

Spry Family Dry Cleaners triumphantly returns after fire

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BLAIRSVILLE – Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Spry Family Dry Cleaners is back, and the one-stop shop for garment care located at 46 Hunt-Martin Street is better than ever. Eleven months ago, in the early morning hours of Nov. 21, 2019, the dry cleaners experienced an accidental fire that destroyed much of the business and left the family questioning the future of the enterprise.

Thankfully, the Union County Fire Department extinguished the blaze in time to save one of two connected buildings, and with overwhelming support from the community and a will to return to a loyal customer base, owner Chris Spry was able to carry out the work of rebuilding.

This turned out to be a slow process, as COVID-19 delayed construction by about six months due to cessation of work at the onset of the pandemic and issues with backordered materials once work could resume, but Chris was finally able to host a soft opening on Friday, Oct. 23. He was so thrilled to be serving the community once again – and out of a completely renovated, upgraded building – that he found himself incapable of sleep the night before.

“This means everything; I didn’t realize I’d be so excited,” Chris said Friday. “(Up until

opening), everything everyday was, hopefully we get the rock done, hopefully we get the inspection done, hopefully we get this wall done.

“Last night, I wasn’t thinking of any of that. It was, ‘Oh my gosh, tomorrow we open up and customers come in.’ I knew I had missed work, but I didn’t realize how much.”

It’s been a long journey for the Spry Family, with Chris being in dry cleaning for 23 years. His mom worked in the industry before moving the family from West Virginia to Blairsville when he was just 2 years old, after which she started working for William Michael “Bubba” Harbin.

Harbin was the former owner of the business Chris now operates, and he died unexpectedly on Aug. 2, 2016. Chris had been an employee of Harbin’s Dry Cleaners for years before his boss passed away, during which time he’d become disillusioned with the profession.

“I really felt like my life was going nowhere, because after working for Bubba for 15 years, I was making less money than I was when I started the job,” Chris said.

When Harbin died, Chris thought for sure he was out of a job – enter Bob and Carol Head, his “two angels” who presented him with an opportunity of a lifetime.

The Heads had long been

customers of Harbin’s, and they knew Chris and appreciated his work ethic. Carol even told him once as he carried her laundry out that, if he kept at it, he’d own the cleaners one day. Little did he know that years later her kind remark would come true.

After Harbin’s sudden death, in which Chris found his boss and father figure deceased in the old building, the young dry cleaner felt his world had caved in, especially since he’d lost his mother, too, to a car accident the year before.

“I didn’t know what I was going to do, and I worried about it,” Chris said. “My mother-in-law, Louise Hooper, asked if I had prayed. Embarrassingly, the thing I should have done first I had not done yet, and that was pray to God. So, I prayed.

“That following day, LuAnn Head called me and said, ‘My dad wants to see you.’ I went to see him in his office, and Bob Head asked me, ‘Do you want to own the cleaners?’”

Chris went home, drew up a business plan and returned to see Bob, who believed in him enough to lend him the money that same day, without so much as a credit check, to purchase the business from Harbin’s family in 2016.

Fast forward to today, 11 months after a fire that devastated the Spry Family and put the future of the business in jeopardy, and the Sprys have once again overcome a tremendous challenge. In fact,



Jeff Bond, Laurie Davis, Teresa Scaglia and Chris Spry of Spry Family Dry Cleaners were happy to return to work for the company’s soft re-opening Friday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

the fire put him ahead, allowing him to upgrade to all new cutting-edge equipment.

He’s always been able and willing to clean any garment or fabric, from leather to silk, and from rugs to draperies, comforters and shoes; it’s just a more efficient process now.

Furthermore, he can still remove any stain and clean any number of sentimental yet challenging pieces for customers.

Additionally, and what many people may not have known prior to the fire, the dry cleaner continues to feature three employees who work all the time doing any alteration necessary. From hemming pants to mending drapes and crafting custom-tailored suits, Spry’s alters it all.

Now, he has all-new services for the public, like hydrocarbon dry cleaning, wet wash, fast turn-around pressing, and expanded linen services for restaurants.

And where the second topside building used to be, Chris has installed a drive-thru for customers offering a safe way to pick up and drop off clothing without ever requiring people to exit their vehicles amid COVID-19.

There’s also the new “Wash, Dry and Fold” service that’s great for families and college students on the go who don’t necessarily have the time or energy to do their everyday laundry.

For this service, Spry’s issues free laundry draw string bags that are a set price, which customers can then fill to the brim overflowing and pay just one price every time, with same or next-day turn-around to pick up nicely sorted and folded clean clothing.

Whether it’s everyday laundry or an expensive garment in need of stain removal, Chris takes pride in everything he does, though he’s got a soft spot

for cleaning clothes that “other cleaners don’t want to do.”

It’s unfortunate, Chris said, but many cleaners turn clothing away for a variety of reasons, including due to the age of certain items or the age of spots on items, or perhaps the delicacy or dirtiness of some clothing.

Doing many of these types of difficult-to-clean items loses money for the business, so he under-stands why other cleaners reject them, but he has his own reasons for going above and beyond for customers.

“I love seeing the facial reaction of someone who thinks their garment is lost,” Chris said of customers returning to retrieve their cleaned clothing. “A person’s happiness and appreciation for our talents and skills far surpass any piece of paper with dollar signs on it.”

Assisting Chris and his employees in accomplishing all this work is the upgraded building featuring a state-of-the-art setup that has made the business a one-of-a-kind dry-cleaning venture.

Major changes include the installation of industry-leading equipment to replace decades-old machines that once inhabited the since-demolished second upper building. Now, Spry’s does nearly all cleaning in the basement of the main building.

Chris never used the basement prior to the fire, but the complete redesign following the blaze has allowed him to implement a custom layout to install everything he needs, where he needs it, to get any job done with optimized speed and safety.

Additionally, Chris has built a separate outbuilding to house the boiler that feeds steam into the business. This is both a safety and cooling feature most dry cleaners can’t afford for space reasons, allowing employees to stay cool as they work away from the incredibly hot boiler.

Originally, the building was built to house a doctor’s office, and it was converted into a dry cleaner years later. Now, the building has come full circle to being a truly efficient, custom-designed dry-cleaning experience.

“We’ve done it not just to be able to save and help the customers, but it’s going to be more efficient for us, more efficient and better for the employees,” Chris said. “You’ll never hardly see a dry cleaner that has an air conditioner, and just having an air conditioner alone makes everybody’s life easier.”

Chris said he is incredibly thankful to God and for all of the community support he’s received in the last 11 months, from people who reached out to offer their condolences and cheer on his efforts, to those who, like one customer, paid his electric bill without telling him.

“I’m so dedicated to this town, just for the fact that everybody has loved us and treated us so good,” Chris said. “I know most of the people from living here all my life, and I worked for the previous owner, so most of my customers have known me for a long time.

“It’s almost like a barber shop – I’ve built a relationship with a majority of the people here. My job is fun, I enjoy doing it, and I enjoy seeing the customers.”

Folks will want to stay tuned to Chris Spry’s personal Facebook page for an official invitation to a Grand Opening event in the coming weeks. Chris wants the event to serve as a celebration thanking everyone for their support. Refreshments will be served.

Spry Family Dry Cleaners can be reached at 706-745-1976 and is open Monday-Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and closed Sundays.



Chris Spry demonstrating a safety feature on one of his new shirt-pressing machines on Oct. 23. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Early Voting...from Page 1A

At the state level, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger reported that, as of 5 p.m. Friday, more than 2.5 million Georgians had voted, including 1.6 million early in person and over 900,000 via absentee by mail.

And statewide, Week 2 early voting was more than double the first week’s ending total of 1.2 million votes cast.

Moreover, this year’s early voting period has seen roughly 2.5 times more votes cast compared with the same period through 2016 General Election early voting, an astonishing testament to the level of electoral enthusiasm in 2020.

Again, early in-person voting for the Nov. 3 election ends Oct. 30, and will not be available on Monday, Nov. 2. People are encouraged to vote early, as turnout is showing to be higher than ever this election, which will likely translate to longer than usual precinct lines come Election Day.

Hours for early voting are between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. through Friday afternoon at the Towns County Board of Elections Office in Suite A of 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiawassee next to the courthouse. Poll workers will direct voters to fill out a small form upon arrival.

“Our poll workers have done an outstanding job,” Elections Supervisor Rachel Edwards said. “Without them, elections wouldn’t be possible; one person can’t bring it all full circle without the volunteers coming forth. I feel like Towns County has the best poll workers.”

As previously reported, poll workers are following COVID-19 best practices, including social distancing enforcement, regular equipment sanitation and wearing of masks. Voters are encouraged but not required to wear facial coverings, which will be made available alongside hand sanitizer.

Voters cannot display campaign-related materials/clothing at polling places where promoted candidates appear on ballots. For example, voters may not enter wearing hats, T-shirts, masks, etc., promoting Donald Trump or Joe Biden for president. This includes popular MAGA gear.

The ballot features contested elections for the following federal, state and local offices: President of the United States; two U.S. Senate races; the 9th Congressional

District seat; two Public Service Commissioner races; District 50 State Senator; 8th District State Representative; and Towns County Tax Commissioner.

Also on the ballot are uncontested elections for five local offices, including Probate Judge, Clerk of Superior Court, Sheriff, Coroner and Commissioner, and no one is running for Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor.

The General Election features three statewide ballot initiatives for all Georgians to decide, including two proposed state constitutional amendments and a referendum.

Amendment 1, if passed, would enable state legislators to use specifically imposed fees and taxes expressly for their intended purposes.

This amendment would ensure that specific fees, such as the \$1 old-tire disposal fee charged in the purchase of every new tire, actually go toward their express purpose instead of being allocated elsewhere, as is current practice under state law.

Amendment 2, if passed, would enable citizens to freely sue the state in an attempt to challenge “state or local laws that violate the Constitution of Georgia, the U.S. Constitution, or state law.” Currently, would-be plaintiffs need government permission to do this.

Statewide Referendum A “establishes a tax exemption for certain real property owned by charities,” according to the ballot, which would benefit some nonprofits like the local Habitat for Humanity.

Election Day will be Tuesday, Nov. 3, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. That day, voters should report to one of the three pre-assigned Towns County voting precincts: Hiawassee at the Civic Center; Young Harris at the Lodge Hall Building, aka Stephens Lodge; and Macedonia at Macedonia Baptist Church.

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

Registered voters who will be at least 18 years of age by Election Day are eligible to vote during early voting, though Oct. 5 was the registration deadline for voters looking to participate in the Nov. 3 election.

Absentee ballots are being automatically mailed to voters who informed the Board Office they were elderly or disabled on

a previous application, though all others need to apply to get their mail-in absentee ballot for the General Election.

People may request mail-in absentee ballots by visiting <https://ballotrequest.sos.ga.gov>, calling the local Board Office at 706-896-4353 or swinging by the office at Lakeview Circle.

After requesting an absentee ballot, voters can easily track the progress of their ballot – before and after voting – by signing up at <https://georgia.ballottrax.net/voter/>.

People wanting to fill out their absentee ballots/applications and drop them off in person can do so either with the Board Office directly or at the security-monitored drop box located against the building outside the left main entrance.

Currently, the deadline to request an absentee ballot is Oct. 30, and the deadline to return absentee-by-mail ballots for counting is 7 p.m. on Nov. 3.

Voters should be aware it could take days for requested ballots to arrive in the mail and potentially several more for completed ballots to be returned for counting when mailed, so it’s best to request one well in advance.

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

Those who receive an absentee ballot by mail but decide to vote in person will need to have their absentee ballot canceled at time of voting, so be sure to bring it to the polls.

Election officials have said double voting is not a concern, as the system will alert poll workers if a voter has, for example, already cast an absentee-by-mail ballot but forgets and shows up at their regular voting precinct on Election Day.

Voters can access the My Voter Page at mvp.sos.ga.gov ahead of the election for information on voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county office, sample ballots and more.

Furthermore, voters need only fill out one ballot application, and the best way to check absentee ballot status is by using BallotTrax, checking the My Voter Page or calling the Board Office.

Halloween...from Page 1A

Chamber Office, and any businesses can give us a call.”

Lee credits the drive-thru idea to Marketing and Membership Director Crystal Wagner, who also helped bring the drive-by Easter Bunny to the area amid COVID-19 in April.

“Crystal has two kids, and although they are teenagers, she knows the importance,” Lee said. “I know it is important, too, but she is just more aware of what the kids need and what they love to do, so she said she wanted to give the kids a good Halloween, just as she did for Easter.”

People looking for something outdoorsy can check out Anna Ruby Falls and Brasstown Bald, as both recreation areas are having “Trick or Treat on the Trail” events this week, sponsored by FIND Outdoors, a nonprofit that manages the locations in

coordination with the U.S. Forest Service.

This is the first year for these events, and both sites are looking forward to celebrating the holiday, according to Liberty Gates, who is Program Manager at Brasstown Bald and Anna Ruby Falls.

“The events at Anna Ruby are going to be on the 30th, which is the Friday before Halloween,” Gates said. “We are holding that from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., and that is going to be a bit bigger than the event at Brasstown.”

“At Anna Ruby, we are going to be having some games available for kids and adults to play, and anyone wearing a costume is going to get a little goodie bag. We are also going to be roasting marshmallows for smores and having a local resident tell spooky stories around the campfire.”

While Brasstown Bald will feature a smaller event, it will still be an opportunity for

kids to play games, grab some candy and enjoy the mountain view on Halloween.

“At Brasstown, we are going to be handing out candy throughout the trail, and there will be a few games up at the top by our visitor center,” Gates said. “That will be from 12-4 p.m.”

“I would note that all this is as supplies last. The games we won’t run out of, but marshmallows or candy we might run out of depending on how many people we get.”

Each of the trail events comes at no cost to participants, although standard parking rates for the sites will still apply.

Additionally, Macedonia Baptist Church will be hosting a trunk or treat event from 5:30-7 p.m. on Halloween in the parking lot behind the church.

For more information and updates on upcoming events, visit GoLakeChatuge.com

VFW Anniversary...from Page 1A

superb public service to others. You provide an invaluable network of service to those who have borne the battle, as well as to their families, and you advance the health and wellbeing of those who bear the burden of defending our nation and our way of life.

“Your continued devotion to protecting and upholding American ideals serve as an inspiration for all to follow, and is testament to our motto, ‘No One Does More For Veterans.’ My heartfelt congratulations on reaching this landmark. Well done!”

Post 7807 Cmdr. John Harkins will welcome everyone to the 50th celebration, including Past VFW State Cmdr. Tony Dobbins, who will present the award to post

members.

Also offering special remarks Thursday will be Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordoles, local VFW Auxiliary Past President Jan Still, VFW Chaplain Dwight Moss, and Past 7807 Post Cmdrs. Joel Turpin, Marty Mynatt, Bart Rodgers, Mel Halfon and John Richards.

“This is a tremendous honor for us, and we’re proud that we’ve been here 50 years,” Halfon said. “We do a lot of donations; we help veterans in need. For example, we’ve paid funeral expenses for veterans who didn’t have money to get buried or cremated.”

Formed on Oct. 29, 1970, Post 7807 also gives scholarships to the local school system and pays for young

service members to join the post, and Halfon, a Combat Veteran from Vietnam, says they always make sure to thank their younger counterparts for their service.

“We didn’t get that,” Halfon said. “When I came back from Vietnam, Jane Fonda and all of the anti-war protesters spit at us, called us baby killers. I felt embarrassed to be in the service, and I got drafted – I didn’t want to go over there. It hurt me, I felt horrible. But I was serving my country.”

VFW Auxiliary members will serve refreshments for the celebration, and attendees will be able to purchase a custom 50th Anniversary Commemorative Coin for \$10 to assist with the organization’s Building Fund.