

North Georgia News

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Class of 2020 Senior Honors and Awards

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Four years of hard work paid off for Union County High's Josie Bradley when she was named Valedictorian for the Class of 2020 during last week's Honors and Award Ceremony, which was streamed on YouTube due to school closures and COVID-19 restrictions.

Also recognized in the Thursday, May 14, event was future U.S. Air Force Academy Cadet Evelyn McBride, who is serving as the Class of 2020 Salutatorian. The valedictorian and salutatorian are the Honor Graduates with the two highest numeric HOPE grade point averages.

On May 15, the North

Georgia News caught up with Bradley and McBride at the Fine Arts Center, where the duo filmed their graduation speeches in preparation for Friday night's drive-in commencement exercises at the high school.

For Bradley, the news came as a shock, although she admitted that becoming valedictorian was on her bucket list throughout high school. "I was really surprised when (Principal C.T. Hussion) gave me the medal," she said. "I knew that I was in the running because it's something I've been trying to achieve these last four years, but I was definitely surprised when he handed me the medal."

Like Bradley, McBride was also aware that she was

until Principal Hussion broke the news last week.

"At the beginning of the year, (UCHS teacher) Alecia Frizzell told me that I have the potential to be salutatorian," McBride said. "And I, not really believing it, was like, 'OK, cool.' Then, when Mr. Hussion told me (Thursday), I just had the biggest smile on my face, and all I could do was gasp."

"It gave me a little extra motivation for sure when (Mrs. Frizzell) said I could become the salutatorian, but I've always been a very motivated person anyway, so I don't think it made a big difference."

Both Bradley and McBride accomplished earlier last week while filming parts of the graduation ceremony that will be broadcast for seniors May 22, which gave them until last Friday to prepare their speeches for recording.

"I did not want to give a speech," McBride joked. "But I've always enjoyed motivational speeches, and I also knew that I couldn't give a funny speech to save my life, so going the motivational route was my only option."

"And when you consider what we've been through, I think a motivational speech was the right choice."

For Bradley, the coronar turmoil in recent weeks also had an impact on her message, and the gravity of addressing classmates she hasn't seen for two months - and may not see again - weighed heavily upon her choice of words.

"It was definitely a lot more emotional with everything that's been going on, because we didn't get to finish (our senior year)," she said. "I think that after everything we've been through, it made me change my perspective, because we are definitely faced with more challenges now that the world has been affected by this pandemic."

In addition to the multitude of friends at UCHS, Bradley credited all of the teachers and school staff who helped mold her into the person she is today, noting that they were also on her mind when she was writing the valedictory address.

"There were so many teachers that made an impact on my life and taught me so many

See Senior Awards, Page 2A



Members of the Union County High Class of 2020 took part in special graduation ceremony filming at the Fine Arts Center last week. Pictured here: Ashley Palmateer. Photo by Todd Forrest



Josie Bradley
UCHS Valedictorian

Evelyn McBride
UCHS Salutatorian

See Your Special Graduation Section Inside
This Week's North Georgia News

Woody Gap to send six graduates into the world Saturday

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

SUCHES - Levi Etheridge, Eric LeCroy, Ernest Ledford, Duncan Lee, Ernest Waldroup and Matthew Woody will accept their diplomas during Saturday's graduation exercises when Woody Gap School bids farewell to its Class of 2020.

Last week, the North Georgia News spoke with Waldroup and Lee, the Class of 2020 Valedictorian and Salutatorian, to discuss saying goodbye to classmates, post-high school plans and more.

When asked about the

moment they learned they would represent their class as valedictorian and salutatorian, Waldroup and Lee were both extremely proud and said they hadn't put much thought into it.

"Earning the title of valedictorian is an honor, but I wasn't after it, and I don't think anyone else in my class was either," Waldroup said, who also served as Woody Gap's 2020 STAR Student. "When I found out I got the title, I wasn't really surprised or excited about it. It was more like a nice warm feeling of approval, proof that I had effectively done my job in the classroom."

"I've never striven to succeed for someone or something else's sake. It's always been to prove to myself that I can do anything when I need to, academically or otherwise. Long story short, it's unexpected praise that I'm proud to have earned."

As for Lee, who plans to become a paramedic and eventually a nurse practitioner, he was aware that finishing among the Top Two was a real possibility in a class with a half-dozen graduates. However, he also admits that any one of the six seniors was capable of accomplishing the feat.

"I was pleasantly

surprised," he said. "Having such a small class, I figured I was in the running, but they are all excellent students, so I wasn't sure if I would get it."

Meanwhile, finishing high school during a pandemic has forced Waldroup to reevaluate his future. But something that hasn't changed is his fondness for Woody Gap and the Suches community.

"One thing I'll miss is being able to see all of my school friends, from teachers to bus drivers, in one place, regularly," he said. "I'm definitely going to keep in touch with my friends."

See Woody Gap, Page 2A



Ernest Waldroup
Woody Gap Valedictorian



Duncan Lee
Woody Gap Salutatorian

Students stream Baccalaureate Service to commemorate year-end

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County High School streamed its student-run Class of 2020 Baccalaureate Service on Sunday, May 17.

The service - a pre-recorded video worked on by students and other participants - was uploaded to YouTube and made available at 7 p.m. Sunday via Facebook at the school website.

Several students participated in the event at Liberty Baptist Church, with music performed by 2020 Valedictorian Josie Bradley and a candle-lighting conducted



Senior Sarah Sanchez lighting the top candle during the UCHS Class of 2020 Baccalaureate Service. Photo/Screenshot

Early voting started Monday, runs weekdays through June 5

By Shawn Jarrard
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The three weeks of early in-person voting for the June 9 General Primary, Presidential Preference Primary and Nonpartisan General Elections began Monday, and people are still being encouraged to wear masks to vote.

Of course, voters don't have to wear a mask to cast a ballot, but officials across the state are advising people to don facial coverings to prevent coronavirus transmission in what has been a whirlwind of an election season.

To recap, in 2020, the state has conducted a last-



minute rollout of brand-new voting equipment, canceled the March 24 Presidential Preference Primary due to coronavirus, and postponed the May 19 General Primary to June 9 for the same reason.

Moreover, the Secretary of State's Office has initiated

a statewide absentee ballot drive to get as many people as possible to vote by mail to further slow the spread of COVID-19.

The absentee initiative has experienced a number of misfires to boot, including many undeliverable ballots and the inclusion of incorrect mailing instructions in ballots, though the state supposedly fixed those instructions after initial ballot mailings.

Voters, poll workers and election officials across the state have expressed concerns about in-person voting during the pandemic, so the increase

See Early Voting, Page 2A

MUSA takes heat as some parents ask for soccer refunds

By Todd Forrest
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When the COVID-19 pandemic forced a statewide suspension of spring youth soccer, some parents were shocked to learn they would not be receiving a refund of registration fees from the local Mountain United Soccer Association, despite their children not participating in any games.

The timeline began in March, when the novel coronavirus forced the Mountain United Soccer Association, or

MUSA, to postpone the spring season based on directives from state soccer officials, eventually resulting in a complete cancellation by the end of April with no refunds.

According to the official MUSA website at mountainsoccer.org, MUSA was formed in 1988 as a 501(c)(3) to provide an opportunity for all kids ages 4-19 to learn soccer skills, develop sportsmanship and character.

MUSA enjoys youth participation in many communities, including Union, Towns and Fannin counties

in Georgia, and Cherokee and Clay counties in North Carolina. Numbers include about 170 kids for the spring season and 200 for the fall season.

Registration fees range from \$75 for the 6-and-under division to \$120 per player for 14 and 16-and-under, and the MUSA website declares that the nonprofit organization adheres to a no-refund policy.

League registration forms also feature a "no refund" waiver that parents must check, acknowledging they are aware of and accept the league's policy before signing up.



Still, a number of parents have expressed their discontent on social media over the enforcement of this policy during the pandemic.

While the no-refund waiver may cover MUSA legally, there's an argument

to be made that the league should make an exception due to the unforeseen "act of God" nature of the pandemic, which is causing economic hardships for families everywhere.

With unemployment rates climbing to Great Depression-like levels and many families struggling to put food on the table, some parents see the act of not returning the registration fees as a calculation putting the league's finances above the community members it serves.

According to MUSA administrators Alex and Julie Ortiz, they are simply looking

out for the league's ability to continue providing youth soccer opportunities down the road.

Among other things, registration fees cover pre-season costs of getting the league up and running, the Ortizes said. And since the season had already gotten underway before the pandemic started shutting things down across the country, MUSA had already spent some of the money and was not in a position to offer full refunds to every family.

See MUSA Soccer, Page 7A

Vol. 111 No. 21

5 Sections 44 Pages

Weather

Thurs: T-Storm Hi 67 Lo 51

Fri: T-Storm Hi 72 Lo 53

Sat: T-Storm Hi 78 Lo 57

Arrests 2D

Church 2B

Classifieds 3D

Opinion 4A

Legals 4D

Obits 4B

Lest We Forget

MEMORIAL DAY 2020