colleagues continued. "She incorporates all kinds of learning activities into her classroom and her curriculum in order to switch the lessons up and get students thinking creatively."

Surles is also the driving force behind the High School yearbook.

Lesia Johnson was named the Middle School Teacher of the Year. Middle School Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs presented Johnson with a plaque.

"Ms. Johnson has her master's degree in education, and this is her 18th year teaching in the classroom," Hobbs said. "Seventeen of those years she taught (English Language Arts).

See *Terrific Teachers*, Page 5A



L-R: TCMS Teacher of the Year Lesia Johnson, TCHS Teacher of the Year Rachel Surles and TCES Teacher of the Year Hilary Tallent. Surles was also named System Teacher of the Year. Photo by Mark Smith

## Davis' giant pumpkin headed to State 4-H



Some Noahs build giant ships – others cultivate giant crops. Pictured here, TCMS sixth-grader Noah Davis with his truly humongous pumpkin. Photo/Submitted

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

When 11-year-old Noah Davis first received a potted pumpkin plant earlier this summer from Towns County Extension Agent Jacob Williams as part of the local 4-H program, he didn't expect to grow a 215-pound pumpkin.

But thanks to his budding gardening skills, that's exactly what the sixth grade Towns County Middle Schooler did, and now, his pumpkin will be the lone local entry in the upcoming State 4-H Giant

Pumpkin Contest, with results expected to be returned by the end of this month.

The initially tiny plant was actually a leftover pumpkin from the Union County 4-H Giant Pumpkin Growing program, which has celebrated multiple state records for student-grown pumpkins in recent years.

Noah has been a 4-H'er since the fourth grade, though his first attempt at growing a giant pumpkin was in 2020 when, as a fifth-grader, he got a plant from Williams after the

See *Giant Pumpkin*, Page 5A

## Georgia Mountain Fair Band disbands after opening music at 2021 Fall Festival



L-R: Georgia Mountain Fair Band Members Barry Palmer, Steve Vincent, Bill Cunningham, Jim Wood, Kenny Head, Jerry Braswell and Dennis Brown backstage at Anderson Music Hall after their final show together on Oct. 8. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The members of the original Georgia Mountain Fair Band, begun in 1956 by "Fiddlin'" Howard Cunningham when the fair was held at the old Towns County High School in a tent, have decided it's time to close out that era of their lives.

So, on Friday, Oct. 8, 2021, the original Georgia Mountain Fair Band played its last set, opening the 2021 Georgia Mountain Fall Festival with an ode to music at the Anderson Music Hall.

The band's last set included traditional country music and a little rock 'n' roll, with the last song played being Jim Wood's raucous rendition of Jerry Bruns' "Johnny B. Goode." And the audience loved it.

Following the last song, GMF Band Director Bill Cunningham – son of Howard Cunningham – said that he and GMF Chairman of Country Music Shows Jim Wood had decided it was time to disband and move on.

Each band member received a plaque commemorating his years of service after the final performance, with Cunningham introducing band

members one by one and presenting plaques with commemorative plaques.

Piano player Kenny Head, from Athens, Georgia, was honored for 12 years of service. Head's career includes tours with The Georgia Satellites, John Berry, T. Graham Brown, Collin Ray, Randy Travis, Billy Dean, Wayne Kemp, and Narvel Felts.

Head is also commemorating his 40-year role as a founding member of the acclaimed Jimmy Buffett tribute band Sons of Sailors, and he is a member of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame.

Guitar player Dennis

Brown, of Lafayette, Georgia, has been a band member for 12 years. During his 30 years as a Nashville musician, Brown performed on the Grand Old Opry and worked with country favorites Vicki Byrd, Doug Stone, Alan Jackson, Ray Price, Terry McBride, Katrina Elam, and Mark Chestnut.

Drummer Steve Vincent, from East Ridge, Tennessee, was honored for 20 years of service. Vincent was somewhat of a child prodigy, as he started playing drums at the age of 12 and became a member of the Chattanooga Symphony at age 14.

See *GMF Band*, Page 6A

## Fraternal Order of Police gives Towns County Sheriff's Office 10 ballistic vests



Sheriff Ken Henderson was thankful to have received 10 life-saving bulletproof vests from the North Georgia Mountains Lodge #112 of the Fraternal Order of Police last week. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Michael Palmer, president and state trustee of the North Georgia Mountains Lodge #112 of the Fraternal Order of Police, presented 10 high-quality bulletproof vests to the Towns County Sheriff's Office on Wednesday, Oct. 6, at a presentation inside the Civic Center in Hiawassee.

Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Sheriff Ken Henderson, Chief Deputy Gene Moss and Capt. Eric Wood attended, along with as many Towns County deputies as could be spared from their

duties.

The Fraternal Order of Police is an advocacy group of current and retired police officers who have represented law enforcement interests since the organization's inception in 1915. The order provides legal representation, college scholarships, and fraternity among peace officers.

Additionally, the order advocates for police officers at state capitols and in Congress and boasts 356,000 members nationwide.

Palmer and Order Member Matt Nall presented the valuable life-saving equipment last week, which the Fraternal Order of Police donates to law enforcement agencies through

a program called "Operation Protect the Protector."

As of this delivery, the order has provided 985 ballistic vests to 169 Georgia law enforcement agencies so far through this in-kind donation program, Palmer said.

"I was blessed to have great leadership (in my career), and that's what you have in Sheriff Henderson, as well as his Chief Deputy Gene Moss," said Palmer to Bradshaw in a gathering before the presentation. "Bless you all and thank you for what you do. Commissioner, you've got a great man here and a professional agency."

Palmer said the North Georgia Mountains Lodge

#112 encompasses Rabun, Habersham, White, Towns and Fannin counties.

"I'm proud to get some people from Union (County)," Palmer said. "The more people we have, the louder our voice is at the state capitol, as well as at the national level. In Georgia, we have close to 6,000 members."

Continuing, "These vests (cost) approximately \$650 apiece and include a tourniquet. We do this for agencies that have a limited or non-existent budget. Ballistic vests today are an absolute necessity (for law enforcement)."

A bit of current news, Palmer said there have been

See *Ballistic Vests*, Page 5A

## Vote early now thru Oct. 29 in Hiawassee

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Advanced in-person voting for the City of Hiawassee referendum to allow packaged liquor sales inside city limits began Monday at the Towns County Board of Elections and Registration Office, and it will continue weekdays through Oct. 29 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

As previously reported, all incumbents for the 2021 Hiawassee Municipal Election qualified unopposed, so the sole item that will appear on the ballot is the referendum asking registered city voters to

consider enabling the establishment of package stores in Hiawassee.

Should the referendum pass, a limited number of liquor stores will be allowed to set up shop within Hiawassee City Limits, with restrictions based on proximity to schools, churches, etc.

Packaged liquor sales would contribute a significant amount of new tax revenues to the City of Hiawassee, generating local tax dollars that would otherwise be flowing to neighboring municipalities.

This is an off year for countywide elections, and only

See *Early Voting*, Page 5A

## TCSO Sheriff's Deputy suspended without pay

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Towns County Sheriff's Office received a complaint on Patrol Deputy Christian Daugirdas in reference to an impounded vehicle incidental to a Sept. 5 DUI arrest.

The accusation was that Daugirdas had driven a suspect's vehicle while waiting for a wrecker service to pick it up.

This complaint was investigated by the staff at the Sheriff's Office, and according to Deputy Daugirdas,

because the vehicle was on an incline, he moved it to get the vehicle on a flat surface to avoid damaging it during loading.

Deputy Daugirdas did admit that he drove the vehicle down the road a short distance before bringing it back to the level ground and positioning it on the wrecker.

Through the course of investigation, the deputy's actions were determined to be in violation of Sheriff's Office policy and regulation.

See *Deputy Suspended*, Page 5A

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## Terrific Teachers...from Page 1A

“She has a long history of having some of the best test scores in (Pioneer Regional Education Service Agency).”

Johnson’s colleagues described her as always expecting 100% from her students, “and she teaches them to be the best: Ms. Johnson is always looking for innovative ways to improve her craft and reach more of her students.”

Receiving the Elementary School Teacher of the Year Award was Dr. Hilary Tallent, and Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss presented Tallent with her plaque.

“Dr. Tallent does an outstanding job working with her students in a professional yet nurturing way,” her colleagues said. “She sets exceptionally high standards and expectations for her students.”

Added another colleague, “I am convinced that every morning when ‘Doc’ comes to school, the main thing on her mind is how she will provide an enjoyable, meaningful experience for her kids.”

Moving along, School Finance Director Myra Underwood updated the board on school finances, saying that the final financials for Fiscal Year 2021 were signed off by Dr. Berrong on Sept. 15 and had been submitted to the Georgia Department of Education.

“Our fund equity for the General Fund ended at \$6.078

million,” Underwood said. “It is up right at \$2 million from the beginning balance. That is partially due to property tax and motor vehicle (tax).

“We actually had budgeted (an anticipated) \$6 million (in revenue), and we received \$6.6 million. This year we did get quite a bit more than we did last year,” she said, adding that it was partially due to back taxes being collected.

“The (Title Ad Valorem Tax on vehicles) ... we budgeted (an anticipated) \$300,000 (in revenue). It actually came in at \$900,000. And then on the sales tax, we budgeted \$1.9 million, and it came in at \$2.6 million.”

So, coupled with coming in under budget on 2021 expenditures, that accounts for most of the approximately \$2 million increase in the General Fund over the 2021 fiscal year, Underwood said.

She also said that, even with accepting the rollback millage rate this year, the school would still be realizing an increase of over \$200,000 in property tax revenue in Fiscal Year 2022 given the new growth in Towns County.

“Even our (real estate) transfer tax check has been more than what we normally receive in the past. We budgeted \$75,000. It came in at \$124,000 (for FY 2021),” she said, noting that the fed-

eral CARES Act money that is coming in is helping out as well.

Finally, the Finance Director said she had been notified that day that the auditors would soon start their audit of the FY21 financials.

In other business, the board accepted the rollback millage rate of 6.863 mils for FY22, as mentioned above.

“The rollback rate that we were given is 6.863 mils, and that is a reduction from 7.346, which we reduced from the year before from 7.47,” Superintendent Berrong said. “We have accepted the rollback rate for at least the last eight years.

“But even with that rollback rate, we’ll be increasing our revenue by \$279,000, mainly because of the new buildings being built and the increasing property values (due to additions, etc.)”

Next, the board approved several new substitute teachers: Hannah Henderson, Cheri Hulke, Ashley Huff, Richard Prosuch, Jessie Farthing, Wendy Gleaton and Jennifer Coker.

The board approved the hire of substitute nurse Jessica Beck. Beck was brought in the previous week, with the board’s approval, when she was needed to fill in for absentees. Beck graduated from North Georgia Technical College in July and is a licensed

practical nurse, or LPN.

Board members also approved a recommendation to add a second Nurse Assistant position and seek someone to fill the position immediately.

With their approval of the resignation of custodian Stevie Oldham, the board approved the hiring of new custodians Roy Rowland and Annette Parsons.

On the dual recommendation of Transportation Director Scott Hamilton and Dr. Berrong, the board approved disposing of seven old buses and two vehicles.

All three school principals reported that the school year was progressing normally in their respective schools, with zero covid cases in the elementary and middle schools, and only three positive COVID cases within the high school student body.

Berrong reported that the few students who elected the online option at the beginning of the year would be allowed to return to normal classes early on Monday, Oct. 11, if they so choose. Otherwise, they will have to wait until the second semester to return to campus.

The Towns County Board of Education meets the first Monday of every month inside the Middle/High School Media Center, with a work session at 6 p.m. and a regular meeting at 6:45 p.m.

## Giant Pumpkin...from Page 1A

ag agent learned he had a penchant for agriculture.

He received last year’s plant later in the year so experienced a shorter growing season that failed to yield a giant pumpkin. But with this summer’s plant arriving earlier in the season, the up and coming sixth-grader was able to get a good start on growing the massive 215-pound pumpkin.

“It’s great that he has an interest in growing things,” Williams said. “That’s a great thing to have, and I’m really proud of him for that and sticking with it this year and growing a pretty good pumpkin.”

As a fifth-generation farmer, Noah has come by much of what he knows from his mother Emily Shook and grandfather Curtis Shook, but his education didn’t stop there. Noah’s father, Barrett Davis, also has family history in farming and passed on his knowledge to his son.

“I just got interested in it and tried it,” the boy said of gardening, with his mother noting that he received his first cabbage plant in the third grade, and his hobby sprouted from there.

Out of his entire class, Noah’s cabbage was the only plant to survive, and as it turned out, he had such a green thumb that this first cabbage produced an 8-pound head.

Before he knew it, Noah had assumed full responsibility for tending to his garden,

and now, as a Middle School student, he grows crops not only for a school program but also for himself.

Following his cabbage accomplishment, Hiwassee Feed and Pro Hardware began offering some free seeds to Noah, though he said he gets most of his plants pre-potted or from Burpee Seeds and Plants.

In addition to his giant pumpkin and colossal cabbage, last year, Noah grew 1.5-pound tomatoes, crediting their growth to being planted in tires filled with chicken litter and mushroom compost.

Thriving thanks to Noah having cultivated exemplary horticultural skills, this year, the garden offered a 7.5-pound cabbage.

But quite literally, his biggest accomplishment to date has been the 215-pound pumpkin, which his mother attributed to both Noah’s growing expertise and the rich soil of Towns County.

After being planted in late June around Father’s Day, the portly pumpkin was popular before it even matured; Noah had to construct a fence to keep the cows and rabbits away from the vine that crept ever closer toward the pasture.

He checked on the plant every day, and unless it rained, made sure to water it. By July, he and his mother caught sight of a tiny flower in the care of the neighbor’s bees.

Eventually, with the help of 17-17-17 fertilizer, chicken litter, and much diligence, the flower became a deceptively melon-like, pale green fruit that grew into a gargantuan gourd large enough for Noah to prop himself up against.

In order to carry the prodigious pumpkin, it had to be rolled onto a tarp, at which point three people were needed to lift it into the back of Emily Shook’s vehicle to take it for weighing at the Towns County Transfer Station.

“We had to load it in the back of my Jeep and then go back and weigh the Jeep without it,” Shook said.

As for the monster pumpkin’s fate, Noah won’t be turning it into a jack-o’-lantern for Halloween, because the rind of the fruit is 4 inches thick by his estimation, which would require an axe to break through the tough skin.

He does, however, plan to cut the orange oddity open to harvest the seeds for use next year, and his mom expects to make plenty of pumpkin pies.

Moving forward, Noah hopes to broaden the circumferences of his pumpkins right alongside his own horticultural horizons as he continues working in his garden and carrying on the family tradition of farming.

Additionally, he wants to begin raising livestock, and currently, he cares for two beef cows and has a fledgling interest in chickens.

## Ballistic Vests...from Page 1A

243 officers shot nationally in the last year, 44 of them fatally.

“Ninety-three of the law enforcement officers have been shot in 75 ambush-style shootings (between Oct. 6, 2020, and Oct. 6, 2021) – a 103% increase for the 2020-2021 timeframe,” Palmer said. “That means you don’t know when it’s coming, but you better have one of those (vests when it does).”

When Sheriff Henderson took office in January, the first thing he did was check people’s vests. He quickly found out that several people had

vests that were five years out of date. That wasn’t good, so he began looking into grants, “and they’ve come through,” he said.

Henderson wants all his deputies to be Fraternal Order of Police members and said that the Sheriff’s Office has the funds to pay for those memberships, as he does not believe the cost should be an added burden on the Commissioner’s Office.

As for Commissioner Bradshaw, he said his main concern is officer safety.

“I don’t want to get a phone call in the middle of

the night that one of our officers has been shot or (is) down and didn’t have a vest to protect them, or (had) a vest that was out of date or inadequate,” Bradshaw said. “So, thank you, sir, (for these vests).”

In closing, Henderson said he appreciated all his officers and the work they do to protect and serve the community.

“So, I can’t thank (Palmer) enough,” Henderson said. “You have done a lot for me in law enforcement through the years. Thank you for all you’ve done for us and thank you for (the vests).”

## Early Voting...from Page 1A

Hiwassee residents will be eligible to cast ballots in this election, for which the voter registration deadline was Oct. 4.

New this year is the addition of a second day of weekend early voting, giving people too busy to vote during the week chances to do so in person on Saturday, Oct. 16, and Saturday, Oct. 23, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Election Day voting will take place Nov. 2 from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the Elections Board Office.

Voters may pick up a copy of the new “Application for Georgia Official Absentee Ballot” from the Elections Board Office located at 67 Lakeview Circle, Suite A, in Hiwassee or print a copy at [https://sos.ga.gov/admin/uploads/2021\\_Absentee\\_App.9721\\_2.pdf](https://sos.ga.gov/admin/uploads/2021_Absentee_App.9721_2.pdf).

“Georgia law allows for absentee-by-mail ballots to be

requested no earlier than 78 days and no later than 11 days prior to an election,” per sos.ga.gov. “Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, email (as an attachment), or in-person to the local County Board of Registrar’s Office.”

People are encouraged to request and return their absentee ballots early to give their ballot “enough time to travel through the mail and resolve

any issues that may arise when voting by absentee ballot,” per georgia.gov.

For the November election, the deadline to return absentee-by-mail ballot applications is Oct. 22. Folks wanting to utilize the official drop box to turn in their absentee ballots can find it inside the Elections Board Office main entrance during early voting hours.

Voters can also drop completed absentee ballots off at the Elections Board Office through Election Day.

## Deputy Suspended...from Page 1A

Daugirdas used bad judgment and conduct unbecoming of a law enforcement officer and has been suspended without pay for two weeks, according to the Sheriff’s Office, and the case remains under investigation.

Sheriff Henderson stated that it is ever his goal to be transparent with the community and that this

kind of conduct will not be tolerated.

Deputy Daugirdas has been employed with the Towns County Sheriff’s Office since August 2020 and was awarded “Employee of the Month” in February of this year, having been commended at the time as “a tremendous asset with the highest amount of drug and DUI arrests.”



# Family-friendly Fall Festival continues thru Saturday

By Jeremy Foster  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

With the Oct. 8 start of the annual Georgia Mountain Fall Festival, the great family-friendly affair kicked off with amazing weather and community support as the festival returned in 2021 following last year's unfortunate cancellation due to COVID-19.

And the nine-day festival will continue this week until its conclusion on Saturday, Oct. 16, with much-anticipated concerts by Ronnie Milsap and Mark Wills. These shows will begin at 7 p.m. and require a hard ticket to enter.

Over the course of the festival, there has been and will be an unmatched plethora of arts, crafts, food and entertainment for everyone to enjoy in an open-air communal environment inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

From A-Z, this event has everything one could ask for: live music performed around seemingly every corner; families and friends taking in all the sights and vendor booths; children playing in the jump house and elsewhere; and all being wowed by acrobatic theatrics.

GA Jerk is one notable newcomer booth by Kevin Cole and Reginald Holden, which saw many impressed with the Barnesville-based jerky company's unique fla-

vor profiles and tenderness of meats, and it was not an exaggeration to say that the lines there simply would not stay empty.

"I have been making jerky for over 25 years, and we just formed our company this year in April," Cole said. "Our first festival we were able to promote at was the Towns County Made In Georgia Festival.

"Our first really big event was here at the Fairgrounds' (Georgia Mountain Fair over the summer), and it is amazing to know that we were not prepared as to how quickly we would sell out of our stock at the last one, so we came a little bit more prepared this time."

Added Cole, "We are online-purchase at the moment (via <http://www.gajerk.com>), but we are actually transitioning into being able to do wholesale with the USDA to be able to do work with gas stations, golf courses, Wal-marts, and various places that you can purchase jerky."

As far as entertainment goes, in addition to the 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. daily music shows at Anderson Music Hall, the Nerveless Nocks Thrill Show wowed spectators with an amazing display of acrobatic skill and technique.

The group's aerial stunt performances included balancing act on stacks of chairs, a momentum act on a huge elliptical, a daring motorcycle

display inside of a 17-foot steel cage ball from Michelangelo Nock, and a chain dancing show from James "On Chains" Murduca.

From Nock, whose family history in performing dates back to the 1840s and the famous Ringling Bros. Circus, to Murduca, the Nerveless Nocks have a total combined experience of 60 years performing – and it shows during their high-octane performances.

Festival guests Chuck Lavine and daughter Wendy Lavine, with Chuck's partner Julia Crenshaw, had only positive things to say about the festival.

The Lavines are originally from upstate New York, with Crenshaw being from Florida, and they decided to move to the area "for the slower pace and peaceful quiet of this Southern mountain life, and especially the nice people."

It was Crenshaw's first time but the father/daughter duo's third venture to the Fall Festival, and everyone was in agreement that "we are certainly going to make this our yearly tradition."

"We love this festival because of the genuineness of everyone and the vendors here," Chuck said. "They do not try to hustle you and pressure you to buy things; they will let you sample, the prices are extremely fair, and the people here are really for the people no matter the case."

Continuing, "It is without a doubt amazing to know that (the organizers behind this) event truly want people to leave happy."

"In any other case, normal concert tickets can be really expensive, and here you get multiple concerts, (access to) all the food and entertainment, and every bell and whistle for the extremely cheap price of admission."

"We hope to be able to catch all of the musical acts in which we would like to see everyone performing, not just anyone in particular."

Shannon Baldwin-Nguyen has been coming to the Fall Festival for 50 years, and she's been involved as a coordinator of the event for going on two years now.

"Despite everything that happened last year with the pandemic," Baldwin-Nguyen said, "this year has already turned out to be our biggest event with a record break-



This photo was taken during one of the helicopter tours of the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds over the weekend.

Photo by Mark Smith

ing almost 100 vendors and booths and demonstrators that we have provided for our wonderful people in the area.

"I cannot wait to see how this festival continues to play out the rest of this week and into the weekend."

"And I really implore everyone to try to come to the Thursday event ... at the Memory Lane Car Museum, as Herschel Walker will be in attendance with Lee Greenwood to promote his campaign for the Senate."

Admission to the festival is \$12 each day, with free parking inside the fairgrounds and free admission to most concerts, excluding those with hard ticket requirements. Festival hours will be 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. For more information, visit [georgiamountainfairgrounds.com](http://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com).



The Bellamy Brothers headlined the opening night of the Fall Festival's nine days of musical offerings inside Anderson Music Hall.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson



The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is once again happily hosting the Georgia Mountain Fall Festival, with plenty more chances this week to visit local vendors and catch live music shows and unique performing acts. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

## GMF Band...from Page 1A



The Georgia Mountain Fair Band rocked Anderson Music Hall one last time on Friday, Oct. 8.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Vincent's career includes gigs with Boots Randolph and Floyd Cramer, Benny Goodman, Donna Fargo, Ronnie McDowell, Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass, Liberace, and Stella Parton, as well as an extended time at Opryland in Nashville.

He also played bluegrass concerts at Carnegie Hall and the Ryman Auditorium.

Lead and harmony vocalist and bass player Jerry Braswell, of Atlanta, was honored for 25 years of service. Braswell performed at the Grand Old Opry for 20 years, notably at the final show at the Ryman and the first show at the "new" current Opry location.

Braswell has worked with such country music greats as Bob Luman, Del Reeves, Jim Ed Brown, Porter Wagoner, and Ernest Tubbs, and he performed regularly on "Hee Haw," "Pop Goes the Country," "Nashville on the Road," "That Nashville Music" and others. Braswell is a member of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame as well.

Banjo, mandolin and fiddle player Barry Palmer, from Cleveland, Georgia, was honored for 44 years of service with the band. A premier banjo player in the country, Palmer is extremely well known in the bluegrass music world and is a member of the current generation of the famed "Bluegrass Alliance."

Palmer has served as emcee for the Georgia Mountain Fair and Fall Festival. In

2008, "Fiddlin'" Howard Cunningham turned the Georgia State Fiddlers Convention over to Palmer.

Guitar player, song writer, vocalist, comic and GMF Director of Country Music Shows Jim Wood, of Suches, Georgia, was honored for 25 years of service. Wood was chosen to head up country music shows at GMF by the legendary "Fiddlin'" Howard Cunningham himself in 2008, shortly before his death.

Wood has shared stages with country music greats Brad Paisley, Brenda Lee, Charlie Daniels, Mickey Gilley, Gene Watson, Jerry Reed, Jim Ed Brown, Jimmy Fortune, Joe Diffie, John Anderson, John Berry, Lee Greenwood, Marty Stewart, Mel and Pam Tillis, Neal McCoy, Percy Sledge, Ricky Skaggs, Tommy Cash, T. Graham Brown, The Bellamy Brothers, The Statler Brothers, and the iconic Ray Price.

And last, but certainly not least, pedal steel guitar player Bill Cunningham, son of "Fiddlin'" Howard Cunningham, of Hiwassee, Georgia, was honored for 50 years of service in the GMF Band. Cunningham was introduced by Wood.

Of all the players in the Georgia Mountain Fair Band over the years, Bill Cunningham joins his dad and James "Chief" Childers, both gone now, as the only members with 50 years of service in the band. Cunningham started

playing the steel at 14 and was a regular steel player for the highly successful musical production "Always Patsy Cline."

As part of the GMF Band, Cunningham has backed such national acts as Hank Locklin, Ray Pillow, Jack Green, Jeanie Sealy, Hank Thompson, and Johnnie Gimble.

He is a member of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame, which also inducted the entire Georgia Mountain Fair Band in 2004.

The Band is certainly not a collection of kids in a part-time garage band. They are all seasoned professionals who made their mark in the music world. There may be another Georgia Mountain Fair Band in the future, but none with the connections these players have with the originals.

"Thank y'all for so many years," said Cunningham to the audience as they were leaving the stage Friday night. "God bless and good night."

The Georgia Mountain Fall Festival will continue this week through Saturday, Oct. 16, with plenty more music to be heard inside Anderson Music Hall.

Admission to the festival is \$12 each day, with free parking inside the fairgrounds and free admission to most concerts, excluding those with hard ticket requirements. Festival hours will be 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. For more information, visit [georgiamountainfairgrounds.com](http://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com).