

Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

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Publication Number 635540 Volume 90 Number 52

Wednesday, October 30, 2019

Federal jury finds Gowder, Heaton guilty in prescription drug trial

By Linda Erbele
Towns County Herald

GAINESVILLE – A federal jury has found former hospital CEO Mike Gowder and Blairsville-based physician Dr. James Heaton guilty on all but one count against them in their prescription drug trial.

The jury returned the much-anticipated verdict to a completely silent courtroom in Gainesville on Thursday, Oct. 24, completing a not quite two-week criminal trial that had seen multiple delays since its original Feb. 11 court date.

All 12 jurors found Gowder and Heaton not guilty of one charge of conspiracy but guilty of all other charges facing them.

The jury foreperson read aloud the verdicts finding Gowder guilty on 102 counts and Heaton guilty on 129 counts involving illegal prescriptions.

The date for sentencing will be set following a sentencing investigation, which Assistant



Mike Gowder



James Heaton

U.S. Attorney Laurel Boatright said would probably take a minimum of three months.

Both men remain on bond until a sentencing hearing can be scheduled.

Specifically, Heaton was found guilty on 75 counts of dispensing prescriptions to Gowder outside the scope of professional practice and not for a legitimate medical purpose, and Gowder was found guilty of aiding and abetting in connection with those same

charges.

Gowder was found guilty on 27 counts of acquiring controlled substances by fraud, and Heaton was found guilty of aiding and abetting in those counts.

Testimony showed that Mike Gowder filled those 75 prescriptions in three different states, though charges for the states other than Georgia were thrown out by the judge on a technicality.

Heaton was also found

guilty of 27 additional counts of dispensing illegal prescriptions to two other patients. He had originally been charged with 35 counts involving a third patient, but those charges were dismissed by the prosecution during trial due to a problem involving the evidence.

The men face a maximum penalty of 20 years on each count of acquiring prescription medications through fraud and dispensing without a legitimate medical reason. The maximum penalty for each aiding and abetting count is four years.

Boatright represented the federal government in U.S.

District Judge Richard Story's courtroom, and she said the case was unusual because of the scope of the conduct, the number of pills, and the fact that it involved defrauding pharmacies in three different states.

"We have brought charges in this district before against doctors, including pharmacists," she said. "The fact that this involved a doctor and a patient made it a little more difficult."

The indictment was a part of Operation SCOPE, standing for Strategically Combatting Opiates through Prosecution and Enforcement.

Boatright described the operation as the Northern District of Georgia's "umbrella" under the Department of Justice's larger opiate prosecution push that started years ago.

"The Department of Justice as a whole has been focusing on the opioid epidemic and the impact it is having across the nation, including smaller communities like Blairsville," Boatright said.

She expressed gratitude to the men and women of the jury, who took the case very

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Federal prosecutors used these seven containers holding 15,000 navy pills to show the jury the quantity of pills used by the defendants over roughly two-and-a-half years.

Halloween in Hiawassee to feature plenty of candy, activities for kids



For the second year in a row, the big Halloween event in Hiawassee will take place around the Towns County Courthouse instead of on the Town Square.

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

It's that special time of year again, when the air gets colder, the leaves change colors, and the fall season ushers in another family-friendly holiday.

Halloween in North Georgia is a fun time for kids and parents alike, though it's

definitely the kids who get the most out of it. For a couple of hours, kids get a chance to dress up and pretend to be anything they wish for one night, all while filling their buckets with candy.

And as always, a big Halloween celebration is planned in Hiawassee for the community to attend.

In years past, kids would

line the sidewalks along Main Street as they patiently waited to take a trip around the Downtown Square, showing off their costumes in hopes of getting as many treats as their buckets could hold from local businesses handing out candy.

Looking for the event safer, last year, Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales suggested

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EMC consultant talks ratemaking; Nelms discusses annual meeting costs

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

YOUNG HARRIS – For the second time this year, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Directors welcomed consultant Chris Mitchell for a special presentation, this time in their Oct. 22 board meeting.

Mitchell is a former employee of the Tennessee Valley Authority – the federal agency that sells power to the EMC – and he runs a private management consulting company that counts BRMEMC and 78 other TVA-connected local power companies as clients.

In his presentation, Mitchell explained the

methodology behind the "Cost of Service Study" he prepares for the EMC every few years. The most recent study is the basis for the revenue-neutral rate adjustment recommendations the co-op has carried out annually since 2017.

According to Mitchell, the study is designed to provide general guidance for the development of retail power rates and fixed charges, taking into account the various costs of providing electricity to differing rate class customers, i.e. residential and business classes.

Fixed costs include everything associated with the maintenance of the EMC, such as upkeep of the physical poles and lines that provide power.



Jeremy Nelms

The rate consultant said the methodology behind his

See EMC, Page 6A

Dick Campbell remembered with Highway 66 bridge dedication



Dick Campbell's daughter Nora Ferguson, holding the sign, with family during the Oct. 23 dedication of her father's namesake memorial bridge on Georgia 66. Photo by Chad Stack

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Miss TCHS Pageant scholarship fundraiser a huge success



Towns County senior Kenlee Shook receiving her Miss TCHS crown from fellow senior Jamison Wood and teacher Brooke Whitt in the Oct. 26 school pageant. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County High School senior Jamison Wood hosted the first-ever Miss Towns County High School Pageant scholarship fundraiser as part of her senior project on Saturday, Oct. 26, inside the Anne Oliver Mitchell Auditorium on campus.

High school seniors

must complete a senior project consisting of a year-long independent study, and every year, seniors coordinate their projects with high school English teacher Brooke Whitt, who's in charge of Senior Capstone Projects.

The students usually decide to follow one of two paths, either doing something related to the profession they have in mind after high school

or undertaking a school-related community service project.

Wood took a hybrid approach, incorporating into her pageant-fundraiser aspects of marketing, which is a discipline she plans to pursue after she graduates high school at the end of the year, then the University of Georgia with a public relations degree.

Having originally

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Baughn, Entwistle win Mirror Ball Trophy in Enotah CASA fundraiser

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – The Fourth Annual Dancing with North Georgia Stars fundraising extravaganza benefiting Enotah CASA took place Saturday, Oct. 26, at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

This yearly event pairs local celebrities and civic leaders with talented dance partners in a competition to see who can raise the most money and come up with the best dance routine to win the coveted Mirror Ball Trophy.

2019 couples included Lynn Hayes and Harvey Cohen, Sharon Penner and Marty Evans, Susan Stalcup and Heath Ledford, Katherine and Joey Nicolella, Julie Wilson and Mai Lim, Renee Deibert and Barbara Wheatley, Sandi Entwistle and Harry Baughn, and Dana Nelson and Mary Grace Nelson.

Dawn Saraney and Al Haywood acted as co-masters of ceremonies for the evening, introducing the judges and interacting with the contestants throughout the show.

Each couple performed an exciting routine that they'd been practicing since June and working hard to master before taking to the big stage Saturday



Sandi Entwistle and Harry Baughn won coveted Mirror Ball Trophy for their fantastic dance routine at the 2019 Dancing with North Georgia Stars fundraising competition. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

night.

A brief intermission followed the performances, giving audience members a chance to vote for the People's Choice award winners with their donations.

For the People's Choice awards, Second Runner-Up went to Susan Stalcup and

Heath Ledford, First Runner-Up went to Renee Deibert and Barbara Wheatley, and the overall winners were Sharon Penner and Marty Evans, who raised the most money of any other couple.

For the judges' awards, Second Runner-Up went to

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