

Rep. Allison looking forward to full-time family life

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

State Rep. Stephen Allison announced last week that he would not be seeking re-election to the Georgia House of Representatives during the 2016 election cycle – and it was not an easy decision to make.

“I don’t know if people understand what an honor it is for their peers, their neighbors, their friends to actually select their name when it’s on a ballot,” said Rep. Allison. “It’s a big deal, and for the past eight years, I’ve been able to go to Atlanta and represent my neighbors, my community, the place that I call home, at the State Capitol, and it’s been the biggest honor in my life.

“So the decision wasn’t taken lightly. My wife and I conversed with many of our close friends and our family, and we prayed at length about this decision. But when I was elected, my oldest son was 7 years old and my youngest was 6 years old. Now, I have a freshman in high school, and one that will be a freshman in August.

“And I only get one chance to raise my kids, and I think the most important thing that I can do right now is come home and be a full-time dad for the last four years that I have the kids at home, and that was, in essence, the main decision.”

Rep. Allison, who runs his own private legal practice out of Blairsville, describes his job at the Georgia State Capitol as a “full-time part-time job,” including three months for Legislative Session, and countless hours and weekends throughout the year speaking

to civic groups and meeting with constituents to address their concerns.

“I’ve missed my son’s ballgames, I’ve missed swim meets,” said Rep. Allison. “Many of my clients have had tremendous patience, because I’m gone for such long lengths of time. I think that when we added it all up, it was just the right time and the right decision for us.”

Now in his eighth year as a public servant, Rep. Allison said that, at first, the job was somewhat overwhelming.

“I think your freshman year is kind of like putting your mouth around a fire hydrant – there’s so much information about so many things that I didn’t believe the state legislature touched,” said Rep. Allison, adding that initially, he thought the job would be simpler. “The legislature touches everything from education to criminal justice, from health care to environmental concerns.”

But you learn fast, said Rep. Allison, and the scope of the job, though widely varied, begins to come into view, especially with the assistance of experts in the community who help you to understand nuanced legal positions within complex bills.

Of course, representing his constituents in Atlanta has been a great honor, but for Rep. Allison, what he has enjoyed most has been helping people with their everyday problems.

“The absolute best part of the job is when you are able to help a constituent who has gotten the runaround from the Department of Revenue, or, several of our seniors had run into troubles with driver’s license issues – or whether it



Stephen Allison

was helping somebody with the bureaucratic nonsense that sometimes goes on in government,” said Rep. Allison. “That was by far the best part of the job, because there’s nothing better than helping your neighbor, and that is one thing that we were able to do in that job.”

After wrapping up the 2016 Legislative Session, during which time Rep. Allison will be looking to get the updated Blairsville City Charter approved, he will return to being a full-time lawyer the year round.

“When I was elected, I told my constituents one thing, and that was, I wanted to be the same person that came back when I retired that I was when I left,” said Rep. Allison. “I’m just a down-home country lawyer. I treat everybody the same, and I believe that it is important that, as public servants, we always keep in mind that we represent other people.”

Over the course of the past eight years, Rep. Allison is most proud of his work to secure major state funding to improve and renovate what

were already some of the best libraries in the state – the Union County Public Library, the Mountain Regional Library and the Towns County Public Library.

In particular, Rep. Allison remembers the hard work contributed by Donna Howell, Susie Brendle and Debbie Phillips of the libraries, as well as the Friends of the Libraries in Towns and Union counties.

Along with backing from Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris and Towns County Sole Commissioner Bill Kendall, and working alongside State Sens. Steve Gooch, John Wilkinson and Chip Pearson, those libraries have become an important and fitting legacy for Rep. Allison.

“We worked as a team on one project, regardless of party, for the benefit of the community, and that’s what I think resonates, is that regardless of your political party, you can come together and solve a problem for the community,” said Rep. Allison. “It’s just a great feeling. I still smile every time I go in there.”

Anyone looking for legal counsel, Rep. Allison’s schedule will soon be wide open – he handles wills and trusts, corporate works and general litigation.

“It has truly been the greatest honor of my life to represent this district for the past eight years, and these people will always have my utmost thanks,” said Rep. Allison of his constituents. “The mountains are just a very special place, and Regina and I are proud we get to call them home.”

Kendall...from Page 1

Have had the opportunity to honor our veterans by constructing Veterans Park at Towns County Schools and Iwo Jima Veterans Memorial at Foster Park and to receive a great honor from our veterans whom I hold in the highest esteem.

I was blessed with a mother and father who took me to church and taught me to tell the truth and that "your word is your bond." My wife Jean, a companion for life, has shown me encouragement and supported me every step of the way and gave me two wonderful children, Gary and Pam. We have four grandchildren, Kendall, Vanessa, Zane and Rhett.

I will leave with a full and grateful heart for the opportunity you have given us to make this journey and meet

so many wonderful friends and have memories that we shall always cherish.

As we go forward in the days ahead, Jean and I leave you with this thought that I have kept in my desk for many years.

*"A NEW DAY"
"This is the beginning of a new day. God has given me this day to use as I will. I can waste it... or use it for good, but what I do today is important, because I am exchanging a day of my life for it. When tomorrow comes, this day will be gone forever ... leaving in its place something that I have traded for. I want it to be gain...and not loss: good and not evil: success and not failure, in order that I shall not regret the price that I have paid for it."
Anonymous*

Vote...from Page 1

presidential primary, but in every election,” said Dehler. “Voting is the foundation of our democracy and should never be taken for granted, and the board hopes that every

registered voter will exercise this very important right.”

Election Day for the Presidential Preference Primary is March 1, the Tuesday following the close of early voting.

Ingles...from Page 1

“Reportedly, a white male had come in, passed a note requesting a specific amount of prescription medication, and at that point in time, they provided that to him,” said Special Agent Hamby. “He left the store, and a description of the possible vehicle he was in was put out to dispatch.

“A Union County Sheriff’s Office (deputy) spotted the vehicle in the Walmart parking lot. After they spotted the vehicle, they made contact with a white male matching the description of the victims at the pharmacy at Ingles. He actually was in possession, at the time that they found him at Walmart, of the prescription medicine that was taken. He was then put into custody at that point in time.”

According to Special Agent Hamby, Doan and Cole were together at Walmart, though she was inside the store at the time Cole was taken into custody, and she was not with Cole during the actual robbery at the Ingles Pharmacy.

The Blairsville Police Department has brought additional charges against Cole: three counts of possession of a controlled substance, one count of removed or falsified

ID of a license plate, one count of crossing a guard line with weapon, drugs or intoxicants, and driving with a suspended/revoked license.

The three controlled substances Cole has been charged with are the liquid hydrocodone he allegedly obtained through the course of his robbery of the Ingles Pharmacy, clonazepam pills and alprazolam pills, according to Blairsville Police.

There were several license plates in Cole’s vehicle, and he was discovered with drugs on his person after entering the Union County Jail, according to Blairsville Police.

Other jurisdictions are also likely to bring charges against the couple for “doing something similar to this robbery at this pharmacy” at other pharmacies, particularly around the Atlanta area and possibly out of state, according to Special Agent Hamby.

This latest robbery is the second in a pair of unrelated robberies in three days in Blairsville. Suspects in the Sunday, Jan. 31, robbery of No. 1 Chinese Restaurant are still being sought by authorities.

Residents share concerns in Young Harris

By Mason Mitchum
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

When the Young Harris City Council met on Tuesday, Feb. 2, members of the public brought up several concerns due to recent developments in the city.

Lewie Hughes and his daughter, Twyla Nicholson, contested that when contractors cut a water main without telling them, the loss of water caused their pumps to burn up.

“In November, when they were putting the new sewer lines in, and they cut the water lines, we didn’t know it and we kept trying to run water, and it burned our pumps up,” said Nicholson. “So we wanted to see if the city would do anything to help with it. They say they don’t cover what’s past the meter, but they didn’t get the water to the meter, which is why it burned the pump up. So we have to have our own pumps to get it up to us.”

“The problem is when they accidentally cut this

line in two, it sucked all of the water out of the lines all the way to our pumps,” continued Hughes. “My pump ran until the impaler melted to the casing, is how hot it got. Twyla’s got to where it wouldn’t push the water up to the shower.”

He said that the water pressure is very weak when it reaches their homes, if it reaches the homes at all.

“I think it’s the city’s responsibility to see that the water goes through the meter. If it goes through the meter, we don’t have a problem. Did you not figure that it’s the city’s responsibility, when they’re cutting, to notify us so that we could turn our pump off?” he finished.

The City heard their concerns and determined that the water committee would meet to address the issue.

“The committee is going to meet and then we’ll get back to you. The committee will look at it,” said Mayor Andrea Gibby.

Next, Alan Sinram stood to address an issue he had with

the open hours of the city park near Thomas Town Road.

“I live in an old project house that’s 100 years old on Thomas Town Road. You all have done a nice job on that nearby park. And then when you added that nice skating board ramp, it comes like 75 feet from our bedroom window,” he said.

His main complaint is that skateboarders on the ramp are disrupting his sleep.

“I’m just concerned about the hours of the park, open till 11 at night, because the skateboards going up and down that wooden ramp make a lot of noise. I don’t want to get on people for having fun, I would have done the same thing. But 11 p.m. is not ideal,” he said.

The mayor and council agreed to look at the signage and the rules to see how they can be better neighbors.

The city voted unanimously to approve the renewal of business licenses for Young Harris Pharmacy, Dare to be Different, Here’s the Scoop and Enota Village



Mayor Andrea Gibby

Apartments. The city also approved a motion to issue a sign permit for Majestic Mountain Properties.

Further, the city had the second reading of the amendments to the alcohol ordinance, which allows the city to issue licenses for Sunday sales and liquor by the drink. The amendments, which modify and adopt new provisions regulating the sale of alcohol within the city, were approved unanimously.

Arrests...from Page 1

course of practice and had no legitimate medical purpose, and many of his patients allegedly traveled from Cherokee County, North Carolina, in order to obtain these prescriptions.

The ongoing investigation is being considered a joint operation with several other agencies from the federal, state and local levels: the DEA Tactical Diversion Squad, the DEA Digital Forensics Lab, the Georgia Drugs and Narcotics Agency, and the Cherokee County NC Sheriff’s Office.

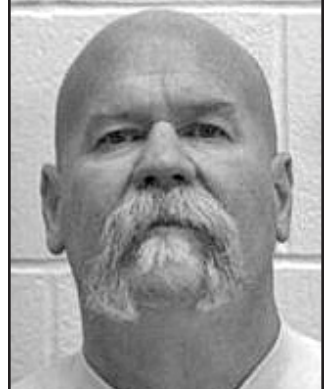
“Once this came to our attention that Dr. David Gowder had been arrested in Fannin County, we started looking into this, and immediately realized that it had jumped state lines,” said Union County Sheriff Mack Mason. “At that time, we called the DEA, and for the last approximately four months, they have had an officer working very diligently alongside us. The more investigating we did, the more agents they made available to us to assist us in whatever we needed.”

Also arrested in connection with the investigation were: Gail Gowder, Mike’s wife; Dr. David Gowder, Mike’s brother; Virginia Lou Harkins, sister to Mike and David; and Jamie Harkins, daughter of Lou Harkins, also niece to Mike and David Gowder.

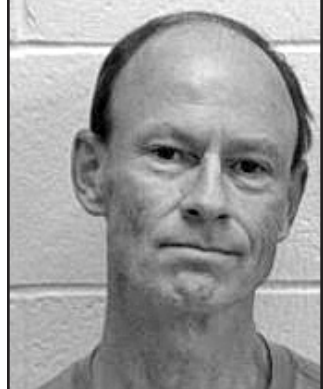
The Union County Sheriff’s Office served a total of six felony arrest warrants on Thursday, as well as two search warrants – one at Union General Hospital and the other at Dr. Heaton’s office – in order to obtain both physical and digital files and patient records to further the ongoing investigation.



John Michael Gowder, M.D.



James Lanier Heaton, M.D.



George David Gowder, M.D.



Gail Nicholson Gowder



Virginia Lou Harkins



Jamie Lee Harkins

All six individuals arrested were booked into the Union County Jail on the following charges, but have since been released on bond, according to the sheriff’s office:

John Michael Gowder, three counts fraudulently obtaining controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute controlled substance.

James Lanier Heaton, 41 counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of controlled substance.

Gail Gowder, two counts of fraudulently obtaining controlled substance.

George David Gowder, seven counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of controlled substance, 36 counts of fraudulently obtaining controlled substance.

Virginia Lou Harkins, two counts of fraudulently obtaining controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute controlled substance.

Jamie Lee Harkins, two counts of fraudulently obtaining controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute controlled substance.

Gail Gowder, Lou Harkins and Jamie Harkins were all arrested for paying for

and obtaining pain pill prescriptions written by Dr. David Gowder, according to authorities.

Dr. Gowder was arrested twice last year on charges of prescription fraud, first in Blue Ridge, then in Union County.

Prior to losing his job with Union General Hospital following an arrest last year, Dr. Gowder had been the director of the emergency room there.

as well as real and fictitious patients, before paying for and filling them himself.

Also discovered during the course of the investigation, Dr. Gowder would send his on-duty subordinates in the emergency room to local pharmacies, where they were directed to fill opiate prescriptions for fictitious patients, then bring the prescriptions back to him at the hospital, according to authorities.

The investigation found that Dr. Gowder had also written controlled substance prescriptions for close family members, including his brother Mike Gowder, and that any employees who attempted to report or prevent Dr. Gowder’s activities were intimidated, harassed, and were in some cases forced to quit or were fired by Mike Gowder, acting as CEO, according to authorities.

During the operation Thursday in which the Union County Sheriff’s Office and the DEA moved in to arrest individuals and seize files, the Cherokee County NC Sheriff’s Office also had men on the ground, including the sheriff himself, the chief deputy and five investigators from that office.

“Our drug guys started looking into our fraudulent scripts that were coming through our pharmacies in North Carolina,” said Sheriff Derrick Palmer. “A lot of our Cherokee County residents, once we got to checking into this, were overprescribed medication, and were getting a lot of medications that there was just no humanly way they could take – it was not possible that they could be ingesting this much medication.

“So in this investigation, we’ve been finding that a lot

of these pills were going on the street, selling them on the street, things of that nature. When we started looking at where they were getting these pills and where these pills were coming from, a lot of it was coming from these doctors that we’re looking at today that Union County is actually doing arrest warrants on.”

According to Sheriff Palmer, many of the prescriptions in question were fraudulent, written out to fictitious people, or simply a matter of overprescribing.

“We have no current charges in North Carolina on any of these doctors right now, but we are looking at indictments coming down the road, and our investigation is still continuing in North Carolina,” said Sheriff Palmer.

Several TV news crews out of Atlanta were in town last week to capture the arrests of Mike Gowder and Dr. Heaton, and for the subsequent arraignment that took place on Friday, Feb. 5.

Sheriff Mason said that, regardless of what transpired last week and over the course of this ongoing investigation, the public should not be wary of the hospital or its staff.

“I want to reiterate the fact that we have a great hospital facility,” said Sheriff Mason. “That’s where I go when I need medical treatment, and I’ve always had a great experience with the staff and services there.

“I want to thank the hospital for all of its cooperation that Thursday, and I thank everyone that reached out to us with information. If they have a need to inform us of anything else or have any questions, my office stands available to answer any questions and be of any assistance that we can.”