

HAPPY Thanksgiving

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Firefighter Berrong honored as community servant and leader



By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Hiwassee native Bruce Berrong served his community for 35 years as a volunteer member of the Towns County Fire Department, and sadly, the beloved firefighter and friend to many passed away at his home at the age of 56 on Wednesday, Nov. 20, following a battle with illness.

Family and friends of Berrong, including fellow firefighters and first responders, attended his funeral services at Banister Funeral Home on Saturday, Nov. 23.

Present that day were all the firefighters of the Towns County Fire Department, as well as firefighters out of Hall, Gilmer and Forsyth counties.

Rev. Jared Coleman,

a former Towns County firefighter, officiated his longtime friend's service, and he reminisced about the years he and Berrong served together as firefighters.

"I don't ever remember meeting Bruce - he's always just been there, been family, always been a part of my life," Coleman said, adding that Berrong loved his community and would do anything to help anyone.

Even after Berrong had to undergo back surgery later in his career, Coleman said no one could keep him from Station 4.

And that held true throughout his time as a first responder, as Berrong was always the first one to the firehouse, and if he wasn't the first person on the scene, he

was the next person to arrive, without fail.

"Bruce was always there," Coleman said. "He has always been the rock in this community. It didn't matter who you were, if you needed help, Bruce would be there."

In life, Berrong was always seen with a smile. He was constantly laughing and playing jokes on everyone, Coleman said, and he had a way of putting the people around him at ease.

Coleman told an amusing and touching story Saturday about what it meant to respond to a call "Code Bruce."

When first responders are sent emergencies calls, three codes are used to specify how quickly they need to get to a scene: Codes 1, 2 and 3.

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Firefighter Bruce Berrong

Sally Varao remembered with American Red Cross building dedication

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS - On Wednesday, Nov. 20, members of the community gathered to pay tribute to one of their own - the remarkable Sally Varao.

Varao, who passed away earlier this year on Jan. 26, was a tireless servant in life who championed many causes benefiting the lives of the people of Towns County and beyond.

The Nov. 20 gathering in her honor was held jointly by Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and the American Red Cross.

Together, they dedicated the American Red Cross Building on Jack Dayton Circle to Sally and the Varao family for their many years of community service, including countless hours spent volunteering with the Red Cross.

Varao was a longtime parishioner of North Mt. Zion Church of God, so it was fitting that Pastor Raburne Wilson opened the dedication with an invocation and some kind words about Joe and Sally Varao.

"Joe, it's just an honor for everyone to be here, and it's an



Joe and Sally Varao

honor to be able to participate in a day like today, and we're all very blessed to have had this family and have this family in our life," Wilson said.

Following the invocation, Commissioner Bradshaw reminisced about the 20 years he'd known the Varaos, taking care to highlight their years of hard work and dedication to their community.

"In this world, there are a lot of special people," Bradshaw said. "There are a lot of people who do a lot of things for other

people.

"But I have never known anybody to be more caring than Sally and Joe Varao, out of all the people I have known in my life. Always others first, always. I am very thankful for these folks."

Since Varao's passing in January, Bradshaw said he wanted to do something special for the family. And with so much of the Varaos' time spent in the Towns County American Red Cross Building, what better

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Sheriff Clinton announces 2020 retirement, will not seek re-election

Statement by
Chris Clinton
Towns County Sheriff

Sometimes, we get so busy doing things that others want us to do that we forget to listen to that still, small voice that should guide the faithful along. Crystal and I seem to be better at serving others than we are at taking care of our own health. I am humbled at the faith so many have in me, but I also feel the time has come for my family to move on to another chapter in our lives, and I will no longer be seeking re-election as sheriff.

I will always be thankful for some of the lasting friendships I have made - so many people I would have never met that have worked so hard to do so much for others. I will always cherish those memories and am a better man for the experience. There are some truly wonderful people in this area. I am honored to have gotten to know so many of them.

The past three years have been especially difficult for my family. After taking care of my

grandfather for the last two years of his life, we suddenly lost him and our friend and bandmate in January, as well as two other family friends, all within about a month. Life is short and precious. The weight of it all has taken a toll on my health and my family's wellbeing.

While the community can find another to serve as sheriff, my wife and children only have me, and it is time that I return to being just a husband and dad. It is time for our family to seek the things God has left for us to accomplish. One thing Crystal and I have left to do is raise a little boy, and we would like to do that without the distraction of politics and all that comes with it.

I am thankful for those who have placed their trust in me all these years. I am thankful for the superb staff at the sheriff's office and for all of our volunteers who serve in so many ways. I intend to continue to offer Citizen Law Enforcement Academy courses in the coming year in the hope that the program will continue.



Sheriff Chris Clinton

We are beginning another effort to provide Christmas gifts for Towns County's less fortunate children through the Towns County Sheriff's Empty Stocking Fund, and I hope I can count on all of you to continue to support these children again this year.

I look forward to 2020 being the best of the thirteen years entrusted to me as Sheriff of Towns County and pray God's continued blessings on our community.

Macon couple experience tragic accident during weekend getaway

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

A Macon man died after the vehicle he was traveling in plunged 100-feet down the side of Unicoi Mountain around 8 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 22, according to authorities.

Ralph Doolittle, 58, was killed in the wreck, though his girlfriend survived and was transported via ambulance for treatment of injuries that were not considered life threatening at the time.

Doolittle was a passenger in the minivan being driven by his girlfriend as the couple made their way up Georgia 75 to stay in a local resort for the weekend.

Being from out of town, the two were unfamiliar with the curvy mountain highway, and driving conditions were poor at the time - it was dark and the roads were slick, with rain and fog also causing decreased visibility.

Authorities noted that the vehicle may have been driving too fast for conditions, which, when combined with the



Ralph Doolittle

couple's unfamiliarity with the area, likely contributed to the accident.

Instead of negotiating a sharp curve in the road about a mile from Unicoi Gap and the Towns/White County line, the vehicle went straight through it and over the mountainside, traveling approximately 100 feet before coming to a rest against a boulder.

The accident resulted in damage that caused the vehicle to catch fire. The driver

made it out of the minivan and attempted to get help, though Doolittle, who was wheelchair bound, was unable to escape the vehicle.

A passing motorist saw the fire and heard the distressed driver yelling for help from somewhere down the mountain, and the motorist called 911 to alert authorities to the couple's plight.

Firefighters from Towns and White counties responded to the scene to extinguish the blaze, and they were joined by the Towns County Sheriff's Office, Towns County EMS, Towns County Coroner's Office and Georgia State Patrol.

GSP was still investigating the accident at press time. That area of roadway is the same spot where Glyn "Dale" Pollard's vehicle went over the side and traveled about 30 feet before coming to a rest last month on Oct. 16.

Authorities believe that Pollard's accident occurred as the result of a fatal heart attack he suffered prior to leaving the road at a place that has no guardrail.

Greenwood, T. Graham Brown team up for Christmas concert Nov. 30

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Country music greats Lee Greenwood and T. Graham Brown will grace the stage at Anderson Music Hall for a Christmas concert on Saturday, Nov. 30, starting at 7 p.m.

"This is our first Christmas show on the road this year," Greenwood said. "We'll be all over the eastern part of the United States, and we start in Hiwassee. I'm excited to get back on the road with Christmas music because it's my favorite time of the year."

Greenwood will of course perform his hugely popular "God Bless the USA" alongside several other hits when he heads to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Saturday.

"We've been to Hiwassee quite a few times," Greenwood said. "The Music Hall will give us a great chance to bring fans to us in an indoor facility. The weather won't be a factor, and I'm looking forward to being with my friend, T. Graham Brown."

Brown, a Georgia native, has been to Anderson Music Hall many times as well, and

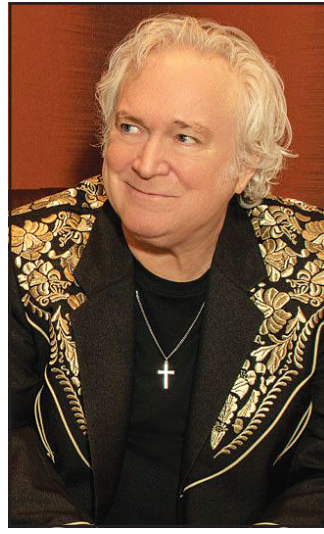


Lee Greenwood

he'll be doing his first Christmas show of the season also.

"From me, they'll probably hear all the hits that they're expecting to hear," Brown said. "We'll throw some Christmas songs in there, probably a couple of gospel songs, tell some funny stories. It'll just be fun. I guarantee you, everybody will have a good time."

"Plus, I love that place. I love playing there. The food's great and the people are wonderful to us. It seems to



T. Graham Brown

me to be kind of intimate. It's a big place, but at the same time, I feel really connected to the crowd every time I'm there."

The two performers mentioned a movie they worked on together recently called "Ticket to Nashville," which is currently being edited for a spring 2020 release.

"It's one of those heartfelt films where there's a lot of family pulling and pushing and some dissension, as you would imagine," Greenwood

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