

# North Georgia News

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2 Sections 22 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## STARs shine brightly in student awards banquet

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Union County High School Class of 2025 STAR Students and Teachers were celebrated in Feb. 13's Evening with the STARs Banquet alongside several other students and one outstanding alumna.

Featuring hard workers with bright futures, the focus of the evening was just as awe-inspiring as any astral phenomenon.

Starting strong by sharing a powerful speech by Matthew McConaughey about shaping one's own destiny, the tone was set for the joint efforts of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce and Union County Schools to honor some of the best and brightest local youth.

Scholarships funded by SouthState Bank and the Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation were presented by Bank Senior Vice President Tony Dyer and EMC General Manager Allan Glidewell, respectively,

totaling an impressive \$3,500 between the two.

Although not present, Rachel Todd – UCHS Class of 2015 and Princeton University Class of 2019 – was named the Alumni Pacesetter, and her comments were played to the crowd in a video.

Todd said her education at Union County Schools had a hand in preparing her for her successful career in the medical field. In particular, she credits Mock Trial with teaching her how to maintain a professional image and better her public speaking skills.

The Community Star Award went to Elijah Ochoa, whose contributions to her community have made "a lasting impact" through involvement in organizations like DECA Club, Spanish Club, Beta Club, United Community Bank Board of Directors, and as a student representative on the College and Career Academy Board. She plans to become an environmental lawyer after graduation.

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L-R: Chamber President Steve Rowe with outstanding students Mikala Souther, Elijah Ochoa, Turner West, Gunnar Ingram, Mia Roberts and Khloe Ledbetter in the Feb. 13 Evening with the STARs. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Paxon Legatt returns home as State Wrestling Champ



L-R: 2025 State Wrestling Champ Paxon Legatt with State Runners-Up Payton Legatt and Eli Flowers.

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

MACON – Union County sophomore Paxon Legatt is the Class AA State Champion, following the footsteps of his brother Payton Legatt (2024 State Champ) and giving UCHS back-to-back State titles in the 157-lb weight class.

Paxon Legatt concludes this sophomore campaign with a 41-1 record with four first-

period pinfall victories at last week's State Championships.

He secured his title via a pin over Columbus High School's Gabriel Jacobus during the finals – a match Paxon Legatt wrapped up in 1 minute and 50 seconds.

Paxon Legatt recorded a semifinal pin vs. Finn Ferrero of Holy Innocents in just 94 seconds. During the quarters, he dropped Coahulla Creek's Shawn Bailey in 67 seconds.

He opened the

tournament with a 59-second pin vs. Dalton Storm of Pike County.

In all, Union County sent three wrestlers to the State finals, with senior Payton Legatt (165 lbs) and sophomore Eli Flowers (113 lbs) each coming in second.

For additional information on Paxon Legatt's State title and results from the rest of Union County's wrestlers at State, see this week's Sports Section.

## Blairsville Mayor Conley to retire at end of February

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

After announcing that he would be retiring soon from office, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley received a round of applause from attendees of the Feb. 11 regular city meeting in recognition for all he has done during his five consecutive terms leading the city.

People wanting to wish Conley well should drop in to see him at the retirement party being held in his honor on Saturday, Feb. 22, between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. inside the Brackett Community Room of United Community Bank at 177 GA-515 W. Refreshments will be provided.

Conley will finish out the month before retiring on Feb. 28 with 26.5 years of service as an elected official, after which Councilman Robert "Buddy" Moore will be sworn in as the new mayor to finish the 10 months left on Conley's term ending Dec. 31 of this year. Moore is the longtime



Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and Mayor Pro Tem Buddy Moore in Conley's last meeting as a city official Feb. 11. Moore will become mayor effective March 1. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

mayor pro tempore on the City Council and the natural successor to fill an unexpired mayoral term.

The outgoing mayor described Moore as "a person whose heart I know is right."

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## Fugitive from traffic stop surrendered at jail Saturday

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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On Saturday, the Blairsville Police Department announced the surrender of Shiloh Jacob Orellana-Irvin, the fugitive who allegedly fled in his vehicle during an attempted traffic stop Feb. 7 and subsequently collided with two members of the motoring public before escaping on foot.

Orellana-Irvin, 30, turned himself into the Union County Jail the afternoon of Feb. 15, and he remained there at press time without bond being set.

He is facing charges of probation violation and fleeing

or attempting to elude a police officer – both felonies – as well as misdemeanor reckless driving, driving without a valid license, no proof of insurance, and removing or affixing a license plate with the intent to conceal or misrepresent.

To recap, the incident in question occurred around 3 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 7, when Orellana-Irvin was reportedly driving through town. 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



Shiloh Jacob Orellana-Irvin Highway. The chief said that Orellana-Irvin at first appeared as if he was going to pull over

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## Summerville man arrested after foot chase from bank

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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A Summerville man surrendered at gunpoint after leading the Union County Sheriff's Office on a foot chase from River City Bank to the Blairsville Post Office last week.

Charles Jason Jackson, 49, entered River City Bank around 3:30 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 10, where he attempted to cash a fraudulent check, according to Sheriff Shawn Dyer.

The bank staff turned Jackson away and alerted E-911 Dispatch, Dyer said, noting that employees there were not personally familiar with Jackson but were on alert regarding similar fraudulent activity at other bank branches in North Georgia.

As it happened, Sheriff Dyer and his Chief Deputy Josh Berry were in the immediate

vicinity and responded in time to see a man matching the dispatched description walking east on the sidewalk of Georgia 515, still in front of the bank.

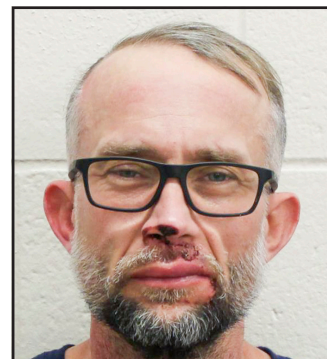
Dyer parked at the bank, quickly verified the clothing description with 911 Dispatch – it was a match – and he got out of his patrol car and asked the man to "come here."

Instead of complying, the man took off running, with Sheriff Dyer and Chief Berry in hot pursuit as deputies as well as officers with the Blairsville Police Department converged on the area.

"I thought he was going to go inside the CVS store, but luckily, he went around the store," Dyer said.

The foot chase continued through the parking lot of Mr. Clean Car Wash, and though Dyer had been gaining on Jackson, he tripped, causing him to lose ground.

Jackson continued



Charles Jason Jackson

running, entering the parking lot of H&R Block to cut around the south side of the building. About that time, one of Dyer's deputies radioed that he was coming into Young Harris Street from GA 515, potentially putting him in position to cut

Dyer and Berry went around the other side of the strip mall hoping to catch Jackson if he went back toward

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# Clint Hobbs returns to Young Harris College

## News Special

Clint Hobbs, former vice president for enrollment management and external relations, returned to Young Harris College on Jan. 1, 2025, as Special Assistant to the President.

In his new role, Hobbs will serve as a member of new President John Wells' senior leadership team, focusing much of his efforts on the College's enrollment program, and advising the President on other matters related to the College.

A 1988 graduate of Young Harris College, Hobbs has enjoyed a career in higher education that has spanned more than 35 years.

He spent 27 years at Young Harris, serving the last 14 years as the vice president for enrollment management and external relations, before leaving to pursue enrollment consulting full-time.

While at Young Harris, Hobbs helped develop and execute the plan that resulted in unprecedented enrollment growth between 2006 and 2014 when enrollment increased from 600 students to over 1,200 students.

After leaving Young Harris, Hobbs served interim stints as the dean of enrollment management at York College of Pennsylvania, and vice president of admissions and financial aid at Benedictine University in Chicago.

In 2017, Hobbs joined Wesleyan College, located in Macon, GA, as their vice president for enrollment management, a position he



Clint Hobbs

held for five years. While at Wesleyan, he was responsible for five of the largest freshman classes to ever enter the College.

As an enrollment consultant, Hobbs has worked with over 25 different colleges and universities across the country, helping them improve their enrollment results.

"I am thrilled to be back home at Young Harris College," Hobbs said. "My heart has always resided here, and I look forward to serving the College once again."

Young Harris College is a private baccalaureate and master's degree-granting institution located in the beautiful mountains of North Georgia.

Founded in 1886 and

historically affiliated with The United Methodist Church, Young Harris College educates, inspires, and empowers students through an education that purposefully integrates the liberal arts and professional studies.

The College has four academic divisions: Fine Arts; Humanities; Mathematics, Science, and Technology; and Professional Studies.

Approximately 1,400 students are enrolled in its residential and Early College programs.

The College is an active member of the NCAA Division II and remains a fierce competitor in the Conference Carolinas. For more information, visit [yhc.edu](http://yhc.edu).

## Foot Chase...from Page 1A

515, all the while the sheriff coordinated via radio with two other deputies who were staking out the Blairsville Post Office, in the direction the chase was headed.

Instead of making his way to 515, Jackson ran around the front of the Post Office, and he tried to hide in one of the big bushes on the east side of the building, Dyer said.

The deputies there quickly spotted him, drew their sidearms and ordered him to come out from hiding, and Jackson complied – finally – and was placed under arrest without further incident.

He was not armed, but deputies did confiscate from him a pipe that tested positive for methamphetamine, Dyer said.

Jackson is facing two felony counts of third-degree forgery, \$1,500 or more; felony possession of drug-related objects; and misdemeanor obstruction of an officer.

Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter was extremely grateful for the efforts of the Sheriff's Office last week, and he said the two

local agencies were in contact with outside law enforcement "on similar acts that we feel like have been committed by this individual."

"A good day for Union County law enforcement," Chief Baxter said of the Feb. 10 teamwork between the agencies.

It was unknown at press time how the out-of-town man came to be in Union County. He has no known ties to the area and apparently walked to the bank property.

Law enforcement has been unable to find a vehicle belonging to him parked anywhere in the county, leading to the belief that he likely had help from someone else.

"These people typically don't park in a bank parking lot," Dyer said. "They'll park somewhere else and walk, that way everybody doesn't get caught. So, we have no idea what he was in; we did look, but we never did find a vehicle."

"(An accomplice was) probably sitting across the road somewhere watching in case we showed up – that's the way it usually goes. And they

probably drove off, mixed in with regular traffic, and we'd have never known it because we were busy chasing him."

Added Dyer, "I think he decided to try to come to a small town and commit a crime and not get caught. He came to the wrong town."

Jackson has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law. He remained in jail at press time with a \$24,000 bond.

"I just want the citizens to know that we're an agency that's quick to respond and take care of issues," Dyer said. "And I feel like the citizens are safe in Union County with the group of guys that we've got working here – they don't take their job lightly."

Dyer said the Sheriff's Office has been particularly busy lately, booking in more than two dozen people over a recent eight-day span. Many of these arrests have been due to drugs, undoubtedly assisted by the third investigator Dyer assigned to the Narcotics Division at the end of last year.

"Our guys are just working hard, and I'm really proud of them getting out here and getting these drugs off the street," Sheriff Dyer said.

## Fugitive In Custody...from Page 1A

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."

The chief said another reason he called off the pursuit 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. "We could tell he was very desperate, and we knew who he was, so we broke it off."

Chief Baxter 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."

And though Orellana-Irvin got away that day, the chief's instinct about having him in custody soon proved correct, as roughly a week later, he turned himself in to

law enforcement.

Orellana-Irvin is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

## Union County Senior Center

This February, show your love and support for seniors in our community!

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♥ "If you can't feed 100 people, then feed just one."  
- Mother Teresa ♥

The heart tree will be displayed at the Senior Center the whole month of February.

For more information, contact the Union County Senior Center at 706-439-6105.

Please make checks payable to Union County Senior Center - Senior Meal Program.

They can be mailed or delivered to Union County Senior Center 95 Senior Center Drive Blairsville, GA 30512





# STARs Banquet...from Page 1A



**Dixie Conger received her STAR Teacher Award from UCHS Principal Josh Davis on Feb. 13.** Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Also unable to attend but nevertheless recognized was Ariel McCarter, who earned the All-Star Panther Award. A truly dedicated athlete, McCarter has taken part in basketball, soccer, track and field, volleyball and cross country. Along with her love for sports, McCarter has a passion for health care and hopes to one day become a pediatrician.

For her commendable work representing her peers as President of the Union County High School Student Council, Mikala Souther was named the recipient of the North Star Award. Souther "ensures that service remains at the heart of leadership," tying in with her deep faith and involvement in extracurricular activities like DECA Club and

UCHS Technology Student Association.

Woody Gap student Mia Roberts received the Shining Star Award. Named a "beacon of support" by School Director of Accountability and Compliance Dr. David Murphy, Roberts is known for her willingness to help and uplift others. She has participated in both sports and school clubs, as well as Student Council.

Khloe Ledbetter earned the Reaching for the Stars Award for her faith, kindness and "infectious sense of humor." Ledbetter holds an outstanding love for her Savior and is eager to maintain a bright disposition with everyone she meets.

This year, Union County High School named two STAR Students in an SAT tie. Both will be heading to the Regional STAR Student Competition in Dahlonega.

Gunnar Ingram admitted that high school had been a long journey resulting in much growth. One of the things that changed the most, he believed, was his mindset.

"Looking back, I realized that success isn't just about intelligence, natural ability

or even hard work," Ingram said. "It's about how you see the world, how you approach problems and how you choose to push forward when things don't go your way."

It was this realization that Ingram said carried him to his accomplishment, growing to accept that there was no real end to challenge, only a willingness to continue facing it and bettering oneself. Ingram has indeed embraced resilience and innovation, managing his own business and hoping to go further down that path.

In the fall, Ingram will be attending the University of Georgia, where he will major in business and minor in nutrition. Eventually, he wants to get involved in fitness, build more businesses and even entertain politics.

One of the people that Ingram credits with helping him rise to the top is Coach Howard McCombs, who was named one of the two STAR Teachers of the evening. In McCombs' eyes, Ingram is "everything you would think and expect out of a STAR Student," with good grades, driven responsibility and a positive attitude.

"(Ingram) is a man of

faith, ambition, and I just respect that, Gunnar, more than you would know. I'm so honored to be here. You're going to do great things - I'm going to be your biggest fan," McCombs said at the end of his own speech.

Turner West also accepted the honor of being named one of Union County's STAR Students. West said his journey began with an interest in the STEM Program, and he found additional opportunity with the DECA Club.

West recalled the highlights of each year of high school and how they shaped him into the person he's become. Through it all, he is grateful for the opportunities Union County High School has given him to grow.

Following graduation, West will attend the University of Georgia to major in biological science. His long-term goal is to graduate dental school, after which he aspires to become an oral and maxillofacial surgeon.

"Choosing a STAR Teacher wasn't exactly easy, as many people have helped shape my journey. But for me, the teacher who not only pushed me to excel but inspired

me to reach new heights is Mrs. Conger," West revealed, introducing his choice for STAR Teacher. "As I continue my journey, I know the lessons I've learned from you - I will keep them and carry them forward in all that I do."

In addition to his family and friends, West thanked Dixie Conger for helping him reach for - and succeed in achieving - stardom. For her part, Conger said teaching West was "exciting," as she appreciated his intellect and desire to learn as a student.

"Turner is really great at just taking it all in; he's like a sponge," Conger said, adding that she admires his integrity to his own values and his kindness. "He is truly a gifted young man, and I am very honored to have known him for the past four years."

Along with the awards that come with being named UCHS's STAR students, Ingram and West also received gifts from River City Bank and United Community Bank, including savings accounts and certificates of recognition.

The North Georgia News congratulates all of the stars honored in the banquet last week.

# Conley to Retire...from Page 1A



**In last week's city meeting, Mayor Conley received a standing ovation for his more than two and a half decades of service at Blairsville City Hall.** Photo by Shawn Jarrard

for the city," and at Conley's request, the council voted to appoint Moore as the next mayor, effective March 1.

"I just know that it's time for me to let somebody else run the city," said Conley, 84, following his last regular meeting as mayor. "I feel like I've made the right decision."

"Buddy has been our mayor pro tem for quite some time now, and he's got a little over 15 years of service as a council member. So, the city will be in good hands."

For his part, Moore said he greatly appreciates the mayor's hard work over the years and that he has learned a lot from him in the time he has served on the council.

"I'm not going to attempt to fill his shoes - I'm just going to be me," Moore said. "Now, y'all know me, I'm completely imperfect, but my heart is into the city, so you don't have to worry about that."

To ensure there is no gap on the council following the transition, Moore asked that Blairsville resident Brock Gordon be appointed to fill the remainder of his council term, starting in March and running through Dec. 31, 2025, and the council voted to do so.

"I teach U.S. History at the High School, I've been there for nine years now," Gordon said when called to speak in the meeting. "(I'm) a lifelong Union County resident, so I just appreciate the opportunity."

Gordon said he and Moore are neighbors and have discussed the goings-on of the city for years. When Moore learned that Conley would be retiring, he asked if Gordon would be interested in filling the rest of his council term, and Gordon said yes.

The new councilman looks forward to learning the ropes this year and working with the rest of the council for the continued betterment of the city.

Blairsville's city charter allows for such appointments "if less than 24 months remain in the unexpired term" of an outgoing mayor or councilman, which applies for both of these appointments, City Attorney Marvin Harkins said.

2025 is a regular election year for the office of mayor and two council seats, the latter currently being held by Moore - soon to be Gordon - and Tony Dyer.

That evening, the council set the qualifying fees for these offices at \$1,080 for Mayor and \$162 per Council seat, which is 3% of the previous year's salary for each office.

Qualifying for the 2025 Municipal General Election

will take place Aug. 18-20 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Qualifying packets can be picked up starting Aug. 1 at City Hall, located at 62 Blue Ridge Street.

The Blairsville election will be held on Nov. 4 from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at City Hall. The candidates who win will be sworn into four-year terms that begin on Jan. 1, 2026, and run through Dec. 31, 2029.

Also in the Feb. 11 meeting, the council completed some unfinished business by conditionally accepting the infrastructure built by Crossing Creek RV Resort to provide city sewer services to the neighborhood.

The conditional acceptance includes the completion of a few minor "punch list" items to wrap up construction on the project, plus the receipt of a maintenance bond that had been issued but was awaiting paperwork delivery to the city.

Having a bond in place ensures that the city is financially covered for the next year should any maintenance issues arise with the recently

built infrastructure, after which maintenance and upkeep will be the city's responsibility in full.

Among new business, the council approved a resolution to amend the city's Master Fee Schedule to add some new community hangar fees at the Blairsville Airport as well as to incorporate the city's alcohol fees as matching the updated alcohol fee schedule of Union County Government.

Council members approved a \$7,500 agreement with the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission to develop a City of Blairsville Downtown Master Plan, as outlined by Downtown Development Authority Director Kristen Bentley in the meeting.

Speaking of the Blairsville DDA, the council voted to approve the appointment of Daniel Davenport to the DDA Board. Davenport has served on the DDA Board in the past.

The Blairsville City Council meets the second Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall.



**Blairsville resident Brock Gordon will be taking his oath of office as a Blairsville City Councilman on Feb. 28.** Photo by Shawn Jarrard

# AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation on Wednesdays



AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Wednesdays from 10 AM - 2 PM beginning February 5 through April 9. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-515, Blairsville, GA.

This service is by appointment only. Please call (706) 963-0905 for reser-

ations. Other AARP Tax Aide locations are: Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10 AM - 2 PM, February 7 - April 11 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge.

Ellijay on Mondays from 10 AM - 2 PM, February 10 - April 14 at the Gilmer Community Library, 268 Calvin Jackson Drive, Ellijay.

Blue Ridge and Ellijay are also by appointment only. Please call (770) 312-2258 for reservations at these locations.