

Towns County Herald

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Senior Ashe raises money for 'Shop with a Hero' Christmas program

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County High School senior Kristen Ashe teamed up with Stephens Lodge #414 Free and Accepted Masons recently to raise \$2,325 for the annual Shop with a Hero Christmas program.

Shop with a Hero is a local program sponsored by the Hiwassee Police Department and Towns County Family Connection in concert with the other first responder agencies to take underprivileged children Christmas shopping.

As to how Ashe got involved with Shop with a Hero, "she approached us in the spring of last year about doing a benefit or a fundraiser," Lodge #414 Past Master Jimmy Krokonko said. "She was

unsure exactly about how she wanted to go with it."

So, after talking about it for the last six months or better, Ashe asked Krokonko if he would be her mentor for her senior project, which she wanted to use to raise money for kids in need.

They shot some ideas back and forth, and she refined the focus of her fundraiser on helping out with Shop with a Hero.

Ashe spent a couple of months going to local churches and businesses to collect donations for her fundraiser, which culminated in a Nov. 23 event at Stephens Lodge, with pre-ordered Boston Butts, a cakewalk, barbecue plates, a silent auction and live music.

And together, Ashe, Krokonko and the community

succeeded in raising \$2,325 for the annual Christmas program, which will both help Ashe fulfill her senior project requirement and treat less fortunate local Christmas to more memorable Christmas experiences.

Krokonko said it humbled his heart to see Ashe come up with the idea and put in all the legwork to help others in need.

"You don't find many kids like that," Krokonko said of Ashe.

Ashe dedicated her senior project to her cousin Braxton Kuykendall, who passed away in 2014 when he was just 10 years old after a battle with cancer, she said.

"I wanted to do something in memory of my cousin that involved children in See Shop with a Hero, Page 6A



Senior Kristen Ashe of Towns County High met with Jimmy Krokonko and Melvin Silvey of Stephens Lodge last week to present a Shop with a Hero fundraising check to Hiwassee Police Chief Paul Smith. Photo by Chad Stack.

Crowds line Main Street for Sheriff's Empty Stocking Parade

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County residents ended Thanksgiving Week with a celebration of family and friends during the annual Sheriff's Empty Stocking Fund Parade on Saturday, Nov. 30.

Just before the parade started at 6 p.m., children and their parents began lining the sidewalks along Main Street in Hiwassee, eagerly awaiting passing floats with their candy-throwing riders.

As always, the annual parade started out from the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds and traveled east until reaching its destination at the Hiwassee Town Square.

This year's parade theme, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," brought Christmas spirit to Towns County just days after the holiday season started with Thanksgiving on Thursday, Nov. 28.



The annual Sheriff's Empty Stocking Parade enjoyed terrific support from the community on Saturday, Nov. 30. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

And residents were happy to see Sheriff Chris Clinton a little more than a week after announcing his decision to not seek re-election in 2020.

Following Clinton and

his family in the parade, the Towns County High School Indian Raider Marching Band played Christmas tunes while marching down Main Street.

As each vehicle and float See Parade, Page 6A

Christmas tree lighting returns to Young Harris Mayor's Park Dec. 6

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Young Harris will hold its longstanding annual Christmas tree lighting for the community on Friday, Dec. 6, beginning at 6 p.m. in Mayor's Park.

"It is the same basic setup," Mayor Andrea Gibbs said of the decades-old tradition. "There's going to be kids singing and the band playing, and Santa Claus will come."

"The only difference is that our beloved gazebo has been torn down earlier this year. We are going to replace it with a pavilion, but we obviously haven't yet, so we have a little makeshift stage that the kids can't fall off of, and makeshift lights and that kind of thing."

The Young Harris Tree Lighting dates to the year 1970, when the first one occurred across from the Post Office on College Street.



Members of the Indian Raider Marching Band led by Director Allison Judd performing in the 2018 Young Harris Tree Lighting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

The lighting continued there for several years, though it eventually moved from its point of origin to various trees along Main Street.

Finally, in the late 1980s,

the lighting found its permanent home in Young Harris Mayor's Park after the construction of City Hall on land left to the city by former Mayor Irene Berry. See Tree Lighting, Page 6A

State Rep. Jay Powell remembered for 'benevolent spirit'

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

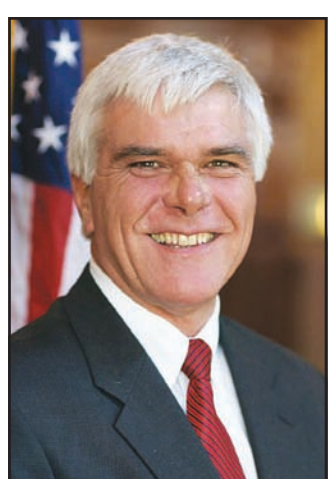
YOUNG HARRIS - District 171 State Rep. Jay Powell, 67, passed away during a legislative leaders' retreat at a Brasstown Valley Resort on Tuesday, Nov. 26.

The Towns County Sheriff's Office requested assistance from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, though no foul play was suspected in his death, according to the GBI.

Georgia House Speaker David Ralston released a statement last week discussing his friend and Republican colleague, who has been an influential state politician since his initial swearing into office on Jan. 12, 2009.

"It is with profound sadness and a broken heart that I write to inform you of the passing of our colleague, Jay Powell," Ralston said. "Jay collapsed last night at a Caucus leadership retreat and, from all indications, passed immediately."

"At this time of heartbreak, we take solace in the fact that our brother is now



State Rep. Jay Powell

with our Lord Jesus Christ. We lift up his wife Deidra and his beloved family. We pray for God's mercies and comfort for them.

"I know this loss touches us all and leaves a hole in our hearts and in the heart of our House family. Jay Powell served with integrity and his leadership truly moved Georgia forward. We will get through this together, with God's grace."

"If you need anything, please reach out to one of our fellow members. We will support one another as we

grieve and celebrate his life together."

Funeral services for Powell were held on Sunday, Dec. 1, in his hometown of Camilla.

According to his obituary, "Jay had a long and distinguished career as a public servant. He served as Mayor of Camilla from 1996 until 2007. He was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 2008, where he served until his passing."

"Powell represented House District 171, which includes Mitchell County and portions of Colquitt and Decatur counties. As Chairman of the House Rules Committee, Jay oversaw the flow of legislation and determined what bills should be debated and voted on the House floor."

"He previously served as Chairman of the House Ways & Means Committee, which oversees tax policy. Throughout his tenure in the House, Jay championed sound fiscal policy, independence of local governments and economic opportunity in rural Georgia, having co-chaired the first Rural Development Council."

Sen. Wilkinson named 'Legislator of the Year' by Rural Jobs Coalition

News Special
Towns County Herald

ATLANTA - Sen. John Wilkinson was recently named Legislator of the Year by the Rural Jobs Coalition, a nonpartisan organization that supports small, rural businesses and advocates around the country for policies that benefit rural economic growth.

Sen. Wilkinson was chosen as Legislator of the Year for his support of agribusiness and policies that help drive job creation, revitalization of small businesses and economic opportunities for small, rural communities across the state.

"Born and raised in Georgia, I know firsthand the struggle of our small businesses to access affordable capital in their rural communities in order to grow operations and hire and retain workers," Sen. Wilkinson said. "The Georgia Agribusiness and Rural Jobs Act (GARJA) is one of many programs that I have supported that provides growth opportunities for our rural businesses."

"Georgia is a national leader in the effort to rebuild our rural areas; I am proud to be a part of that passionate movement."

The GARJA, sponsored



Sen. John Wilkinson

by Sen. Wilkinson during the 2017 Legislative Session, is a program that uses a tax credit for investors in rural funds to increase capital available to small businesses in rural Georgia.

These investments can be made in agribusiness, businesses dealing with healthcare, transportation, technology or other areas as deemed appropriate by the Department of Community Affairs.

A Republican from Toccoa, Sen. Wilkinson was first elected to the State Senate for Georgia's 50th District during a special election in 2011

and has been reelected to serve in three subsequent elections.

He represents Towns, Banks, Franklin, Habersham, Rabun, Stephens and portions of Hall and Jackson counties.

In 2014, Wilkinson was elected by his colleagues to serve as the Majority Caucus Secretary. He also serves as the Chairman of the Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee and as Vice-Chairman of the Education and Youth Committee.

Additionally, the senator is a member of the Committee on Assignments and the Administrative Affairs Committee. He is also a member of the Appropriations and Natural Resources and the Environment Committees.

Sen. Wilkinson is an Ex-Officio member of the Rules Committee and was appointed to serve on the COPS Task Force in 2017.

In October 2017, the Peace Officers Association of Georgia awarded Sen. Wilkinson with an honorary lifetime membership for his dedication to public safety and support of officers across Georgia.

Recently, Wilkinson received an "A+" rating. See Wilkinson, Page 6A

Federal judge denies Mike Gowder's request for new criminal trial

By Linda Erbele
Towns County Herald

Last week, a federal judge denied Mike Gowder's request for a new trial following the former hospital CEO's Oct. 24 conviction of more than 100 counts involving dozens of illegal prescriptions.

U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story issued his Nov. 26 denial in response to a motion filed by Gowder's attorney, Stephen Sadow, on Oct. 28, just four days after a federal jury returned a 102-count guilty verdict in the

case.

In the motion, Sadow said that Story had made an "error" in previously denying separate trials for Gowder and co-defendant Dr. James Heaton, resulting in Heaton being unable to testify on his former patient's behalf regarding the "medical legitimacy" of the prescriptions in question.

Sadow argued that, had Heaton been a witness in Gowder's standalone trial instead of a co-defendant in a joint trial, a letter Heaton wrote in September 2015 to the

Georgia Composite Medical Board describing Gowder's medical condition could have been entered as evidence.

Story responded that his pretrial ruling denying separate trials issued on Sept. 19 was "not error and so a new trial is not warranted," adding that Gowder had failed to show either a need for the letter or that Heaton was likely to testify.

Following seven days of testimony at the U.S. Courthouse in Gainesville last month, a federal jury found Gowder guilty of 27 counts of

acquiring controlled substances by fraud and 75 counts of aiding and abetting in the dispensing of prescriptions without a legitimate medical purpose.

Heaton was found guilty of 75 counts of dispensing prescriptions without a legitimate medical purpose and 27 counts of aiding and abetting in the acquiring of those controlled substances by fraud.

The doctor was also found guilty of 27 more counts of dispensing prescriptions without a legitimate medical

purpose involving two other patients.

Gowder and Heaton remain free on bond pending a sentencing hearing, which will take place following a sentencing investigation that could take several months to complete.

Former co-defendant in the case David Gowder, who is Mike's brother, pleaded guilty in March to one count of prescribing oxycodone without a legitimate medical purpose. David also remains free on bond as he awaits sentencing.



Mike Gowder

2 Sections 16 Pages
Lake Levels
Blue Ridge 1,670.35
Chatuge 1,918.32
Nottely 1,763.06

Inside
Arrests 2A
Church 4B
Classifieds 7B
Opinions 4A
Legals 7B
Obits 5B
Sports 2B

BASKETBALL
Friday Dec. 6 @ Union Co.
6 PM
WRESTLING
Dec. 6 & 7 TBA
King of the Mountain
Tournament

2019
Love
Light
Tree
Dec. 9th
See page 2A

Towns County
Historical Society
Christmas
Meeting Dec. 9
See page 2A

TOYS FOR TOTS
Collection
Deadline Dec. 13
See page 3A