

## Berrong...from Page 1A

The Towns County Fire Department uses a fourth code known as "Code Bruce," Coleman said, which means "get here five minutes ago."

"I rode with Bruce one time in the fire truck, and I swore after that I would never ride with him again – I'll drive myself or walk before I get back into a fire truck with Bruce," Coleman said endearingly, adding that, now, he would give anything to ride with his friend just one more time in the engine.

Rev. Glen Eller also officiated the service Saturday, and he offered closing remarks honoring his dear friend before all public safety personnel led the procession to Berrong's final resting place at Upper Hightower Baptist Church Cemetery.

Upon arrival, all firefighters donned their helmets and coats, and Rev. Coleman led everyone in prayer.

An honor guard consisting of fire services out of Hall, Gilmer and Forsyth counties rang the traditional signal for when a firefighter is returning home.

Towns County E-911 Dispatch presented the final radio call for Berrong's 914 number, which was followed by three surrounding sirens and public safety personnel saying goodbye to their brother by laying red roses on his casket.

"Thank you to Union County Fire, Warne (NC) Fire



**Public safety personnel said goodbye to Firefighter Bruce Berrong, their friend with a true servant's heart, by laying red roses on his casket before he was interred Saturday.**

Department and Union General EMS for sending personnel to cover the county so that local responders could attend," Towns County Fire Capt. Travis Gibson said after the service.

Continued Gibson, "Thank you to White County Fire Department, Clay County NC Fire Department, Hall County Fire, Forsyth County Fire, Gilmer County Fire, Towns County EMS, Georgia State Patrol, Hiwassee Police Department, Towns County Sheriff's Office, and Banister Funeral Home for the excellent job they did."

The staff of Banister Funeral Home broke the

tradition of providing services in their Sunday best by wearing jeans and boots "the way Bruce wanted."

Berrong is survived by his father Leon Berrong; son and daughter-in-law, Edward and Jessica Berrong; son Josh Berrong; daughter LeAnn Dean; sons Billy Dean and Caleb Nelson; sisters and brothers-in-law, Wilda Mae and Rex Hogsed, and Joyce Ann and Dwayne Beck; grandchildren Tinley, Tatum, Josh and Jeremiah; and precious friends Gina Dean and Kayla Kimkowski, along with a number of nieces, nephews and a host of family and friends.



**Multiple first responder agencies attended Berrong's services at Banister Funeral Home on Nov. 23, showcasing the firefighter's far-reaching impact on the people of the community.**

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

## Varao...from Page 1A



**Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw with Joe Varao during the Nov. 20 dedication of The Varao Building housing The American Red Cross in Towns County.**

Photo by Chad Stack



**Family and friends surrounded Joe Varao as they honored him and his wife, Sally, in the Nov. 20 dedication ceremony.**

Photo by Chad Stack

way to honor them, Bradshaw said.

After Bradshaw's emotional speech, he and Joe Varao unveiled the sign dedicating "The Varao Building" to Sally and Joe "for their service and commitment to Towns County and the American Red Cross."

Sally and Joe met 32 years ago in San Francisco, California, as chaperones on a camping trip with their children, Joe said. The couple married and later moved to Towns County, now more than 20 years ago.

"I try and explain to people when I go back to California where I live and the people I live with, and it's just incredible," Varao said. "I thank God I am here."

Joe said his wife would be so proud of the building dedication, but that, more than anything, she would just be happy to be there sharing that time with her family and friends.

Matthew Akins from the American Red Cross closed Wednesday's memorial dedication with some memories of his own, saying that the Varaos had become family after working with them for 20 years.

In addition to their more widely known community service efforts, Akins said the Varaos served as a foster family for many years, and that they were always looking for ways to give back to the community, including helping students from the high school find scholarships.

Sally was also a longtime poll manager in Towns County, volunteered with the Chatuge Regional Hospital Auxiliary and local food pantry, and during her time with the American Red Cross, she and Joe helped bring smoke alarms to more than 930 homes locally.

"To say she was committed to her community as much as she was her family – well, that's about the biggest understatement that I've ever heard," Akins said. "Joe and Mustang Sally embraced this community like we were their kids, and I can't think of a better way to embrace them back right now."

Towns County firefighter Diane Nelson introduced speakers at the dedication ceremony, and following the event, everyone in attendance gathered inside The Varao Building for more stories and refreshments.