

Farewell Dr. Smith...from Page 1A



The 2020 Towns County School Board is composed of Brandon Grimsley, Stephanie McConnell, Stan Chastain, Tamie Bradley and Dr. Kilee Smith, pictured here with Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong in the school media center. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

well together over the last four years to create a more open, transparent environment for the public.

Personally, Smith is responsible for the "We Are Towns County Schools" faculty and staff interviews that appeared in the Towns County Herald, and she said getting to know the people who make the school run has been one of the most rewarding experiences of her tenure.

The board and school principals presented Smith with several appreciation gifts, and Smith did the same in return. And judging from the feedback to her farewell remarks as well as the warm wishes showered upon her by those in attendance, Smith will truly be missed.

Also attending the meeting was incoming Board Member Caroleen Woods, in whom Smith said she had the utmost confidence to continue the school board's mission of providing the best possible education for the children of Towns County. Woods will swear in come January.

In other business, the board adopted its 2021 meeting schedule, which will maintain

the first Monday each month for most meetings. In April, the board will meet on the second Monday due to Spring Break, and in September, the board will meet on the first Tuesday due to Labor Day.

Board members decided to hold back-to-back work session and regular meetings on the same day and in the campus media center for the first time in 2020, and to cut down on the time between meetings in 2021, they'll have regular sessions begin at 6:45 p.m. instead of 7 p.m.

School principals and Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong all reported that, thankfully, COVID-19 was continuing to have minimal impact in the schools, though one of the system's two school resource officers tested positive and was out on quarantine starting last week.

"I don't feel the safety of the school is compromised at all considering we only had one SRO for years before we added the second about three years ago," Berrong said after the meeting.

In a frank conversation about student performance

amid COVID, school officials agreed that it was hard to enforce completion of work for a small percentage of online-only students, but that a majority were doing well both online and in person.

The board office is examining policies to boost performance by students who are failing, particularly in online-only instruction, to potentially include requiring kids who are struggling to return for face-to-face classes.

Additionally, board members nominated and accepted new board leadership for 2021, as they do at the end of each calendar year. Current Vice Chair Tamie Bradley will be moving up to Board Chair, and Board Member Brandon Grimsley will helm the Vice Chair position next year.

School Finance Director Myra Underwood said the system's finances continue to look good. Sales tax collections are up year over year despite COVID, and though property tax collections are currently below typical, Underwood fully expects those to bounce back starting in January.

WWII Lessons...from Page 1A

at Pearl Harbor, I was up in the North Atlantic on my second destroyer as a 19-year-old kid," Johnson said.

When news of the surprise attack reached his ship, Johnson said that everyone thought it was a military exercise initially. This notion was quickly dispelled, however, once "this is not a drill" began repeating over and over on the loudspeakers.

It was a momentous and terrible time for those young patriots, and all these years later, Johnson still takes every opportunity to honor the victims of Pearl Harbor, where he had Christmas dinner in 1944 just a couple of months before reporting for duty at the famed Battle of Iwo Jima.

"I want to remember them and not forget how they served and sacrificed their lives for us, for our freedom, today," Johnson said. "To remember the people who never had an opportunity to raise a family and have a good life.

"All we can do is keep the memory of these people alive, keep their names alive and what they did alive. It's also important to recognize our veterans of all times and all wars who have sacrificed for the freedom of our nation and the world.

"If it wasn't for our veterans and people serving today, we wouldn't be walking the streets free. We would be under a communistic government; we wouldn't be free, and people should be free."

U.S. Air Force Veteran Rob Taylor of Blairsville was

9 years old when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He was living in Miami, Florida, at the time and was on his way home from a movie with his grandmother when he heard the news.

"On our way home, she stopped at her regular gas station for gasoline, and the owner came out," Taylor said. "He was white as a sheet and shaking. He walked up to the window and said, 'The Japs just bombed Pearl Harbor.'"

"Of course, I didn't know what or where Pearl Harbor was, but my grandmother was in shock. We hurried home, which was about three or four minutes away, and told my grandfather and my parents."

Taylor said he remembers everyone being "kind of nervous" in the leadup to the war, because the general public knew the U.S. was providing aid to the European side, "but never expected this thing from Pearl Harbor."

Soon after the attack, the rationing began. Taylor recalls everyone meeting up at the school to sign up for sugar rationing, which was the first food item to be rationed, followed by coffee, meat, cheese and more.

Americans at home experienced these and other hardships during the war, but instead of defeating people's spirits, it united the country behind the sacrifices of the countless brave soldiers who had gone off to fight the war.

Janice Walters-Taylor, herself an Army Veteran during the Vietnam War and wife to Rob Taylor, said her grandparents

had spoken with her about those days and the stateside effort, wherein everybody chipped in to stretch what they had because resources were spread so thin.

"The spirit of the nation was, 'Let's all get together,' and, 'We're all in this together,'" Walters-Taylor said. "Rationing happened pretty quickly and pretty drastically. Nobody could get new tires on their cars because tires went to the war effort."

Rubber, paper, metal and gasoline were rationed, too, "and if you didn't already own a car, you could forget about it until after the war. It was drastic and immediate," Walters-Taylor said.

"The World War II era was the closest this country had ever come to socialism," Rob Taylor said. "Everything was rationed. When you went to the grocery store, you didn't worry so much about how much money you had but how many ration points you had.

"Still, I don't remember anybody grumbling about having to put up with the war effort. Everybody came together. They accepted it graciously, and believe you me, when they found anybody cheating on the system - things like forging ration stamps and hoarding food - they were quickly turned in and dealt with."

And even though these sacrifices were imposed upon the populace, with everyone pitching in both at home and abroad, such hardships ultimately proved to be temporary, as freedom offered people better inspiration with which to fight and eventually defeat the Axis Powers.

Taylor is a Korean War Veteran, having served some 130 miles north of the 38th Parallel at Chodo Island in North Korea. Unfortunately, Taylor said he is finding that the level of civic-mindedness among the public has declined over the years.

"Everything for all those war years was 'we' and 'us,' while today, I find that it's 'I' and 'me,'" Taylor said. And Walters-Taylor agrees.

To solve the troubling lack of American nationalism they perceive today, the husband-and-wife duo propose that schools bring back a strong emphasis on civics, including in-depth study of the U.S. Constitution and government.

"And we don't revere our military like we used to," said Walters-Taylor, who serves as president and chaplain of American Legion Auxiliary Unit 121. "Pearl Harbor is an indication of what happened in history, and if we don't embrace history and learn from it, we are doomed to repeat it."

Lions Club...from Page 1A

"We get to see some of the same ones, but it is probably one of the highlights because of the giving. The Lions Club does a lot to put back into the community."

Jerry and June Smith moved here recently and opened their car museum in July, taking over the former site of Fun World next to Fieldstone Cinemas.

June said she and her husband love the community and the people of Towns County, and they're able to give back, so they do.

"It is the best feeling in the world to be able to give back to others," June said. "We didn't grow up with silver spoons in our mouths. We have been on the other end, and we are fortunate enough to be on this end.

"Christmas is because of the children, and besides, the Biblical meaning of Christmas, the joy that Christmas brings to kids and families and people all over is what it is all about. So, I know it is a tough time for a lot of people, and we want to help any way we can."

With the donation, the club was able to provide Christmas dinners to each visiting family last week as well, a tradition the group hopes to continue in the coming years, Lions Club President Jeff Myers said.

For the families that attend Give-A-Christmas, events like this help give the youngest

members of the community a great Christmas they might not receive otherwise.

"My family moved here not too long ago, and this is our first time being part of something like this," said Judith Merritt, who brought her grandkids. "Down in Florida, where we lived, there wasn't a lot of things like this for people that may not have everything together.

"I never expected this community to be so close and caring. That is nothing against this area, but I just haven't experienced anything like that before, and it was a completely different feeling.

"I am so thankful that my grandkids get this opportunity and get to have a better Christmas because of people that care."

Names of children participating in the event are provided in coordination with the local school system, which partners with other organizations and people in the community to positively impact as many kids as possible.

The Lions Club puts on multiple fundraisers each year and makes donations of its own in support of causes in the community. For more information on the group and its goals, visit e-clubhouse.org/sites/TownsCounty.

And be sure to check out the "Memory Lane Classic Cars" Facebook page. The museum houses approximately 100 classic cars, hot rods, motorcycles and more, with galleries alternating weekly from among the Smiths' growing collection of automobiles.



Towns County Lions Jeff Myers and Dianne Williams love helping their community, especially when it involves children at Christmastime. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Gingerbread Men...from Page 1A



The Lake Chatuge Chamber held a ribbon cutting for Chelsea Berrong last week. L-R: Kris Berrong, Chelsea Berrong, Clover Berrong, Shelly Berrong and Crystal Wagner. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

and we thought it would be fun if we could have something for the kids to do during the day instead of just Christmas lights at night.

"I switched what I was doing to (the gingerbread hunt), and I have done seven (businesses) so far. We definitely plan on doing it again in the future."

The contest started on Dec. 7 and runs two full weeks to Dec. 21. Berrong is hopeful that the endeavor will help local businesses by getting the community involved in exploring Hiwassee and seeing how much it has to offer.

"It is something people can do with their family outside," Berrong said. "This is also during the day, and it gets people out into the

Hiwassee area to see the new stores that we have. It is important that everybody shops local right now and visits our restaurants."

Chamber President Candace Lee sees the hashtag campaign as an opportunity to bring businesses, the community and tourists together during a particularly festive time of year.

"We wanted to provide an activity for not only the holidays, but something that the kids could get involved in while promoting area businesses," Lee said. "It takes people throughout town to look at storefronts and see what some of these businesses are that they haven't visited before.

"Of course, it keeps them at the store a little longer as they

look for the gingerbread men. It is also good for kids because a lot of the paintings that the Paint Party Mommy does are the real colorful illustrations that kids love. So, it gives families something to do for the holidays."

For information on other local events, check out the chamber's "Visit Lake Chatuge" Facebook page or call 706-896-4966.

Berrong does other seasonal and thematic storefront paintings for businesses. Inquiries can be made at "The Paint Party Mommy" on Facebook, including those from individuals wanting to know about virtual paint parties and paint kits for private events.

Election...from Page 1A

be closed for those weekday holidays, and there's no Saturday voting this election.

Elections officials are encouraging voters to make every attempt to cast their ballots early, as the possibility of bad winter weather may impact the electorate's ability to make it to the polls on Jan. 5 Election Day.

Absentee ballots are being automatically mailed to voters who informed the Board Office they were elderly or disabled on a previous application, though all others need to apply to get their mail-in absentee ballot for the runoffs.

People may request mail-in absentee ballots by visiting <https://ballotrequest.sos.ga.gov>, calling the local Board Office at 706-896-4353 or swinging by the office at Lakeview Circle.

After requesting a mailed ballot, voters can track the progress of their ballot - before and after voting - by signing up at <https://georgia.ballottrax.net/voter/>. Those who receive an absentee ballot but decide to vote in person should bring their mailed ballot to the polls for canceling.

Completed absentee ballots/applications may be mailed or dropped off in person either with Board Office personnel or using the security-monitored drop box located against the building outside the left main entrance.

Voters can also access the My Voter Page at mvp.sos.ga.gov ahead of the election for information on voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file

with the county office, sample ballots and more.

Registered voters who will be at least 18 years of age by Election Day are eligible to vote during early voting, though Dec. 7 was the registration deadline for residents looking to participate in the runoff elections.

Election Day is Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2021, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. That day, voters should report to one of the pre-assigned Towns County voting precincts: Hiwassee at the Civic Center; Young Harris at the Lodge Hall Building, aka Stephens Lodge; and Macedonia at Macedonia Baptist Church.

People are not required to bring their mailed precinct cards, but they must show a valid photo ID to vote.

In addition to early in-person voting starting Dec. 14, the Electoral College was set to meet after press time Monday for state electors to cast their votes to determine the next president of the United States.

Donald Trump is still waging legal battles in several states, including Georgia, and it remains to be seen whether he will succeed in overturning Joe Biden's apparent national victory, especially if the former

vice president secures 270 electoral votes to become president-elect.

Trump has alleged that widespread voting fraud and irregularities have interfered with fair and open elections in 2020, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation announced last week it would be helping to investigate such claims.

"On Tuesday, Dec. 8, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation met with officials from the Georgia Secretary of State's Office after receiving a request to assist them with investigations related to the 2020 General Election," GBI Public Affairs Director Nelly Miles said.

Continuing, "The GBI's role will be to assist in investigating specific cases identified by the SOS's Office. GBI agents will conduct interviews and investigative acts regarding allegations of fraud as reported to the SOS's Office."

The GBI has advised that reports of questionable election-related activities be made to the Elections Division of the Secretary of State's Office via <https://sos.ga.gov/cgi-bin/mailelectionscomplaint.asp>.

Heaton...from Page 1A

already denied Gowder.

Ultimately, Judge Story offered Gowder a compromise of sorts, postponing the start of his year and a day prison sentence from Jan. 4 to May 1, 2021, "to afford him an opportunity to be vaccinated."

Judge Story originally sentenced the men in June 2020 following their October 2019 conviction on more than 100 counts each of prescription drug fraud.

The sentencing hearings for the co-defendants had been postponed three times

between March and June as the courts and country adjusted to the pandemic, and this is the second time Story has granted the men reporting extensions due to COVID-19.

Following sentencing, Heaton's attorneys asked that the case be reviewed in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. A date for a hearing on the appeal will be set following the filing of legal briefs due Jan. 12, 2021.

Heaton and Gowder were originally arrested in 2016, alongside former Union General Hospital Emergency Room Director David Gowder - Mike's brother - and charged with multiple counts of prescription fraud.

David Gowder avoided trial by entering a guilty plea in March 2019 to one count of prescribing oxycodone without a legitimate medical purpose. He was sentenced in June 2020 to 18 months in prison, and he began serving his sentence in July.

Opportunity to change a life

Do you know a loved one who struggles with addictions or strongholds?

Unity Farm, a biblically based, 12-step Men's Recovery Home is located in Union County. For more information please call 706-851-5390 or 706-455-9043. NT(Dec16/21)CA