

North Georgia News

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Annual Night to Shine welcomes 94 royal guests

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation, the Night to Shine has been a staple of community solidarity since 2015. This year, it was observed by 820 churches across 60 countries, including right here in the United States.

Closer to home, the annual celebration is held at the First United Methodist Church of Union County and welcomes guests from Union, Towns and Fannin counties across Georgia, and North Carolina counties Clay and Cherokee.

The magical night fell on Friday, Feb. 7, with 94 guests enjoying the celebration with buddies and caretakers. In

addition to that, 315 volunteers helped put everything together and kept things running smoothly. It's worth noting that attendance was slightly up compared with past events.

2025 was extra special because of the inclusion of a third bus, according to local event organizer Scott Terry. One of the highlights of the night is to ride one of the party buses around the Blairsville Square.

"We were really hurting for our guests that were not able to ride the buses because of mobility issues, and so we started last year talking with some folks, and the county was generous enough to allow us to use one of their wheelchair-accessible vehicles," explained

Terry.

The buses, decorated each year to match changing color schemes, allow the rest of the community to interact with the event's kings and queens. It's become a tradition for people to line the streets of Downtown Blairsville when the party buses make their three rounds, waving and cheering for the riders inside.

For how much fun the kings and queens have, their caregivers are also treated to a night out. Families and partners are served dinner and can even participate in a raffle and play games like music bingo.

Samantha Matheson's sister Morgan was one of the queens for the night, and this

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Night to Shine once again featured the popular Party Bus that made its way around the Blairsville Square with plenty of local fanfare Feb. 7. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Commemorating 80 years since Battle of Iwo Jima

By Alton "Doc" Coleman
Marine Corps League 783
Commandant

In recognition of the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima, the Marine Corps League's Unicoi Detachment 783 will host the annual Iwo Jima Memorial Ceremony at the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center in Young Harris.

The indoor ceremony will commence at 10 a.m. on Monday, Feb. 17.

This year's keynote speaker will be U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Frank J. Lozano, Program Executive Officer Missiles and Space in Redstone Arsenal, Alabama.

As the Program Executive Officer, Gen. Lozano is responsible for the development, production, fielding, sustainment, and international program aspects for assigned missile and space

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Frank J. Lozano
U.S. Army Major General

Wanted local man hits two motorists after fleeing stop

By Shawn Jarrard
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At press time, the Blairsville Police Department was asking the community's help in locating a Union County resident wanted for fleeing law enforcement in a Feb. 7 chase that resulted in two collisions with the motoring public.

Around 3 p.m. on Friday, Shiloh Jacob Orellana-Irvin, 30, was allegedly driving through town when Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter got behind his red Ford Focus to stop him for a tag violation.

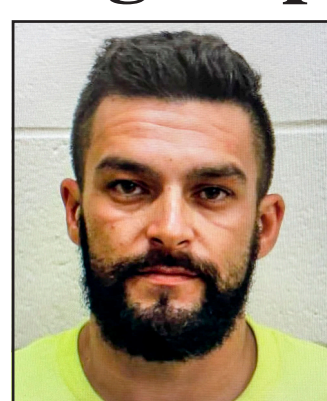
Baxter initiated the traffic stop in the west-facing left turn lane of Georgia 515 at the intersection of Murphy Highway. The chief said that Orellana-Irvin at first appeared as if he was going to pull over while making his way slowly toward the four-way stop at Blue Ridge Street.

Suddenly, Orellana-Irvin hit the gas, speeding his way down the wrong lane of Blue Ridge Street toward Blue Ridge Highway, in the process hitting a passing motorist in front of Sushi Shack and damaging both vehicles. Baxter said that, thankfully, no one was hurt in the collision.

"When he got to Blue Ridge Highway, he ran through the intersection (heading west)," Baxter said. "At some point after striking the initial vehicle, the hood of the car flipped over the windshield and was covering the windshield. We terminated the chase shortly thereafter."

Baxter said he ended the chase "due to the individual's reckless disregard for the motoring public," as Orellana-Irvin was driving with greatly diminished visibility and "at a high rate of speed."

Chief Baxter said another reason he called off the pursuit



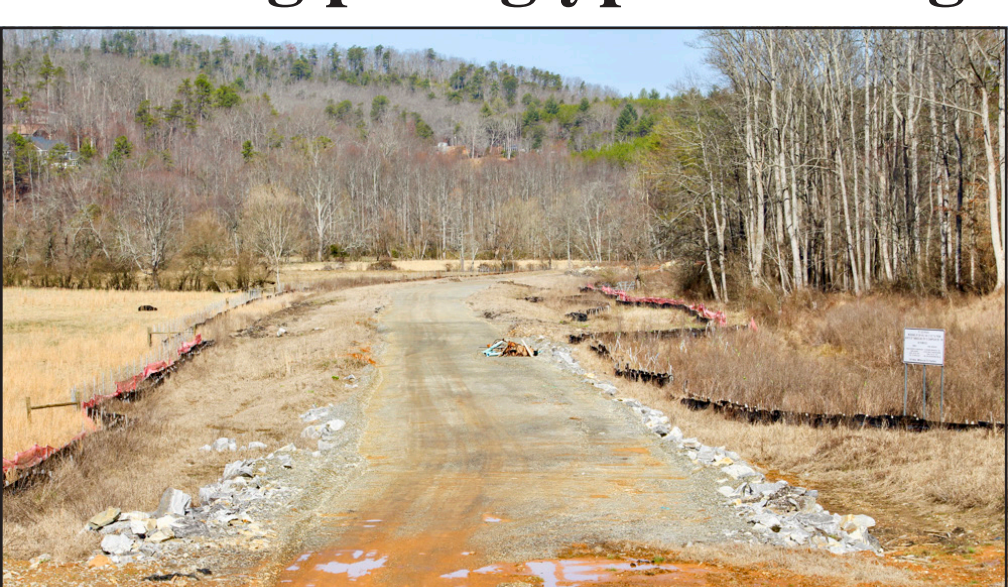
Shiloh Jacob Orellana-Irvin

was because he knew the identity of the driver, both from information obtained for the attempted stop as well as having had prior run-ins with Orellana-Irvin, so he felt confident the fugitive would be in custody before long.

"It just was not worth the danger of hurting someone or anything," Baxter said.

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Bypass to resume construction following petroglyph meeting



Much work has already been done to cut in the new Young Harris Bypass, with construction slated to resume next week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
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The Georgia Department of Transportation is estimating that work on the Young Harris Bypass will start back Monday after a lengthy pause that began last summer when a boulder containing Native American petroglyphs was inadvertently damaged during construction.

Also known as Phase I of the Georgia 515 reconstruction project, the two-lane bypass will serve as one bookend of the project to widen to four lanes roughly 7.5 miles of the

highway between Blairsville and Young Harris city limits.

The bypass will be about 1.25 miles of new roadway running around the west side of Young Harris, starting with one roundabout at GA 515 and Brasstown Creek Road and ending with another roundabout just north of Timberline Drive on GA 515.

Construction is getting back on track after a meeting on Friday, Feb. 7, between GDOT and the appropriate tribal authorities at the site of the damaged rock carvings in Young Harris.

It appears that the boulder containing the petroglyphs had been previously marked by state archeologists but that a miscommunication with subcontractor C.W. Matthews Contracting Co. resulted in the boulder being moved with construction equipment and subsequently damaged.

After Friday's meeting, the state has arrived at a solution to resume construction on Feb. 17. Part of that solution will include the on-site presence of archeologists – both state employees and third-party

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Chamber celebrates members with annual awards banquet

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Every year, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce gets together for a major awards banquet to recognize businesses and individuals that have stood out through "dedication, hard work and contributions to our community as a whole."

In 2025, the date fell on Jan. 24, and Brasstown Valley Resort once again served as the locale. This year's theme was

"Boots and Bling," bringing a modern, glamorous twist to the Western cowboy aesthetic. Kitty Mauzy of United Community Bank marked the occasion with an opening message of gratitude in return for everything the Chamber does to promote the community.

"What we really want to do here tonight is just thank the Chamber for always being our friend and supporting us and supporting everyone in the community," Mauzy said. "You know, they've worked really hard, and I don't know if they

get the credit they deserve a lot of times."

Chiming in from a different sector, Union General Health System CEO Kevin Bierschenk also took the opportunity to thank the Chamber for its role in enriching health care in the region.

"Because of y'all and your partnership, this year, we should be able to do 27,000 ER visits," Bierschenk said. "We're doing 750 deliveries, (and) we can do about 3,600 surgeries in

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River City Bank received the coveted "Business of the Year" award at the annual awards banquet by the Chamber of Commerce. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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The Team That Was Meant to Be: Microchipping Pets



Microchip Team at Mountain Shelter Humane Society

Have you ever had a moment when you knew you were exactly where you were meant to be, doing the work you were meant to do? For the Microchip Team at Mountain Shelter Humane Society, Saturday, February 1, was one of those moments.

Each year, countless pets go missing, leaving their owners heartbroken and the animals lost, hungry, and scared. Sadly, many never make it back home simply because they don't have identification.

For months, the Mountain Shelter Humane Society's dedicated team of board members, employees, volunteers, and supporters worked to organize a Free Microchipping Clinic for local pets. The event was held at the organization's thrift store across from the Civic Center, and thanks to their efforts, it

was a huge success!

In just four hours, approximately 50 animals were microchipped including cats, puppies, senior dogs, and even one horse. Pet owners were deeply grateful for the opportunity to protect their animals and ensure their safety.

That same evening, at 5 p.m., the team witnessed firsthand the importance of their work. Union County Animal Control responded to a call about a beautiful young dog wandering lost in the Ivy Log area without identification and without a microchip.

This mission is essential, but more help is needed. Businesses and individuals who want to support free microchipping clinics are encouraged to contribute. Volunteers are needed to spread the word about the importance of pet microchipping. And most

importantly, pet owners who haven't yet microchipped their animals are urged to take this simple but life-saving step.

Microchipping gives pets a way home. If your pet isn't microchipped yet, don't wait! This small action could save their life.

Mountain Shelter Humane Society plans to offer these clinics quarterly. For more information, contact the Adoption Center at 706-781-3843 and follow both the Adoption Center and Thrift Store on Facebook!

The Mountain Shelter Humane Society Adoption Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to serving the community and its animals. With a mission centered on compassion, the Adoption Center has been a beacon of hope for thousands of animals over the past 40 years.

Battle of Iwo Jima...from Page 1A

systems. His operational and combat experience includes deployments to Bosnia, Kuwait and Iraq.

All Veteran Service Organizations, as well as the public, are invited to attend the anniversary event. After the ceremony, attendees are invited to remain and enjoy cake, coffee and camaraderie.

During the engagement at Iwo Jima 80 years ago, U.S. Marines would see some of the most horrific fighting during World War II.

U.S. Expeditionary Forces would be made up of Marines from the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine Divisions, led by U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Harry Schmidt, along with the Navy's Fifth Fleet, commanded by Rear Adm. Raymond A. Spruance.

In opposition were 21,060 soldiers of Imperial

Japanese Army's 109th Division, commanded by Lieutenant General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, along with four anti-aircraft defense units from the Imperial Navy.

The epic battle would prove to be one of the deadliest conflicts in United States Marine Corps history, with American casualties exceeding those of the Japanese with a ratio of three American casualties for every two Japanese.

By the end of the 36-day battle, there would be approximately 26,000 American casualties, including 6,800 dead. Among those Killed in Action was Gunnery Sgt. John Basilone, Congressional Medal of Honor recipient from the Guadalcanal campaign. For his heroic actions on Iwo Jima, he was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

In addition, 22 Marines

(12 posthumously) and five Navy sailors (two posthumously), four of whom were Hospital Corpsmen attached to Marine infantry units, were awarded the Medal of Honor.

Medals of Honor awarded for the Battle of Iwo Jima accounted for 28% of the 82 awarded to Marines during the entirety of World War II.

The mission of the Marine Corps League is to promote the interest and to preserve traditions of the United States Marine Corps; strengthen the fraternity of Marines and their families; serve Marines and FMF Navy Personnel who wear or who have worn the Eagle, Globe and Anchor; and foster the ideals of Americanism and patriotic volunteerism.

MCL Unicoi Detachment 783 is represented by veterans in Towns and Union counties.

Local Man Wanted...from Page 1A

"We could tell he was very desperate, and we knew who he was, so we broke it off."

The chief deactivated his lights and sirens and continued to follow the fleeing vehicle from a safe distance. Baxter witnessed Orellana-Irvin strike another car on Blue Ridge Highway while the hood of his car still covered his windshield. Once again, no one was injured in the collision.

"He went about a mile and a half outside of the city and pulled into a driveway just prior to Fairview Church Road," Baxter said. "The individual jumped out of the car while it was still rolling and ran."

"Union County Sheriff's Office was quick to arrive with a tracking dog. An initial track

was made with that dog, but we did not locate him."

Baxter said his agency now has multiple warrants for Orellana-Irvin's arrest, "and we did discover that he's wanted" by another agency in Georgia.

"So, we are asking for the public's help in this case," Baxter said Sunday. "We're going to catch him - we know we will. It'd be in his best interests to turn himself in."

"He struck two vehicles fleeing from this traffic stop. It was just a bad situation, a bad time of day with the amount of traffic out after school, and we just felt it was better to break that pursuit off versus continuing to chase him and someone getting injured or killed."

Baxter said authorities currently have no reason to believe that Orellana-Irvin is a present danger to the public while at large: "We have no indication that he was armed or anything - there was no evidence of that."

Anyone who sees Orellana-Irvin or knows his whereabouts is being asked to call the E911 Non-Emergency Number at 706-439-6038, which is available 24/7. All calls will remain "discreet and anonymous."

"We appreciate any help we can get to try to take this individual into custody before he hurts or takes the risk of hurting someone else in another one of these chases," Baxter said.

Bypass Construction...from Page 1A

professionals - to monitor the bypass project for the remainder of the build.

"There's going to be people out there monitoring the construction site, both for construction work and for the general public, because they don't want the general public being in those areas, either," GDOT District 1 Communications Officer Nathan Johnston said.

Archaeologists will also be keeping an eye on another boulder with petroglyphs that has not been disturbed in the construction area, and they will be on the lookout for artifacts that may have been missed during the initial survey.

"It's to cover the known areas and also the potential areas of something else being found, which is common in any construction," Johnston said. "Anytime artifacts or anything like that come into play, construction will be

halted.

"But they don't anticipate anything else being found; it's just a general precaution as it is for any type of construction."

Additionally, there will be heightened security around the petroglyphs, and construction will remain paused within 150 feet of the historical boulder until more meetings can be held to decide how best to proceed with construction at the site of the ancient carvings.

Currently, GDOT has the bypass listed at about 46% of the way to being done, with a September 2026 completion date, though it remained unclear at press time how the significant delay in construction would alter the timeline to finish.

Phase II of the three-phase reconstruction project is well underway between Sampson Road in Towns County and Earl Shelton Road in Union County.

And since GDOT awarded a \$110,976,976 contract to AIS Infrastructure last month, Phase III construction will begin soon between Blairsville city limits and Earl Shelton Road.

Britta Larson-Bowers, a spokesperson for AIS Infrastructure, said that the Notice to Proceed date for the final phase of construction will be set on or shortly after a preconstruction meeting that is expected to take place at the end of February.

"Construction will begin in Stage 1, which is in the city limits of Blairsville," Larson-Bowers said, referring to the starting location of the project near Young Harris Street in front of Home Depot.

Continuing, "There will be staged traffic control for each stage of this project. But due to the sheer number of vehicles within the city limits, there could be some delays."

Night to Shine...from Page 1A



2025 Night to Shine was a joyous occasion filled with music and dancing for the 94 special guests who arrived from five different area counties. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

was their third year attending from Hiawassee. Matheson admitted it brought her joy to see her sister get so excited in the months leading up to Night to Shine.

"It's a great opportunity for people in need with disabilities," Matheson said. "It's great for the community; everyone is willing to help no matter what."

Meanwhile, John Riley of Hayesville was cutting a rug on the dancefloor with his friends and his buddy for the night, Jan Teagle. Teagle, who lives in Union County, is a retired special education

teacher, and she calls the Night to Shine attendees her "tribe."

"He's been the best date I've had in years," said Teagle with a grin. "I can't say enough about this charming young man, and he's the best dancer out there."

According to Riley, his mother taught him all his moves. Aurellia Riley was there to reunite with him at the end of the night, and she was thankful for the chance the Night to Shine gave for her son to go out and have a great time.

"I love it," John said of the event, echoing the sentiment of his peers, all of

whom were crowned kings and queens at the end of the night. To wrap up, everyone was given the chance to return to the dancefloor as their caretakers watched from the walkway above.

"Our Night to Shine," performed by Rascal Flatts, is the official theme of the worldwide phenomenon, and is always played as the kings and queens enjoy one final dance. Balloons, held in a net above the crowd throughout the evening, are released in one final hurrah, carrying the love of an entire community with them.



Dressed to the nines and sporting royal headgear, the Kings and Queens of the Night to Shine event on Friday were treated to the crowd-favorite balloon drop to close out the evening at First United Methodist Church. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Chamber Awards...from Page 1A



Chamber President Steve Rowe was happy to present a Legacy Award to father-son duo W.C. Nelson and Will Nelson of Nelson Tractor Co. in the chamber awards banquet last month. United Community Bank also received a Legacy Award that evening. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

our facility."

As for the awards, Shelley Eyerly was named Ambassador of the Year. Known as a "tireless advocate for the community" since moving to Blairsville in 2017, Eyerly joined AirMedCare Network and began serving as a Chamber Ambassador in 2022.

Luke's Place earned Non-Profit of the Year, also known as the Community United Award due to its sponsorship by United Community Bank. Luke's Place is a safe, supportive environment for local teens and their families to hang out. They offer video game stations, a live music stage, and couches to lounge on, free of charge.

Alexis Noe, CEO and Founder of Luke's Place, named the organization in honor of her brother, an outgoing young man who passed away due to a fentanyl overdose three years ago. Noe said the goal of Luke's Place is to prevent substance abuse by giving local youth a secure space to go after school and on weekends.

The Business of the Year Award went to River City Bank. According to Chamber President Steve Rowe, "They care deeply because they are our friends and neighbors." Hosting youth art shows, shoe drives, hurricane relief donations and more, River City Bank has gone above and beyond being more than just a bank.

Introduced this year was a new category of recognition. The Legacy Award goes to local businesses celebrating 75 years

or more in operation. At the banquet, both 2024 and 2025's businesses were recognized.

Nelson Tractor Company earned 2024's Legacy Award, with United Community Bank achieving the title for 2025. Notably, W.C. Nelson, a Union County native and historical link to both businesses, was present for the moment the two were honored.

Finally, Lamar Paris was revealed as the Chamber's Person of the Year, with Larry Garrett receiving a Certificate of Honor. For his part, Garrett served Union County for more than 30 years, most recently as the County Manager.

Born and raised in Union County, Paris served 24 years in office as Sole Commissioner, though he also has a history coaching Little League football and working with Union County High School's Booster Club.

As commissioner, Paris represented Union County in Atlanta, Washington D.C., and even China, and was recognized in 2024 by the Georgia Chamber of Commerce.

"This is a great county, and a lot of great people are here," said Paris, who was surprised and moved by the award. "I just want to thank everybody."

Business was also conducted that evening, with the recognition of departing and incoming board members.

Jaime Lewis and Matthew Mashburn were thanked for their contributions to the Chamber Board.

Stepping up to the plate will be Missy Mashburn and Michael Guild, although it was Brandon Hargrove who took home the honor of Board Member of the Year.

Special guest State Sen. Steve Gooch said taxpayers could expect a Gold Dome push toward lowering income taxes and emphasizing an increase in public and school safety. He suspected Gov. Brian Kemp would also extend a hand to help Georgia's businesses that are still recovering in the wake of Hurricane Helene, committing \$600 million toward relief efforts.

State Rep. Stan Gunter was also in attendance, and he made a point of thanking the Chamber for its extensive work, first and foremost. Gunter said he "agreed there were some changes that need to take place" when it comes to potential tort reform, and that he would "keep an open mind" during this year's legislative session.

Chamber President Rowe then shared a Chamber update courtesy of Georgia Labor statistics, divulging that, as of 2024, the local Chamber of Commerce had over 800 members. Of those, 615 were Union County businesses, and with approximately 768 businesses in Union County, that means right at 80% of them are part of the Chamber.

"We thank y'all for that," Rowe said to those gathered. "We will do everything we can to keep the economy and community strong."