

# North Georgia News

75¢

2 Sections 24 Pages      Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County      www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County      Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909      Wednesday, April 9, 2025

## County to treat kids to Egg Hunt on Saturday

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**North Georgia News**  
**editor@nganews.com**

The Union County Recreation Department has a record 16,000 candy-filled eggs ready to set out for the annual Easter Egg Hunt, this year on Saturday, April 12, starting at 10 a.m. inside the usual Meeks Park hunting grounds.

Families are invited to attend the free community event, with children up to age 12 welcome to participate in the hunt. The staging area is the same as last year at Colwell Fields 1 & 2 in the lower end of the park.

New in 2025 is the inaugural Bunny Run, a fun activity for people of all ages

to join the Easter Bunny in jogging a mile inside the park before the egg hunt begins. The middle ballfields will serve as a halfway point for younger kids who want to join the run on the way back.

“They’ll start around the Colwell Field area and run the mile loop around the park,” County Manager Tony Hughes said, adding that the local Bunny Run was inspired by family trips down to Callaway Gardens in past Easter celebrations.

After the Bunny Run, youngsters in three age categories will race to fill their baskets. Kids ages 0-4 will hunt first at Colwell 1, followed by 5 to 9-year-olds on Colwell 2,

and then 10 to 12-year-olds in an area behind the fields. Older children in attendance may cheer on their younger siblings.

There may be some special “surprise” eggs for kids to find in the bunch, but regardless, there should be enough of the colorful eggs for the baskets of all children, especially since the total number has nearly doubled from last year.

The Rec Department will be handing out Easter baskets to families that need them, and people are asked not to bring 5-gallon buckets, please.

But wait – there’s more. Each participating child will get the opportunity to receive

*See Easter Egg Hunt, Page 3A*



Figuratively speaking, the Sports Center is ready to hatch from all the candy-stuffed eggs the Rec Department will be bringing over to the annual Easter Hunt scheduled for Saturday.

## Valedictorian Roberts looks ahead to promising future

**By Brittany Holbrooks**  
**North Georgia News**  
**Staff Writer**

Although Mia Roberts is Woody Gap School’s only graduating senior this year, her title of Valedictorian for the Class of 2025 was hard-won. In fact, Roberts has accomplished much in her high school career and is on track to keep doing more.

“It kind of makes you feel like you’re on top of the world,” Roberts said of her status, with Principal Wendy Reynolds clarifying that the position comes with requirements; just because Roberts is the only member of her class doesn’t

*See Valedictorian Roberts, Page 3A*



Woody Gap Principal Wendy Reynolds is incredibly proud of her school’s 2025 Valedictorian, Mia Roberts.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## UCHS names Souther, West top grads for Class of 2025

**By Brittany Holbrooks**  
**North Georgia News**  
**Staff Writer**

The Union County High School Class of 2025 Valedictorian and Salutatorian were named on March 19, revealed as Mikala Souther and Turner West, respectively.

And after cultivating busy high school careers, the pair look forward to bright futures after walking across the graduation stage on May 23.

Both agreed that being named the top of their class was an exciting revelation, but not entirely a surprise.

“I would say that it was one of my goals to always

*See UCHS Top Grads, Page 6A*



Congrats to UCHS Class of 2025 Salutatorian Turner West and Valedictorian Mikala Souther, who will have big speeches to make on graduation night in May. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Scammer gets prison time for ripping off elderly woman

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**North Georgia News**  
**editor@nganews.com**

A scammer has learned the hard way that the elderly are provided special protections in the law following a weeklong trial that started with jury selection on Monday, March 31, and ended with a guilty verdict and prison sentence on Friday, April 4, inside the Union County Courthouse.

Milan Chaudhari, 33, of Columbus, has been convicted on four felony counts related to the crime of stealing \$50,000 from a local elderly woman last year – and trying for more.

Deliberating for right at an hour Friday afternoon, it did not take jurors long to find him

guilty of conspiracy to commit elder exploitation, theft by taking, theft by deception, and criminal attempt to commit a theft by taking.

Scammers target the elderly for numerous reasons: age-related decline; less familiarity with technology and the deceptions that have cropped up in an increasingly connected world; a greater likelihood of having amassed resources over a lifetime of work; etc.

These are but a few of the justifications for having legal provisions designed specifically to protect them, and Chaudhari’s sentence speaks to just how seriously the Enotah Judicial Circuit takes



**Milan Chaudhari**  
exploitation of its particularly vulnerable senior population.  
*See Elder Exploitation, Page 2A*

## Criminal pretends to be fraud investigator with bank

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**North Georgia News**  
**editor@nganews.com**

A Blairsville woman recently avoided being scammed out of \$14,000 in savings by applying common sense after being called by a man impersonating a fraud investigator with a local bank.

The scammer, a man with an Indian accent claiming to be “Robert Gonzalez” of United Community Bank, contacted the woman on the evening of Friday, March 25, said Sgt. Bob Calamari, the dedicated financial crimes investigator with the Union County Sheriff’s Office.

It is not known how the scammer learned enough

information about the woman to approach her with a scam specific to her bank, but after identifying himself, the man asked her if she had purchased Delta Air Lines tickets, which, of course, she had not – because this was a scam.

However, she did volunteer that she had received a new debit card, which the man said had been “compromised,” so the bank would be canceling it. He gave her a real bank address to mail the card to, presumably to establish credibility regarding his association with United Community.

Next, the scammer told her the bank would need to “protect” the money in her



account by taking custody of it. “They wanted all the money out of her savings account,” Calamari said. “They told her to go to the bank, and they were going to meet her”  
*See Failed Scam, Page 12A*

## Banff Centre Film Festival celebrates mountain of success

**By Brittany Holbrooks**  
**North Georgia News**  
**Staff Writer**

On March 29, the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club’s annual screening of the Banff Centre Mountain Film Festival World Tour came to Blairsville for the first time, showcasing a love of the outdoors through masterful visuals and evocative storytelling.

Along with GATC, 23 partners set up tables in the lobby of the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center that Saturday to showcase organizations and programs that benefit the natural spaces that surround the community and protect local trails and

*See Banff Centre, Page 6A*



The Banff Film Festival’s inaugural outing in Blairsville was such a success that there are already plans for it to return next year.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## UCSO returns motorcycle stolen by man on state parole

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**North Georgia News**  
**editor@nganews.com**

Last week, a Union County man was just about to put the tag on a brand-new X-PRO 125cc motorcycle he had not even driven yet when he realized it had been stolen from his residence on Jones Creek Road.

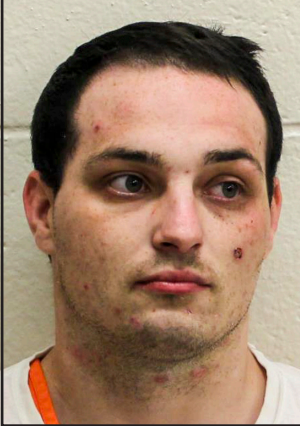
As it turned out, the property owner had actually recorded the theft on a security camera overlooking his porch and front yard, which is where he had parked his Amazon-ordered bike after he finished assembling it.

On the security footage, a man can be seen walking into view from the street and

wheeling the bike out to the road, where he hotwired it and drove away. It was about 2:30 a.m. on Monday, March 31, and the thief had a shirt wrapped around his head to hide his face.

The rightful owner noticed the bike had gone missing later that Monday and called 911 to report it, said Union County Sheriff’s Lt. Doug Brackett, who heads up the Criminal Investigations Division.

After a patrol deputy took an initial report, Lt. Dustin Walker began an investigation, interviewing the bike owner, reviewing the video footage, and canvassing the area to see if the vehicle was either parked in plain sight or being ridden by



**Jacob Lee**  
someone.  
A break in the case occurred two days later after  
*See Motorcycle Theft, Page 12A*



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**Union Co. Fire Dept. Free Smoke Alarm Program**      *See Page 7A*

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# Elder Exploitation...from Page 1A

For his crimes, Chaudhari has received a total sentence of 25 years: 10 years to serve behind bars, and the remainder on probation.

Additionally, he has been ordered to pay back the sum of money he stole from the woman, and he is banished from the Enotah Circuit territory of Union, Towns, Lumpkin and White counties for the entire length of his sentence.

He will get credit for time served in the Union County Jail since his arrest on March 11, 2024, and will be parole-eligible after serving about one-third of his prison sentence.

But there are several challenges ahead for Chaudhari.

For one, District Attorney Jeff Langley said he will oppose parole as long as the \$50,000 Chaudhari stole goes unpaid to the victim, meaning he will be facing an uphill battle for early release and could end up serving his full prison sentence.

And when he does get out of prison, Chaudhari will very likely be subject to deportation back to his home country of India, as it appears he may have come here legally but that his legal status has expired. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has placed a hold on him.

Further, evidence presented at trial last week connected Chaudhari to a similar crime against a Mississippi elder, committed about a week before his locally charged offenses, and he could be facing a brand-new trial in the Magnolia State after completing his prison term here.

As background, Chaudhari played a major role in a scam that convinced an elderly Blairsville woman that she needed to either pay up or face arrest by federal law enforcement for fake drug crimes.

Chaudhari acted as the driver and bagman in the con, working with at least one other individual – though others are suspected – in what authorities believe was a scam ring either based in India or run by a group of Indians based on the shared language of those involved, Langley said.

The scam escalated quickly after the woman responded to a March 7, 2024, email detailing a fake online banking transaction, which spiraled into Chaudhari visiting her home on March 8 pretending to be a federal courier picking up \$50,000 to clear what turned out to be bogus arrest warrants.

They got the money, but these criminals also got greedy, setting up the perfect opportunity to catch at least one of them in the act, Langley said.

After withdrawing the money from the bank and handing it over to the “courier,” she contacted the Union County Sheriff’s Office, which confirmed her too-late suspicions; UCSO Financial Crimes Investigator Sgt. Bob Calamari told her she had indeed been scammed out of her cash.

But the Sheriff’s Office was ready when the scammers called the woman back four days after their initial contact to demand an additional \$50,000, and so was the victim, who expertly played her part in an intricate operation to catch one of the scammers and bring him to justice.

Monday, March 11, was a day of patience and intense surveillance. The Sheriff’s Office pooled all its investigatory resources, stationing 13 deputies from multiple divisions near the woman’s home in an hours-long wait for the bagman’s return.

Local law enforcement’s task was to avoid detection by the scammers to prevent the criminals from getting spooked and disappearing forever. This included lying low but close enough to apprehend the suspect while deploying countersurveillance to ensure they were not being watched.

The woman’s task was similar and equally grueling, requiring her to spend upwards of nine hours on the phone with a scammer who identified himself only as “Mark.” She,

## Sons of Confederate Veterans Meeting

David W. Payne Camp 1633, Sons of Confederate Veterans meets the second Thursday of every month at 7 PM, at the Davenport Veterans Building, across the 4-lane from Longhorn Steakhouse in Blairsville. The public is welcome to attend.

too, needed to stay cool and avoid suspicion, with assistance from Sgt. Calamari passing handwritten notes.

Ultimately, the sting operation went off without a hitch. As soon as the bagman arrived – soon after determined to have been Chaudhari – deputies used vehicles to box his BMW SUV into her driveway, and he was taken into custody without incident.

Evidence presented at trial included a distinctive bracelet Chaudhari was wearing at the time of his arrest, which matched videos found on his phone depicting a man wearing that same bracelet counting stolen money, Langley said.

And with help from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, Langley and his team – Assistant District Attorney Anna Guardino served as lead prosecutor – were able to fly in witnesses from Mississippi to link him to a similar crime committed there about a week before, on Feb. 29, 2024.

The jury was convinced that, based on the physical and digital evidence, the prosecution had proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Chaudhari was the driver who showed up March 8 at the local woman’s house and took her \$50,000.

What did not convince the jury was Chaudhari’s defense. Initially, Chaudhari told investigators he had been paid \$500 to simply pick up a package, of which he claimed not to know the contents nor the details regarding its arrangement, Langley said.

But he changed his story the week of the trial, Langley said, newly chronicling how he had been acting under duress on the instructions of a criminal gang that was threatening the safety of his mother back in India.

Guardino highlighted for the jury that the evidence – including multiple cash pickups in elder scams committed in two states – showed a pattern of criminality that was inconsistent with a man hired to run errands he did not know were connected to illegal activity, and the jury agreed.

On his familial threat claim, Guardino informed the jury that Chaudhari did not once warn his family in India or any law enforcement about a potential threat, and she pointed out that this new defense did not match his initial statements, so this aspect of his testimony fell apart for jurors as well.

In a victim impact statement provided during sentencing, one of the woman’s family members offered moving testimony that, in the end, the stolen money was not the important factor in this crime.

“A family member testified very eloquently that with these types of crimes, it’s not only a financial loss,” Langley said. “These kinds of crimes embarrass the victims, hurt the victims, cause a loss of confidence, and sometimes really a loss of quality of life in their life when they’ve been victimized by these kinds of financial frauds committed on elderly persons.”

Langley said the sentence Chaudhari received is a hard-won victory and sends a warning to scammers everywhere that they are, in fact, subject to prosecution and prison time. He also said the guilty verdict shows how invested the legal system and community are in protecting seniors.

“Elderly citizens are particularly vulnerable to these types of crimes,” Langley said, noting the above average number of retirees living in the mountains. “Many of our elderly citizens have substantial financial means, but they are counting on those savings lasting them the rest of their lives, and, therefore, we’ve got to work to protect them.”

He commended the tremendous efforts of his Assistant District Attorney Guardino in successfully leading the case at trial, and he thanked his Inv. Kyle Laramore, who assisted in tracking down and interviewing the additional witnesses from out of state.

Langley also shared appreciation for the cooperation of the victim and her family; the GBI; and the Sheriff’s Office, which flawlessly executed a sting that resulted in a scammer’s arrest and conviction – a notoriously difficult task given the nature of scams typically being conducted from abroad.

“This is a good case in which to warn the public, especially our older citizens, to be careful with scams,” Langley said. “That text from ‘Peach Pass’ is not real. The IRS is not texting you on your

phone. And you will never be contacted by law enforcement or a prosecution and told to send money because you missed a court date.

“Those are all scams, and we see those scams rampant in this community,”

Sheriff Shawn Dyer said he would like to have seen Chaudhari get “a hundred years for defrauding an elderly person out of money,” but he felt that the outcome was still a major success in the county, “No. 1, for catching this guy, and No. 2, for him getting prosecuted.”

“I haven’t heard of another county around us catching somebody doing this other than us,” Dyer said. “Now, it may have happened, but I haven’t heard of it ... It’s pretty rare to be able to catch these people.”

“Our guys spent 12 or 13 hours (staking out the house and sitting with the victim) to make this catch happen – that’s a lot of resources. A lot of places don’t have the ability to put that many resources into catching somebody, and I’m glad we do.

“This says we have a well-capable Sheriff’s Office that can handle about anything that comes at us. We’ve got competent people that we trust to do what it takes to get the job done. They’re just a bunch of dedicated individuals that really care about the people in Union County.

“They know what they’re doing, and they will put in the time to do it, even if that takes away from their families and personal lives. Most of these guys are only supposed to work eight hours a day, and yet they’re out 15, 16, 18 hours a day to solve crime, and they don’t gripe about that.”

UCSO Capt. Daren “Bear” Osborn led the Criminal Investigations Division when Chaudhari was arrested, and he credits Sheriff Dyer’s vision in 2023 – then the third-in-command at UCSO – of installing a full-time investigator to address the growing national and local fraud and scam trend.

On top of dedicated financial crime investigations by Sgt. Calamari, UCSO has been utilizing local media and hosting public awareness classes to inform the community about the types of scams in hopes that people can avoid being defrauded of their hard-earned money.

The sheriff is proud of these educational efforts, which seem to be getting results, and he is proud of the work of all involved in putting Chaudhari behind bars.

“Our investigators, the District Attorney’s Office, the GBI – everybody did a great job, because the case was successful,” Sheriff Dyer said. “There were no flaws on prosecuting this guy – they did everything they needed to prove he did what he did. It just worked out good in the end.

“If the lady had her money back today, I would be even happier, but that probably won’t happen for years, and that’s a shame. She has suffered a lot of mental stress over this, and that’s the sad part. It’s just a very heinous crime.”

Others are still out there, including the over-the-phone scammer “Mark,” who has not been identified by law enforcement.

Chaudhari never admitted to being able to identify any co-conspirators, but Langley said the evidence appeared to show a widespread operation wherein drivers could opt-in to an a la carte-style scamming scheme, choosing which pickups they wanted to make from a list of options.

Langley invites Chaudhari to increase his chances of parole “by providing us better information than what he testified to this week,” and the still-open case could become active again if additional evidence comes to light.

Residents who are contacted online or over the phone by individuals asking for money either in person or via money orders, wire transfers, prepaid cards, etc., are encouraged to call the Sheriff’s Office at 706-439-6066 to speak with an investigator before turning over any money.



# Easter Egg Hunt...from Page 1A

a raffle ticket for a toy prize, and the Rec Department will once again be handing out free popcorn for families to enjoy.

Of course, kids will have plenty of chances to visit with the Easter Bunny, both for photos and high-fives, and the county is hopeful for a tremendous turnout, as the event has been scheduled the weekend before Easter to accommodate families that travel for the holy holiday.

“We absolutely love the kids of the county, and we appreciate the parents for being involved and bringing them, which gives us an opportunity to spend time with them,” County Manager Hughes said.

A big reason behind the record number of eggs this year is because the Rec

Department has experienced a record number of children enrolled in spring sports programs, and Hughes and recreation staff want to keep the egg rolling, so to speak, on youth involvement.

“We love doing things for the kids,” Hughes said. “We’re looking at doing other events in the near future to give kids more opportunities to do different things. The children are our future, and we want them involved with county activities.”

Logistically, the egg hunt is a massive undertaking. Instead of the usual pre-filled option, this year, the Rec Department has been individually stuffing donated plastic eggs with candy. And that’s on top of having to head out early the day of the hunt to

transport and scatter them all.

Assisting the Rec Department employees with filling the eggs have been Union County High School Access students, who, thanks to the school’s Community Based Instruction Program, are able to practice life skills while also serving their community.

“Those kids are so much fun,” Assistant Rec Director Susan Stalcup said of the students. “They come in once a month and work for like an hour and a half on different tasks for us, and they are wonderful.”

For all involved each year, the egg-hunt effort is certainly a labor of love, which Stalcup said fits perfectly with the guiding ethos of the Rec Department in providing a wide array of opportunities

for the community’s children.

“Everyone thinks the Rec Department is just sports, but we have lots of community events,” Stalcup said. “Whether it’s the Daddy Daughter Dance, the Easter Egg Hunt – we’re not just athletics.

“We do all sorts of different things in the community. (For example), I have a high school group coming over here in a couple weeks that is a hospitality group. We’re always trying to interact with and do things in the community.

“Recreation is the lifeblood of your community, so anything you’re doing in the community is important – for all ages, not just the kids. People automatically think we’re just athletics, but we’re so much more than athletics.”

In the event of inclement weather this Saturday, the egg hunt will be rescheduled to Saturday, April 19 – the day before Easter Sunday.

# Valedictorian Roberts...from Page 1A

mean she automatically earned valedictorian.

To qualify, a student must: be enrolled at Woody Gap at least four semesters; have completed eight high school semesters; have the top core GPA out of Honor Graduates; or hold the top Core Academic GPA with no failed courses and having never received a mark of no credit.

Roberts accomplished this and more. Thriving through online learning, she has been able to speed through some of her courses within a semester when, normally, such classes would take a year to get through.

Not only that, but Roberts dual-enrolled at Young Harris College and has completed credits for English and Spanish, giving her a head start on her postsecondary education. Right now, she’s working on finishing a class in psychology, which has piqued her interest.

“I’ve been through a lot, and I see other kids going through it every day,” Roberts said. “It kind of just made me feel like I should help them, like I just want to make a difference in their lives.”

Once she graduates, Roberts hopes to attend the

University of North Georgia so she can “stay close to home.” While she’s not decided whether to commute or stay on-campus, she does want to continue to test the waters by looking into a psychology degree.

In the meantime, she’s also got community service experience under her belt, having volunteered at the Indian Summer Festival and helped deliver meals to local seniors. Admittedly, sports are not really Roberts’ forte, but she decided to give them a try earlier in her high school career with basketball and track.

“Yes, it’s great physical activity, but I prefer weight training and working out for my exercise,” said Roberts.

For her part, Principal Reynolds has enjoyed watching Roberts grow into herself over the years. When Reynolds first came to Woody Gap, Roberts was a freshman, and before Reynolds was her principal, she taught Roberts in a math class.

“She’s been a delight,” Reynolds said. “To start with, she was very quiet. I had to kind of pry her a little bit, but once she realized I was there to help her, she would ask questions.”

Described as possessing a “great work ethic,” Roberts has also made a name for herself by being a “go-to student” in case something needs doing around campus, whether that means changing signs or helping with younger students.

Reynolds stated with a smile, “She’s won a special place in my heart.”

As far as her inspirations go, Roberts credits her mother as one of her greatest cheerleaders and the source of her strength. It was through watching her overcome a liver transplant and other hardships that she learned how to handle whatever life threw her way, too.

One message Roberts has for the students behind her is to always keep a positive outlook and stay motivated. It’s something she herself has struggled with in the past, but she recognizes that it’s possible to overcome doubt and come out stronger for it.

“I know this is so cliché, but it is very true that you can do anything you set your mind to,” Roberts said. “If someone says you can’t do it, you don’t listen to that. If you want to do it, you do it, and I think that’s so overlooked.”

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# Banff Centre...from Page 1A

hiking opportunities.

When the doors opened at 1 p.m., guests had an hour to check out what exhibitors had to offer. Using displays and giving out items like brochures and stickers, they painted a picture of what the Southern

Appalachian Trail is like and how the communities dotted along its outskirts live.

The action started at 2 p.m. Film festivals typically play a series of short pictures rather than longer movies, and this year's lineup included



GATC President Lynne Beeson offered remarks during the Banff Film Festival last month. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

everything from five-minute shorts to a 44-minute documentary.

"Anytime – Switzerland" takes viewers on a breathtaking journey along the Lenzerheide Bike Park, where riders defy gravity in jaw-dropping stunts that carry them over ramp and hill without issue.

"Jamrock: The Birth of Jamaican Rock Climbing" follows the journey of 12-time national climbing champion Kai Lightner as he helps to establish rock climbing as a professional sport in the Caribbean island nation.

"Of a Lifetime" chronicles the De Le Rue family's journey to Antarctica, where young Mila spends her 18th birthday following in the daring footsteps of her snowboarding father and uncle. While facing incredible fear, she learns just what it means to overcome challenge and how to make her own place in the world.

"The Smoke That Thunders," at just five minutes long, was one of the shortest stories told at the festival, but it offered awe-inspiring shots of the underside of Victoria Falls as professional extreme whitewater kayaker Ben Marr braved the elements paddling upstream.

"The Last Observers" is a heartwarming, bittersweet peek into the lives of the last two manual weather recorders in Sweden: Lennart Karlsson and Karin Persson. The couple met through a shared passion for nature – particularly birds – and also managed the Falsterbo Bird Observatory.

"Reel Rock: Jirishanca" tells the story of how alpinists Josh Wharton and Vince Anderson scaled a 19,993-foot Andean mountain in the heart of Peru. Both men have a history pursuing extreme sports, but now, with families to live for, they must temper the risk of their adventure with the deep love for the lives they have built.

"Sliding," the shortest film of the collection with a four-minute runtime, follows one woman's fun snow day out as she slips through the Swiss Alps headfirst on a sled through sunny, ice-packed tunnels a world away from the bustle of the surrounding town.

Each film was well-received, with applause – and some cheering – following in the wake of every credit roll. About 350 people attended the festival, traveling from near and far to enjoy the experience. There are even plans for the festival to return next year, with the Fine Arts Center booked for March 28, 2026.

Craig Keyworth and Pat Decker are no strangers to film festivals, especially those by the Banff Centre – which they once attended in its namesake Canadian town – and they carry a passion for nature. Though they live in Atlanta, the couple owns a house in Blairsville, and they came up specifically to attend the film festival.

"I liked the films, but I also like that, ahead of time, you get to learn more about some of the things that are happening (locally)," said Decker, describing the exhibits as a chance to hear about "taking adventures here." "There were some great different displays for areas around town that we knew a little bit about but not a lot about."

Silu Tu felt a personal connection with the films presented at the festival that day. The one thing she hadn't done in her career of adventuring to that point, however, was visit a film festival. Admittedly, Tu didn't have high hopes going in because she thought the films would be low-budget indie productions, but she found her own view of the world strengthened.

As a rock climber that recently visited Jamaica and a volunteer at GATC, Tu was invested in the stories told and the organization that helped bring them to the public eye. She was inspired, in fact, to visit Peru thanks to "Reel Rock: Jirishanca."

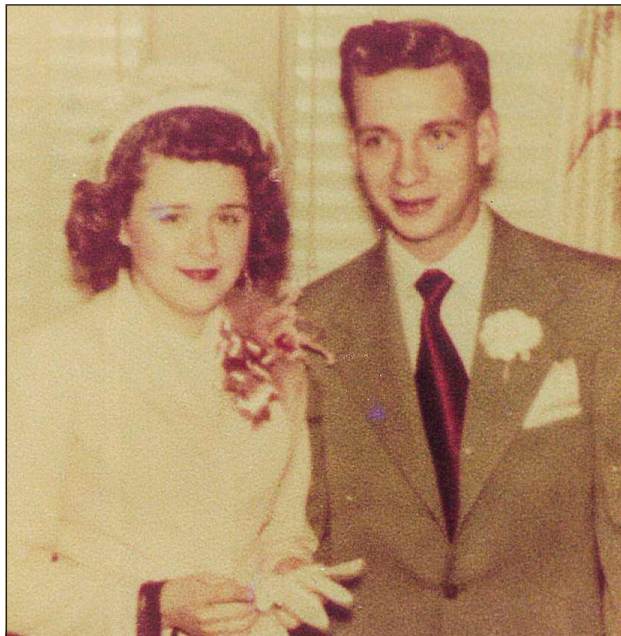
"I really liked (the festival). Really, it changed my idea. I remember the last time a movie spoke to my heart, it was 10 years ago," Tu said, explaining that Karin Persson's view of supporting all life on Earth in "The Last Observers" really resonated with her.

"A lot of people talk about, 'Oh, you're on your own, you have to be an individual, you are your own person,'" Tu said. "But we all know that's not true. You have to rely on society or the community or your neighbors or whoever is around you."

Ticket purchases to the festival benefited the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club with its efforts to promote appreciation, management, maintenance and protection of the Appalachian Trail and other natural outdoor places, according to GATC President Lynne Beeson said.

For more information on the GATC, visit <https://georgia-atclub.org/>. And for more info on the film festival and other programs, check out <https://www.banffcentre.ca/>.

## Carl and Gloria Johnson Celebrate 75th Anniversary



Gloria Copley and Carl W. (C.W.) Johnson, April 6, 1950



Carl and Gloria Johnson, 2025

Teenagers married on April 6, 1950 celebrated 75 years together on April 6, 2025. The family has grown, it includes their 3 children (1 who is deceased), 7 grandchildren (1 who is deceased). The family also includes a set of mirror girl twins (grandchildren) and 12??? great grandchildren, which also includes a set of twin girls.

God is good all the time!!!  
2025 Photo by John Killebrew,  
Submitted by Mrs. C.W. Johnson



# UCHS Top Grads

..from Page 1A

be one of the top students," admitted Souther. "I don't know if it was to be exactly Valedictorian, but I always wanted to be up there."

For his part, West said the position of Salutatorian came naturally. Good grades followed in the wake of his love of learning; West was also named one of Union County's STAR Students of 2025, and he chose Dixie Conger as his STAR Teacher.

With a bright personality and healthy dose of determination, West regularly strives for greatness. Following an internship to get his foot in the door, he hopes to pursue a career in oral and maxillofacial surgery, putting him a path that will take him first to the University of Georgia to major in biology.

Souther, meanwhile, has her sights set on becoming a patent attorney, having always held an interest in law. She's already committed to attending the Georgia Institute of Technology this fall, and following her undergraduate program, she'll move on to law school.

But for all their determination, both Val and Sal want to acknowledge that they couldn't have reached the top without support.

Of course, Souther and West thank their families – particularly their parents – but they also credit school staff like Dr. Melissa Bridges and Alecia Frizzell for their "constant support."

Though their big speeches aren't ready yet, Souther said she has an idea of what she wants to outline in hers, to be unveiled as a surprise on graduation night. Similarly, West will continue to work on his until the time is right.

They do, however, have some ready advice for any younger students who are considering following in their academic footsteps.

"I think if you engross yourself in your studies and pay attention in class, you will inevitably rise to the top," West believes, with Souther suggesting, "Keep being you, keep studying hard. If this is one of the things that you want, go for it."

Among their own classmates, Souther and West have come to know them well not just by growing up beside them, but by participating with them in extracurriculars like DECA Club and the Technology Student Association.

In describing his graduating class, West views them as an incredibly diverse and unique group of individuals, and just as she had a message for younger students, Souther would also like to address her peers.

"Failure is a key point to success," Souther said, disclosing that she learned to accept this viewpoint through her journey with college admissions and building up her own future. "Life will go on."

But despite any failures, both agree that their time at Union County High has shaped them for the better. Souther and West look back fondly on their four years as UCHS Panthers and are eternally grateful for the good memories they've gathered.

"There's so many great experiences I will never forget," said West, who moved here earlier in life and views it as a defining feature of his journey to date. "I'm just super fortunate to have Union County High School and the experiences that they have allowed me to have and enjoy."

# Lovely Daffodil Garden in full bloom behind Blairsville City Hall



Officially part of the Worldwide Daffodil Project, the beautiful Children's Daffodil Garden planted in memory of the child victims of the Holocaust is in full bloom in the park behind Blairsville City Hall.



# Failed Scam...from Page 1A

Saturday at 11:30 a.m., here in town, to get the money.”

By that point, the woman had gotten wise to the scam. Instead of simply complying with the instructions, she went to the bank the next day and told employees everything that transpired the night before.

With her still at the bank, United Community Relationship Manager Jimmy Nichols of the main Blairsville branch called Union County Sheriff Shawn Dyer, who sent

Sgt. Calamari to meet the woman there.

Calamari stayed with the woman – who, as a senior citizen, was likely considered a prime target by the would-be scammers – while she waited for a call from “Gonzalez” for additional instructions.

The pair were sitting with a bank representative at the Customer Service desk when the scammer called back, insisting that she send all her savings to him – only, the man kept changing his instructions,

demonstrating in real time what could perhaps best be described as ineptitude.

“Initially, the plan was they were going to come to get (a cashier’s check he asked her to obtain),” Calamari said. “I called 911 Dispatch on the telephone to say I needed some patrol units positioned in (nearby parking lots) in case somebody showed up.”

No one ever arrived to get the money. Instead, “Gonzalez” asked the woman to give the cashier’s check to a teller inside

the bank – a teller whom the scammer said would soon be arrested for being the source of the airline ticket fraud.

He told the woman he was watching her every move, claiming to be able to see her via security cameras in the building. Of course, the scammer did not actually have access to the camera system, which Calamari had the woman test.

“I turned around and saw four tellers,” Calamari said. “So, I wrote down on a piece of paper (for the woman to read and ask), ‘What’s the teller’s name?’” Then he changed the scenario again.”

After that, the scammer acted as though he wanted the money deposited into another account, and though the routing number was associated with United Community, the account number he provided was quickly determined to be fake.

So far, the scammer had riddled off multiple scenarios and pieces of information that turned out to be “bogus,” never detailing exactly how the money would make its way into his hands, though Calamari suspects the man would have eventually settled on a wire transfer.

“I think he was trying to devise another way to get the money sent to where he was,” Calamari said. “After about an hour and a half of listening to his statements and stories, I took the victim’s phone and went into one of the private offices.

“I said, ‘Hey, Robert.’ And he said, ‘Who’s this?’ I identified myself as an investigator with the Sheriff’s Office, and I told him, ‘You’re not really good at what you do, so you need to go get a real job and quit scamming people out of their money in this community.’”

Sgt. Calamari informed the man that he had his name and phone number, and that he would be looking for him to arrest.

“And then he said, ‘Come find me,’” Calamari said. “At that point, I gave him a couple of choice words and disconnected the call. He has not contacted her since, and I had her block the number off her phone.”

The phone number came back as having originated outside the U.S., and it is unlikely that the attempted theft will result in arrest. But given

this reality, the incident ended as well as could be expected, since the woman did not end up getting scammed out of \$14,000.

Calamari provided her with literature he uses as part of his public outreach initiative to inform people how to protect themselves financially, and he invited her to his next public scam awareness class.

People are advised to follow this woman’s example; when she perceived something was off, she went directly to an official source to ask questions and express her concerns. Validating info in this way before turning over any money is a strong defense against scammers, Calamari said.

“She was pretty savvy – she didn’t fall for it,” Calamari said, commending her actions in letting the bank know about her predicament.

But not all people are as fortunate. Since November, Union Countians have been scammed out of about \$245,000. Importantly, the

average amount scammed in any given month has dropped since Calamari first began working financial crimes in Fall 2023.

From November ‘23 to November ‘24, scammers made off with more than \$900,000 across multiple cases that wound up in the Sheriff’s Office. That is a significantly higher scam average than in recent months.

And the average amount of money returned or prevented from being taken in scams has gone up, too; in the last four months alone, the Sheriff’s Office has recovered or stopped about \$112,000 in stolen money, compared with roughly \$270,000 over the immediately preceding year.

Taken together, these figures paint a clear picture that the public education efforts by UCSO are paying off – more people are becoming wise to scams. And the Sheriff’s Office plans to continue those efforts, so be on the lookout for upcoming scam class dates and other information.

# Motorcycle Theft...from Page 1A



Jacob Lee has been charged with stealing this motorcycle, which the owner ordered off Amazon and assembled just before the theft.

the UCSO Narcotics Division initiated a drug investigation into Jacob Lee, a resident living nearby on Rex Payne Road.

Lee, 26, was paroled from state prison this January after serving time for a 2019 burglary conviction, and he also has a history of illegal drug use in the county, according to the Sheriff’s Office.

When Narcotics Lt. Tyler Miller, Staff Sgt. Jay McCarter and Sgt. Josh Bergen met with Lee at his residence on Wednesday, April 2, they informed him they would be conducting a search, at which point he fled, kicking off a brief foot chase that ended with Lee’s apprehension.

“Once we got him into custody, we asked him why he ran, and he told us that there was a motorcycle there that he had stolen,” added Miller.

Indeed, deputies found the motorcycle in a shed on the property during the search, and apart from a missing mirror and some minor damage from being hotwired, the bike was returned in working order the same day it was recovered, according to the Sheriff’s Office.

Investigators did not discover any drugs, but the stolen bike resulted in three misdemeanors for Lee: theft by taking, in this case an item valued less than \$1,500; criminal trespass for going onto another person’s property for an unlawful purpose; and obstruction of law enforcement for running from the deputies.

In an interview with investigators, Lee admitted to having been walking down Jones Creek early that Monday when he saw the bike and decided to take it, Lt. Walker

said. He even described aspects of the theft that matched the security footage, like the shirt wrapped around his head.

And investigators found articles of clothing inside Lee’s residence that matched what the suspect wore in the video as well, Lt. Brackett said.

“We take theft seriously here, and we’re going to do everything we can to solve them and put the people in jail that’s doing them,” Brackett said.

At press time, Lee was still in custody at the Union County Jail with a \$6,000 bond. All individuals are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

As for the bike’s owner, he was thrilled to have gotten his new purchase back, having given up on ever seeing it again, according to Walker.