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Mountain Home Music to close after Christmas show

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

For the more than 20 years, the Mountain Home Music Theatre and owner Stella Berrong have brought entertainment to Towns County

and added charm for the community.

Sadly, the Dec. 12 Mountain Home Music Band at 7 p.m. will be the final show at theatre, as Berrong has decided to permanently close for health

reasons and citing the difficulty of continuing the venue.

Last weekend, Roy Perren gave his ever-popular Elvis performance on the stage for the penultimate show Dec. 5, which also fell on Berrong's 91st birthday. For his part, Perren has been proud to play at the venue located on US 76 between Young Harris and Hiawassee.

"This is my eighth season," Perren said. "I have probably done around 25 to 30 shows over the years. It is really sad, because I have enjoyed doing this so much and met so many people.

"Crowds have been down this year because of COVID, but I have probably sung for a couple thousand people in my time here, and this is a way to reach out and touch folks and bring happiness.

"There have been tens of thousands of people who have come to this place, and the different bands have been great. Some were getting started and moving on to better things, but

(Stella) has had some big acts over the years, and I think it means a lot to the community. People miss this when it is gone."

Berrong opened the current theatre location in 2000 after her son closed the previous Mountain Home Music that used to reside next to where Asiano Restaurant has been for the last 20 years.

"He owned that place there, and he ran it from '85 to '93 and had 800 seats," Berrong said. "My husband had to have open-heart surgery and everything, and he had a car lot down there. My son came down one day and said he wanted to sell the music hall."

After her husband passed, Berrong went through a hard spell, and the theatre helped her to cope with her grief and remember her loved ones, though her health nowadays won't let her continue.

While this is the end of the music hall chapter of her life, she ensures the community that the building's next inhabitant



Mountain Home Music Owner Stella Berrong accepts flowers on her 91st birthday in the Dec. 5 Elvis performance – the second to last show before she closes the venue for good.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson
"I've never had it and never will."

This Saturday, Berrong will welcome back the Mountain Home Music Band, namely The Berrongs & Crew with Jimmy Hooper and Billy Nicholson, to See Mountain Home, Page 6A



Roy Perren brought Elvis Presley to life over more than two dozen performances at the Mountain Home Music Theatre over the weekend, pictured here in his last show there Dec. 5, 2020.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Shop with a Hero to take 45 kids Christmas shopping

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

For many families in the county, Christmas can be a difficult time of year, as parents and guardians worry about how to give their children the best Christmas possible.

Thankfully, for the last 10 years, Shop with a Hero has stepped in to help by allowing less fortunate kids to do some Christmas shopping and let their dreams run wild.

Set for the last day of school before Christmas Break Dec. 18, the program this year will allow 45 kids to go shopping, with help from volunteer chaperones including local law enforcement and others who will assist children as they pick out Christmas gifts to place under their trees.

See Shop with a Hero, Page 5A



Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith

COVID testing available locally five days a week

State, local officials prepare for vaccine delivery

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor



The Georgia Department of Public Health District 2 has expanded local COVID-19 testing opportunities, so now, people have access to testing five days a week right here in Towns County.

Most recently, regional public testing has only been available out of the Towns County Health Department on intermittent weeks, but since Nov. 30, the Health Department has been providing appointment-only testing Monday through Friday from 8-9 a.m.

Appointments can be made by reaching out to the scheduling call center at 1-888-426-5073. The call center is open from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and from 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays.

"Offering testing each day of the week will be more convenient for our residents and allow our staff to continue providing other health department services," said Dave Palmer of District 2 Public Health.

Added Palmer, "We also started this same schedule for testing at our (Union), Banks, Dawson, Hart, Rabun, Stephens and White County Health Departments on Nov. 30."

Residents needing a weekend appointment can call about one of the district's two Saturday testing sites in either

Hall or Habersham counties, both of which are open from 8:30 am to noon Saturdays.

Any Towns County resident can sign up for a COVID test, with or without symptoms, by scheduling an appointment for testing at the local Health Department on 1104 Jack Dayton Circle in Young Harris.

Results may take a few days to return and will be accessible online, and people testing positive can expect a follow-up call from District 2 Public Health for information regarding isolating and contact tracing.

As Georgia heads deeper into the annual winter respiratory virus season, it appears that COVID-19 is outcompeting its viral competitors for number of infections. That's not to say influenza is not circulating, but it does appear to be down See COVID Testing, Page 5A

Love Light Tree to shine despite event cancellation

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Each year, the Chatuge Regional Hospital Auxiliary and Nursing Home Auxiliary host the Love Light Tree Lighting Ceremony to allow people in the community to honor loved ones while raising scholarship money for local students interested in medical careers.

The Love Light Ceremony has been ongoing since a real tree before moving inside the hospital. This year, the ceremony will not be held as usual, though the auxiliary will put up the tree and still donate funds raised to scholarships.

According to Auxiliary President Jane Cornett, Love Light is the group's main focus each year and a way to be involved with the community, especially around the holidays.

"It has been our main fundraiser for high school kids,



This year's Love Light Tree will be lit in honor of one of its own, longtime Chatuge Regional Hospital Auxiliary Volunteer and Love Light Ceremony Chair Brenda Hitchcock, who passed away Feb. 9, 2020. Pictured here in the 2019 ceremony.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener
pursuing a career in the medical field," Cornett said. "We (also) use it as a way to honor and remember people from the past years.

"We try to reach out to the community for this, and they are good about supporting us. The community is wonderful. This year, there See Love Light Tree, Page 5A

Runoff early voting begins Monday; closed on holidays

Elections Board completes second presidential recount

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Georgia is on the nation's mind as it enters the final stretch before the much-anticipated U.S. Senate Runoff Elections set to take place Tuesday, Jan. 5.

Voters will also be deciding the next District 4 Public Service Commissioner in a concurrent state runoff election come January.

Early in-person voting for the runoffs begins Monday, Dec. 14, and will run weekdays through Thursday, Dec. 31, between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. at the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration Office, located inside Suite A of 67



Towns County Elections Supervisor Rachel Edwards and the locally assigned Dominion Voting Systems technician race machine to clean the ballot scanner during the presidential race machine recount initial attempt on Nov. 24.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Gowder hoping to avoid 'death trap' prison sentence

By Linda Erbele
Towns County Herald

A federal judge has denied a request by former hospital CEO Mike Gowder for re-sentencing to home confinement, according to court documents.

U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story issued the order Monday in response to Gowder's motion filed Dec. 3 requesting emergency action regarding another motion he'd filed in October initially asking for re-sentencing.

Gowder, 62, was requesting home confinement citing concerns over COVID-19 in prison and several personal

"serious medical conditions," including "hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, early Type 2 diabetes, chronic and acute lower back and leg pain."

He filed the motions on behalf of himself without an attorney in the federal Northern District of Georgia, with little time remaining before he was to begin serving his sentence.

"On Jan. 4, 2021, Defendant is required to turn himself into a federal prison, which could or would cause his certain death," Gowder wrote.

Judge Story said in his Dec. 7 order that, "while the court is sympathetic to Defendant's conditions, they do not rise to

the level of extraordinary and compelling circumstances that justify compassionate release."

However, "in light of advances being made regarding a COVID-19 vaccine, to delay Defendant's report date in order to afford him an opportunity to be vaccinated before beginning his custodial sentence," Story said Gowder would not be required to report to prison before May 1, 2021, effectively granting him four additional months before he must start his sentence.

The former Union General Hospital executive was sentenced in June 2020 to a year and a day in prison after being found

guilty on more than 100 counts of prescription drug fraud in his federal jury trial last year.

In recognition of COVID-19's impact on the prison population over the summer, at the time, Judge Story postponed Gowder's confinement until at least Jan. 2, 2021. He was subsequently ordered to report to the low-security federal facility in Jesup on Jan. 4, and now, he has until at least May 1, 2021.

The Dec. 7 order partly addresses Gowder's core contention that his sentence "could be rendered a death sentence," with the judge casting an eye toward the future in hopes

of a vaccine alleviating such concerns.

COVID-19 is a viral disease that is caused by a highly contagious pathogen known to spread in congregant settings like prisons, which Gowder describes as "death traps."

As such, he has argued that home confinement is a reasonable alternative to his present sentence, and that federal statutes and the U.S. Constitution "make it possible for the Court to adjust its sentences accordingly."

"With the COVID-19 pandemic infesting all federal prisons, it is only a matter of time



Mike Gowder

before COVID-19 would attack the defendant and certainly could or would kill him," he wrote in the denied motion.

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