

Towns County Herald

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Hiawassee, Sheriff's Office coordinate Christmas efforts

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Dec. 4, the City of Hiawassee hosted its fourth annual "Light Up Hiawassee" event, which saw the square being lit up with Christmas lights that will remain on through the New Year's holiday.

The event ran in conjunction with the Towns County Sheriff's Office Christmas Parade that made its way from the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds to deliver Santa to the square, complete with horses, classic cars, and plenty of festive floats by local businesses, volunteer organizations, churches and the Towns County High School Band.

Everything kicked off around 4 p.m., when residents began to gather with friends, family and children to celebrate the occasion and enjoy community cheer, which included ac-

tivities on the Hiawassee Town Square and pictures with Santa inside the Old Rock Jail.

And with sponsors on hand to revel in the spirit, there were many things to enjoy that evening, such as SERVPRO doing ornament decorating, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary Post #7807 grilling hot dogs, Ingles providing cookie decorating, Kevin Mullens spinning cotton candy and brewing hot chocolate, the local Boy Scouts of America helping the Sheriff's Office with gourmet popcorn, and City Hall's Letters to Santa booth.

"We wanted to make this event big so we could just bring the community together and have a good time," Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales said. "This is just a great event all around, and I am very proud that the city puts it together every year."

"The most important thing for me has always been to bring our community together. Our community is small, and it

is just really fun for everyone to come together and experience small-town living."

People wishing to become involved by volunteering to assist with city events or offer ideas may contact Ordiales at 706-896-2202 or mayor@hiawassee.ga.gov.

As noted above, the Sheriff's Office Christmas Parade got underway from the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds and traveled up Main Street Hiawassee, ending at the square but with plenty of candy tossing and holiday greetings in between the two destinations.

Sheriff Ken Henderson began the parade in his truck and stopped along the way to join in throwing candy to children. Trailing him were community-decorated floats as well as beautiful horses, while everyone awaited the arrival of Santa bringing up the rear aboard Towns County Fire Ladder 1.

After arriving, Santa de-

livered a public message from the podium on the square, saying he was heading over to the Old Rock Jail and for kids to come and hang out with him to tell him what they wanted for Christmas.

Of course, every child jumped at the chance to visit with Santa for a while before going home happy and filled to the brim with Christmas cheer.

"We are so excited that a lot of people came out to celebrate," Sheriff Henderson said. "Everything has gone really well, and it is a good time of the year."

"We are proud to be a part of this, and our goal is to be able to work with everybody, because that is what makes a truly great community and environment, the ability for everyone to come together for each other."

"It is especially important to have things like this available during the holiday season. See *Christmas Fun*, Page 8A



Instead of riding into town on a sleigh, Santa joined the Sheriff's Office Christmas Parade aboard Towns County Fire Ladder 1 Saturday night. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Rep. Gunter, Sen. Hatchett and Police Chief visit residents



L-R: Paul Smith, William "Scotty" Scott, Stan Gunter and Michael Borkman in the Dec. 3 breakfast meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Mountain Movers and Shakers welcomed Georgia District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter and Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith in their Dec. 3 regular breakfast meeting at Sundance Grill.

Among the attendees were District 50 State Sen. Bo Hatchett, Towns County Sole

Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Enotah Judicial Circuit Juvenile Court Judge Jeremy Clough, Sheriff Ken Henderson, Chief Deputy Gene Moss, and Sheriff's Auxiliary Director Anna Denton.

Paramount among the issues Gunter spoke on was the redistricting that the Georgia General Assembly conducted over the last three weeks following the 2020 census.

Gunter said the State House and Senate, wanting to avoid a complicated partisan battle over redistricting in their respective chambers, were able to work out solutions "to comply with the Voting Rights Act, to draw districts (without) splitting counties, (and to) keep communities together."

"We should have a group of maps that will survive any

See *Movers & Shakers*, Page 6A

Federal judge temporarily halts COVID vaccine mandate Hospitalizations, cases trending upward

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Dec. 6 deadline for health care workers to comply with a nationwide COVID-19 vaccine mandate has been postponed by a federal judge in Louisiana, effectively pausing implementation of the mandate locally.

Until last week, the mandate was requiring all people working with health care providers that receive federal Medicare and Medicaid funding to have received an initial dose of any of the approved COVID vaccines by Dec. 6, with full vaccination expected by Jan. 4, 2022.

Citing concerns over

constitutionality, U.S. District Judge Terry A. Doughty ordered a preliminary injunction on Nov. 30 blocking the national mandate by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, or CMS.

The judge's decision, which came on the heels of a separate national injunction from earlier in November that blocked the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for companies with 100 or more workers, is certain to be appealed to a higher court.

"There's still no guarantee that it's not going to be a CMS mandate at some point," Union General Health System Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said. "How we have to look at it right now is as a temporary



Julia Barnett
UGH Chief Nursing Officer

delay that gets rid of those deadlines that we felt were unrealistic for our staff anyway."

See *Vaccine Mandate*, Page 6A

TCSO, Henderson to treat kids to 'Shop With The Sheriff'

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Following the Dec. 4 Towns County Sheriff's Office Christmas Parade, Sheriff Ken Henderson is continuing to get into the holiday spirit by hosting an all-new "Shop With The Sheriff" program to take children Christmas shopping on Dec. 13.

It's a new twist on a classic tradition, as the Sheriff's Office has been providing presents for kids of the community for more than 30 years, most recently through the Empty Stocking Fund, which simply became too difficult to manage logistically and with toy storage in recent years.

That's why, in 2021,

See *Shop With Sheriff*, Page 6A



Sheriff Ken Henderson is looking forward to taking kids Christmas shopping Dec. 13 during the inaugural "Shop With The Sheriff" program. Photo/Facebook

Annual speaking contest goes regional for '22 main event



L-R: Top of Georgia Speaking Contest organizers Terrylynne Marshall, Charlotte Sleczkowski, Jeff Langley and Gerry Chotiner. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Interested middle and high school students from around the region are beginning to prepare for the annual Top of Georgia Speaking Contest set for March 14-21, 2022.

For the first time, the traditionally Towns County-focused event will welcome participants from neighboring Union County as well as Clay County, North Carolina.

The contest has come a long way from its humble be-

ginnings as a Towns County GOP-sponsored event by Sam Fullerton in 2009, when it featured about a dozen contestants showcasing their public speaking development in the Towns County High School cafeteria.

Over the years, the contest has consisted of partnerships between the GOP, the nonpartisan civic group the Mountain Movers and Shakers, and Towns County 4-H, with student participation rising to 21 contestants during the last outing in 2019.

"Initially, the topics were

patriotic," said current contest organizer Dr. Gerry Chotiner, retired dermatologist and public speaking advocate who, after moving to Towns County five years ago, became a mentor to students looking to master the art of speech.

The program has evolved since those early days to allow students to choose their own topics within reason, and now with a wider geographic area of student involvement, the contest has the potential to recruit a greater variety of sponsors and

See *Speaking Contest*, Page 6A

Hit-and-run suspect dies in secondary car crash on GA 2

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

A man out of Rabun County died in a car crash on the Towns County side of Clayton Mountain after being involved in a hit-and-run accident shortly after 11 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 26.

Antonio Paramo Chavez, 56, was driving east on Georgia 2 in a black 2000 Chevrolet Silverado when he rear-ended the vehicle of a Hiawassee woman attempting to make a left turn from the eastbound lane of Georgia 2 onto Upper Hightower Road, per the Georgia State Patrol.

Chavez was following too closely behind the second

vehicle, leading to the impact, after which he fled the scene, GSP concluded.

About a mile east of the accident, Chavez apparently lost control of his truck and traveled off the north shoulder of the road and overturned down an embankment, per GSP.

Not wearing a seatbelt, he was ejected from the vehicle and died at the scene, according to the Towns County Coroner's Office.

GSP noted that Towns County EMS workers "could smell the odor of alcohol" on Chavez, and toxicology results were pending at press time.

"The vehicle sustained significant front and front left damage," GSP said. "No trees



Georgia 2 at Upper Hightower Road was the scene of a Nov. 26 hit-and-run that ended up in a fatal single-car crash about a mile east of the intersection. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

in the area were struck head on. Prior to this traffic crash, a truck matching (Chavez's vehicle) description struck and fled

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Movers & Shakers...from Page 1A

court challenges, which, by the way, have already been filed against these maps, I think," said Gunter, intimating that no matter how the maps are drawn, there will be fights over the process, though hopefully nothing to overturn the work.

Gerrymandering, he said, is a bad word, but that's exactly what the process of redistricting is, and it's acceptable as long as it is done reasonably and lawfully.

If it gets out of hand as it did several years ago when the Democrats controlled the Georgia House, Senate and Governor's Office, Gunter said, then it's turned over to the courts to decide.

"We didn't want that," he said. "The overall population in this district (on the new maps) is 59,244. Here in Towns County, it's 12,493 (21% of the district), with 10,923 over the age of 18.

"Union County has 42% of the population of the district, with (a population of) 24,632 and 20,808 (over the age of 18).

"White County has 37 percent of the population in the district, with (a population of) 22,119 and an over-18 population of 17,881."

Gunter said that, because South Georgia experienced a population decrease overall, the redistricting shifted north so the districts could maintain their population numbers. Consequently, the Ninth Congressional District lost its southernmost counties to the Tenth District.

Moving along, Gunter said vaccine mandates would be on the '22 legislative agenda because of the huge number of health care workers leaving the field over such mandates, thereby causing big problems for the health care industry and, by extension, the people who need health care.

The issue of undocumented immigrants being dropped off clandestinely in Georgia was raised in the meeting. Gunter and Hatchett, who stepped to the front of the room, said that if they knew of specific incidents, they would act on them.

Next, the discussion segued into what the legislature has done to combat the widespread perception of corruption regarding elections in

Georgia. "What we did with Senate Bill 202 is, the Secretary of State used to be the head of the Election Board in the State of Georgia; we took that away from him. We took the power away from the Secretary of State," Hatchett said, to clapping of approval from the attendees.

"The legislature now is going to appoint the new chairman of the Elections Board," he continued. "Moving forward, there's a lot of people in the state that don't trust the election systems anymore, and our job, and what we've talked about multiple times, is, how do we restore that trust?"

"With Senate Bill 202 requiring ID to vote absentee, the Democrats said we're racist, (that) it's 'Jim Crow' - it's not. Just show an ID. You've got to show an ID to do (everything) else. That is the law now. Moving forward, the elections now are going to be more secure."

Gunter added that, with Senate Bill 202, the State Elections Board may now take over any county elections apparatus that has been shown to be operating without integrity.

Looking to the next legislative session, Gunter said people can expect to see a variety of issues taken up, including Critical Race Theory, Constitutional Carry, cybersecurity, tax treatment of tiny homes, legal apportionment in tort cases, and adjustment of the Georgia appeals process.

Constitutional Carry is an issue that might enjoy new life in Georgia because of redistricting, Gunter said, adding that he's heard the governor may sponsor it and that it may well pass this time.

Gunter commented that, after attending the Technology Association of Georgia legislative retreat, he is confident that electric vehicles are the thing of the future worldwide.

"Every automaker in the world is looking to go with electric vehicles. So, get ready. It's coming," he said, adding that autonomous vehicles, those that drive themselves, will be part of it as well.

Several comments were made criticizing the move to electric vehicles because of the huge burden on the power grid, the potential chemical pollution of discarded/wrecked

electric cars and batteries, and the reduction in fuel tax income to maintain roadway infrastructure.

Finally, Chief Paul Smith gave an update and overview of Hiwassee PD's Shop with a Hero Christmas program for children.

"We're fortunate to live and work in this community where we get so much support and love," Smith said. "So, I thank you for that. Every year we take about 30 to 40 kids Christmas shopping. This year we've got 45 signed up (to go Dec. 17).

"The last day of school (before Christmas) is a half day, so, they get out at noon, we bring them pizza, they have a pizza party at the school, and we load up the bus with children. One bus just for kids, and one bus is empty, because when they come back, it's filled with all the Christmas presents."

Kids benefiting from Shop with a Hero in 2021 are middle-school aged, selected through the school system with the help of Towns County Family Connection. This year, Smith said he and his fellow first responders will be taking 45 kids Christmas shopping at the Blairsville Walmart.

Additionally, Smith said each child will get \$200 to shop with plus a new pair of shoes and a new winter jacket of their choice.

The chief told a heartwarming story of his first time taking kids shopping 10 years ago. His charge first went and picked out toys, then started putting the toys back, exchanging them for presents for members of his family.

"That's the majority of the kids," Smith said. "They have this money that they get to spend on themselves, but they're spending it on their family, too."

Michael Borkman and William "Scotty" Scott, who manage the Mountain Movers and Shakers, passed the hat after Smith spoke and collected \$438 for Shop with a Hero.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Broadband Director Alex King will be the featured speaker in the Dec. 10 regular breakfast meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers, to commence at 8 a.m. at the Sundance Grill in Hiwassee.

Vaccine Mandate...from Page 1A

What this means locally is that health care providers such as Union General have more time to prepare for any eventual mandate by either encouraging staff to get vaccinated or collecting federally recognized exemptions.

Currently, exemptions are only being granted for "recognized medical conditions or religious beliefs, observances, or practices," per CMS, with no exemption presently for individuals who have recovered from COVID-19.

To combat the spread of the coronavirus, CMS initiated the mandate as part of an "emergency regulation" Nov. 4.

"CMS's goal is to bring health care providers into compliance," the federal health agency said last month. "However, the agency will not hesitate to use its full enforcement authority to protect the health and safety of patients."

"Full enforcement" would entail cutting off federal Medicare and Medicaid funding, which makes up a sizeable portion of monies collected by many medical establishments.

Union General Health System - the largest employer in Union County and one of the largest in Towns - receives between 70%-75% of its revenues via federal funding, including Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement programs, according to Barnett.

A loss of CMS funding would be devastating for the Health System, Barnett said, adding that such a major revenue cut would require the hospitals and nursing homes here to either dramatically reduce services or perhaps close altogether.

Up to this point, vaccination by employees has been optional. Barnett said Union General Health System desires to allow individuals to direct their own health care decisions; but faced with a serious threat to much needed CMS funding, compliance with a valid vaccine mandate would not be optional.

To be clear, Barnett encourages all eligible individuals to get vaccinated, as she believes the vaccines to be both safe and effective; she has yet to see any vaccine-related hospitalizations at Union General, and as for efficacy, she supervised the Health System's medical efforts through the recent COVID surge that overwhelmingly affected the unvaccinated.

Still, she said she is uncomfortable with the idea of a mandate for anyone who has a personal reason to forgo vaccination, including any of the roughly 2,000 people currently working with Union General who, under a mandate, would need to comply or face termination.

As the mandate was not implemented this week, Barnett said she does not have a completed list of staff, contractors and volunteers who would have been in compliance via vaccination or exemption.

And though she's unaware of any Health System employees quitting prior to the mandate going into effect, she anticipates losing workers if the mandate is eventually enforced. This would be unfortunate, as Barnett said the health care sector - like many sectors - is severely understaffed.

"I do think this is something that everybody understands is not a Union General Health System mandate but a CMS mandate," Barnett said. "So, while it might affect morale and we wish it was not being done, I don't think that (our staff) necessarily blame the hospital for it."

In order to be prepared should the mandate be reinstated, the Health System is continuing to educate its workforce about the benefits of vaccination, including encouraging people to attend in-house vaccine clinics or otherwise turn in an "applicable exemption," Barnett said.

Approximately 76,000 health care facilities and more than 17 million health care workers are subject to the mandate, which the White House has said "will enhance patient safety in health care settings."

"The rule applies to employees regardless of whether their positions are clinical or non-clinical," per the White House, "and includes employees, students, trainees, and volunteers who work at a covered facility that receives federal funding from Medicare or Medicaid."

"It also includes individuals who provide treatment or other services for the facility under contract or other arrangements."

So far, COVID-19 booster shots that have been rolling out in the last couple months are not a part of the mandate, which has only called for first and second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vac-

cines, and the single shot of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

COVID IN REGION

Union General has continued to see a small yet steady rotation of new COVID-19 inpatients since the record delta surge receded at the end of summer, though the numbers are way down from their recent peak.

Over the last two weeks, however, the Health System has experienced a noticeable uptick in COVID hospitalizations and outpatient visits, but Barnett said it's too early to tell if the area is looking at the onset of another big surge for the winter months like in January 2021.

"There's all the news on this new variant, but we haven't really seen any different types of presentations (locally) from what we've been seeing over the past few months, and about the same severity of illness range as well," Barnett said.

Above, Barnett is referring to the latest "variant of concern" that has been dubbed "omicron," of which the first known domestic case was discovered in California last week, quickly followed by the first known case in Georgia and other states.

At press time, delta was still the predominately circulating COVID-19 variant in the U.S., but omicron has many public health officials concerned due to early indications of increased transmissibility, as well as the relatively high number and kind of mutations the virus seems to have undergone, potentially to the detriment of protection induced by the current crop of vaccines and recovery from prior infection.

Regardless of what variant may or may not be looming, Barnett said the Health System remains vigilant in preparing for whatever comes next by applying lessons learned over the course of the pandemic, e.g., stocking up on additional hospital beds, respiratory equipment, PPE and more.

If COVID figures do continue to climb and there appears to be a bigger problem on the horizon, Barnett said the Health System will resume its efforts of regularly updating the community on the numbers of local COVID hospitalizations and general vaccination status among inpatients.

Fatal Crash...from Page 1A

the scene." Continuing, "Due to the damages and evidence from the prior crash, this vehicle was identified as the hit-and-run vehicle."

"Evidence from the prior crash" included statements by the other driver, who recognized the headlights of the vehicle, which she identified as a "late '90s GMC or Chevy pickup." The Silverado also transferred dark-colored paint to the woman's car in the initial crash.

Georgia State Patrol listed several "Operator Contributing Factors" for Chavez, including "Following Too Close" for the hit-and-run crash, and "Under the Influence" and

"Too Fast for Conditions" for the fatal accident.

The woman whose vehicle was rear-ended was not transported from the scene for medical treatment, however, upon returning home, her husband drove her for medical evaluation at Union General Hospital in Blairsville.

Chavez's body was taken to Rabun County, and he will be transported to Mexico, where his wife and other members of his family will conduct funeral services, the Coroner's Office said.

At the time of the accident, Chavez was wearing clothing that indicated he had been working that day, perhaps doing masonry or some other

type of construction work, according to the Coroner's Office.

The Coroner's Office was able to verify that Chavez had been issued a "Limited Term" Georgia driver's license, which requires customers of the Department of Driver Services to "present documentation proving that they are lawfully present in the United States."

First responders at the scene that evening were the Towns County Fire Department, Sheriff's Office, GSP, Towns EMS, and the Coroner's Office.

"The Towns County Coroner's Office offers our condolences to the family," Coroner Tamela Cooper said.

Shop With Sheriff...from Page 1A

Sheriff Henderson has decided to switch things up with a new tradition, drawing inspiration from area Christmas programs sponsored by first responders, in which local law enforcement officers serve as chaperones to take children shopping for Christmas.

Of course, Sheriff Henderson is thankful for all of the community-based support that has enabled his office to take these deserving local children Christmas shopping next week, and he welcomes further contributions from anyone wanting to participate in such a worthy cause.

"This has been made possible through a lot of good, wonderful, kind people making donations to us for the 'Shop With The Sheriff,'" Henderson said. "We have had from small to huge donations for this ... a lot of money that's been given to us for these kids, so the people of our community have been very helpful for us."

To take place next Monday, the trip will feature an afternoon meal before the chil-

dren are treated to the extra special shopping experience at the Blairsville Walmart.

Towns County Family Connection with the schools assisted Henderson in selecting 30 to 50 kids aged kindergarten through fifth grade for the program; these are children who, without such programs, would likely go without much - if anything - under their trees Christmas morning.

The sheriff sees the program as an opportunity to conduct outreach between his department and the community he has sworn to protect and serve, including the building of relationships with local youth who will one day inherit the responsibilities of running and safeguarding the county.

"It's good for all of us to be able to do something good for our kids and let them see us in a light that's good, not a bad light," Henderson said. "I think it gives a greater respect for law enforcement."

"A lot of these kids are going to go away saying, you know, those guys are good guys,

or have some different opinion about the people involved."

"And we all know it's a time for giving, and the giving needs to be to our kids. That's what we want to do, and we're excited about it."

"Shop With The Sheriff" is but one of several initiatives by the Sheriff's Office targeting positive engagement with local children. Henderson's office has also escorted school buses for youth sporting events and promoted "Junior Deputies" in the past year, with additional interaction opportunities in the works.

"There's nothing more rewarding than what we're doing right here," Henderson said of the new Christmas program. "We just want to do all we can for our kids in the community that may not have the kind of Christmas we want them to have. So, we want to try to brighten that up."

"I don't know how you can do anything that's more heartfelt than that right there, and the smiles on their little faces will just do it all for you."

Remembering Reece: A Farmer for All Seasons

Byron Herbert Reece was a "Farmer for All Seasons." At the foothills of the Appalachian Mountain chain in the beautiful Choestoe Valley of Union County, Hub Reece was a self-proclaimed "Farmer First and Writer Second."



Byron Herbert Reece hours. Reece's second love was poetry, and his love of the land inspired his thoughts and reflections of the day that he recorded long into the night by firelight. In Winter, he used his time wisely in studying the writings of American and European writers and recording his thoughts. Reece spoke from his heart and his everyday experiences as a farmer, as one who was well read, as one who loved and appreciated classical and beautiful music, as one who loved his family dearly.

In his biography of Reece, "Mountain Singer," Raymond Cook says of him, "Byron Herbert Reece was no poseur. He was what he seemed: first of all, a dirt farmer of modest success; and after that, a poet of surpassing ge-

nus." Editor Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution said that Reece was "one of the really great poets of our time, and one who stands with those of any other time."

A Fire Of Boughs

by Byron Herbert Reece
At onset of December
When the cold comes to stay
I bring boughs, leafed in May,
To feed the cheerful ember
And warm the wintry night.
Folded into his fur,
The cat disdains to stir
But dreams by firelight
And I should follow suit
Except that boughs in turning
Shapeless in the burning
Alarms the more than brute
Caged within my being
That often plays at blind
But stirs and shakes my mind
With grave misgiving, seeing
Wood fall from coal to ash,
Its substance burned
to nothing,
Its luminescent clothing,
Its shine, its flash,
Expended, one with night -
And is not comforted
That such translation shed
Both warmth and light.

***"Remembering Reece" is contributed by the Byron Herbert Reece Society, whose purpose is to preserve, perpetuate and promote the literary and cultural legacy of the Georgia mountain poet/novelist, Byron Herbert Reece. Jerri Duncan Gill, Chair

Speaking Contest...from Page 1A

mentors, so the committee is hopeful for future buy-in by the Union County School System and local businesses.

Already, the determination of the current crop of Top of Georgia organizers has garnered greater student accessibility and mentoring by way of the Young Harris College Department of Communication Studies, which as a new sponsor has made room for 40 students to participate in the upcoming contest. With continued interest, the program could expand to 60 in the next year.

Certainly, things are looking promising enough that Chotiner said he wouldn't be investing so much time and dedication to the program if he wasn't sure it would grow into something much more monumental.

Of course, now that the college is sponsoring the event, rewards for participants have grown. There's \$2,000 in total prize money up for grabs, but the biggest prize is a Young Harris College scholarship of up to \$5,000, offering college experience to students who may not get the chance otherwise.

Phillips, Towns County GOP Chair Betsy Young, Speaking Contest Chair Charlotte Sleczkowski and Speaking Contest Secretary Terrylynn Marshall.

Interested parties should be aware that there will be six training sessions at Young Harris College between Jan. 20 and March 2, 2022. All meetings will fall on Thursdays from 4-5 p.m., and each student must be prepared to deliver a four to six-minute speech.

To apply for participation or contact the committee with interest as a mentor or sponsor, email topofgeorgiastudent@gmail.com.

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Christmas Fun...from Page 1A



Children had great fun decorating cookies using supplies donated by Ingles during Light Up Hiawassee Dec. 4. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

"A lot of people do not have big family circles, and most families do not have a lot of money during this time, which is why we are glad to be doing our 'Shop With The Sheriff' on Dec. 13, to take less fortunate children shopping for gifts at

Walmart. "We are gladly going to be helping between 40-50 kids, and we just want to thank the wonderful people of Towns County for making all of this possible," the sheriff said. Winners of the Sher-

iff's Office Christmas Parade float contest were Peach State Federal Credit Union in First Place, Towns County Lions Club with Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Corrina Luckenbach in Second Place, and SERVPRO in Third Place.



Congrats to Peach State Federal Credit Union for winning First Place in the Sheriff's Office Christmas Parade over the weekend, pictured here with Sheriff Henderson. Photo/Facebook

Knights of Columbus donate coats to Towns County Schools



L-R: Rick Graff, Amy Gibby Rosser and Glenn Harahand for the local Knights of Columbus coat donation Nov. 29. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Monday, Nov. 29, the Knights of Columbus Council 11746 from St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church of Blairsville delivered winter parkas for six boys and six girls in need to the Family Connection Office at Towns County Schools.

The goal of the Coats for Kids program is to ensure that no child in North America goes without a coat during the winter season.

Through the dedication of Knights of Columbus councils across the U.S. and Canada, hundreds of thousands of new winter coats have been distributed to children since the program's inception.

Council 11746 representatives on hand for the donation were Grand Knight Rick Graff, Deputy Grand Knight Glenn Harahand, and Secretary Ralph Kwiatkowski.

"In the United States and Canada, this year so far, we have distributed over 134,000 coats, Kwiatkowski said. "Last year, due to the pandemic, we only distributed 103,049 coats. In Georgia this year, 'K of C' councils have distributed 4,392 coats. (Coats for Kids) is always on our calendar for this time of year."

Harahand said the group raises money using various fundraisers throughout each year, including breakfasts and dinners in the church, the proceeds of which go into the organization's general funding.

"And we donate to charities from that, and we also still support seminarians that are studying to become priests," Harahand said. "But mainly, it is primarily through donations that we are able to achieve this."

"Boxes (of coats) come in arranged by approximate age. Last year we picked high school, but this year we picked middle school so we can fairly alternate between each group."

Grand Knight Graff has been involved with the St. Francis-affiliated council for three years now, but the council has been doing the coat donation program for close to 20 years.

"This is just a small part of our overall mission," Graff said. "We have four founding principles: charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism."

Amy Gibby Rosser is the Towns County Family Connection coordinator at Towns County Schools, and she said Family Connection has worked with the Knights of Columbus for several years on multiple

projects, including the Special Olympics.

"This is our second year with the coat drive, and in the past, we have served approximately 200-250 children community-wide for (giving during the Christmas season)," Gibby Rosser said, "including clothing and toys, which is about 20% of our school population."

"(The kids) usually come by a referral basis from parents and administration, and we make sure that need is handled. People can sponsor a family/kids or make a monetary donation if they are inclined to help out for the underprivileged."

Towns County Principal Roy Perren was elated with the coat drive, calling it "very awesome" and "a great thing that helps our students out."

"The generosity of our community has always been amazing through the years, and not only us, but our students really appreciate these efforts," Perren said.

People desiring more information or wanting to contact the local Knights of Columbus Council about how to help may email ralphk41@gmail.com or call 706-870-0819. Rosser with Family Connection may be reached at argibby@townscountyschools.org or 706-896-4131, ext. 1233.