

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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## CEO of UGH and five others arrested on drug charges

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Mike Gowder, CEO of Union General Hospital Inc., was publicly arrested at his office and ushered out the front doors of the hospital in handcuffs on Thursday, Feb. 4.

Gowder's arrest came after a nine-month investigation conducted by the Union County Sheriff's Office, looking into illegal prescription drug practices, according to the sheriff's office.

According to authorities, Gowder had obtained from Dr. James Heaton, who was also arrested Thursday at his office, some 72 prescriptions for Oxycodone 30 mg, 24 prescriptions for Oxycodone 10 mg and 12 prescriptions for Hydrocodone 10 mg, all controlled substances.

These prescriptions came in sometimes several times a month over the course of January 2012 through June 2015, for a total of 15,170 pills, and Gowder would fill



Mike Gowder

them regularly in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee, according to authorities.

Also according to authorities, Dr. Heaton prescribed several months' worth of prescriptions for opiates and Xanax at a visit, which was outside the normal course of practice and had no legitimate medical purpose, and many of his patients allegedly traveled from Cherokee County, North

Carolina, in order to obtain these prescriptions.

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

"Once this came to our attention that Dr. David Gowder



Dr. James L. Heaton

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

whatever we needed."

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

The Union County Sheriff's Office served a total of six felony arrest warrants



Dr. David Gowder

on Thursday, as well as two search warrants – one at Union General Hospital and the other at Dr. Heaton's office – in order to obtain both physical and digital files and patient records to further the ongoing investigation.

All six individuals arrested were booked into the Union County Jail on the following charges, but have since been released on

See Arrests, Page 14A

## Six arrested are arraigned, post bond

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The six suspects charged in the Union General Hospital prescription drug ring were transported from Union County Jail to make their first appearances in Union County Superior Court on Friday, February 5th.

Each received bail ranging from \$3,000 to \$50,000 after being notified of their charges by Superior Court Judge Martha Christian.

Charges against the six were presented by the office of Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Cliney, in its capacity as representing the State of Georgia.

Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder was charged with three counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance, and



Superior Court Judge Martha Christian

received a bond of \$50,000.

Dr. David Gowder, who was formerly a board member of UGH and director of the hospital's emergency room, and brother of Mike Gowder, was met with seven counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of a controlled substance and 36 counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance

(Oxycodone, Hydrocodone, and Alprazolam (Xanax)), and was issued a \$10,000 bond after previously posting \$40,000 on prior charges.

Dr. James L. Heaton, a board member of UGH and a Blairsville physician, was charged with 41 counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of a controlled substance, and was granted bail

in the amount of \$10,000.

Gail Gowder, the wife of Mike Gowder, has been charged with two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, and received a \$20,000 bail.

Jamie Harkins, the niece of Mike and David Gowder, was charged with two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance. She received a bail in the amount of \$3,000.

Virginia Lou Harkins, nurse practitioner and director of Appalachian Home Health, sister of Mike and David Gowder, and mother of Jamie Harkins, was charged with two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance, and was

See Arraignment, Page 14A

## Two charged in Ingles Pharmacy robbery

By Shawn Jarrard  
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A Young Harris couple was arrested following the strong-armed robbery of the Ingles Pharmacy in Blairsville on Tuesday, Feb. 2.

Jesse Thomas Cole, 29, a recent move-in from Colorado, was arrested that Tuesday night and charged with the robbery, while Jessica Chase Doan, 30, originally of Hayesville, NC, turned herself in on Wednesday, Feb. 3, to face the same charge at the Union County Jail, according to GBI Region 8 Special Agent Dustin Hamby.

The robbery occurred shortly before the pharmacy closed for the evening, around 8:30 p.m.

"Reportedly, a white male had come in, passed a note



Jesse Thomas Cole



Jessica Chase Doan  
See Ingles, Page 3A

## Union General ready to move forward

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Board of Directors for Union General Hospital had a crisis on its hands last week – the CEO of the hospital, Mike Gowder, had been arrested,



Lewis Kelley, Interim CEO

as well as one of their board members, area physician Dr. James Heaton.

In a statement posted to the hospital website, printed and handed out to Union General, Inc. employees, and sent to area news agencies, the board let the public know that it had acted quickly in response to the unsettling turn of events that took place on Thursday, Feb. 4.

The very same day that Gowder, Heaton and four others were taken into custody by the Union County Sheriff's Office and the Drug Enforcement Administration on illegal prescription drug charges, the board voted unanimously to name Lewis Kelley as interim CEO of Union General Hospital.

"He has the community at heart – Lewis will roll up his



Patsy Efird, Chairman and Jim Williams, Vice-Chairman of the Union General Hospital Board of Directors

sleeves and do whatever it takes to help us to navigate through this," said Board Vice Chair Jim Williams.

Furthermore, the board placed Gowder on paid administrative leave "pending

the results of an internal review and investigation, including the review and consideration of the law enforcement activities," according to Williams.

"I think the board in its See UGH, Page 2A

## Have you seen this man?

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The GBI has produced a sketch of a man they believe robbed the No. 1 Chinese Restaurant in the Food City Shopping Center on Sunday, Jan. 31.

According to the GBI, three to four Asian males entered the restaurant around 10 a.m. that Sunday.

"They assaulted the restaurant employee and took an undisclosed amount of money from the cash register," according to a GBI statement. "The Asian males were observed by several witnesses while in the area of the restaurant. They were driving black SUVs. The Blairsville Police Department responded to the robbery and requested the assistance of the GBI."



As the investigation is still ongoing, the authorities have been able to disclose only limited information to the public, though the GBI is asking the public for.

"The GBI and the Blairsville Police Department See Robbery, Page 2A

## Vote early now for Presidential Preference Primary

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Early voting began Monday, Feb. 8, for the Georgia Presidential Preference Primary, and it will continue for three weeks through Friday, Feb. 26.

Voting is taking place at the Union County Courthouse inside the Registrar's Office.

Hours to vote are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, and voting will be open for one Saturday, on Feb. 20, from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m.

Officials at the Union

County Registrar's Office have been answering a high volume of calls concerning early voting, and they anticipate plenty of early voters.

It is too late to register to vote for the Presidential Preference Primary, but people can still come in and register to vote in order to be eligible to vote in May for the General Primary.

"It's easy," said Libby Stevens, board chair for the Union County Board of Elections. "You can go to the Registrar's Office and fill out an application there.

The Driver's License office, you can fill out an application there."

More tech savvy residents can even register online, at registertovote.sos.ga.gov, which is the Secretary of State's Online Voter Registration website.

The Board of Elections is responsible for preparing voting machines – testing them to make sure everything is running smoothly, and preloading the elections.

"We expect at least 50 See Voting, Page 3A

## Towns and Union counties welcome new extension agent

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Melissa Mattee wants the people of Towns and Union to know that, as the new ag agent for both counties, she's got your back – and your backyard.

Whether you're a budding gardener in need of soil sampling and fertilizer advice, or a full-fledged farmer looking to spruce up on the latest in corn production, Mattee's waiting and ready to fill in those agricultural knowledge gaps.



Melissa Mattee

"Stop by, call me, don't be shy," said Mattee, a Stockbridge native. "I

want people to know that I essentially have an open door policy. We're here from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. If you have any questions, if you want some literature on something, or if you just want to see who I am and meet me – please, come in. I'll be in Union County at Blairsville four days a week, and Towns County one day a week, starting out."

Mattee comes to the North Georgia Mountains from Athens, where she has spent the last seven years studying at the University of Georgia.

See Mattee, Page 2A

<p>Vol. 107 No. 6</p> <p>2 Sections 22 Pages</p> <p>Weather</p> <p>Thurs: Sunny Hi 38 Lo 23</p> <p>Fri: Rain/Snow Hi 44 Lo 23</p> <p>Sat: Sunny Hi 30 Lo 9</p>	<p>Inside</p> <p>Arrests 8A</p> <p>Church 10A</p> <p>Classifieds 2B</p> <p>Opinion 4A</p> <p>Legals 4B</p> <p>Obits 12A</p> <p>Sports 13A</p>	<p>Presidential Primary Sample Ballots</p> <p>See page 5B</p>	<p>UC Lions Club Trash and Treasure event</p> <p>See page 6A</p>	<p>Iwo Jima Program</p> <p>at Towns County Recreation and Conference Center</p> <p>See page 9A</p>	<p>SPORTS</p> <p>BASKETBALL</p> <p>Region 8-AA Tournament @ Rabun Co</p> <p>Boys: Wed. Feb. 10 5:30 vs. Washington Wilkes</p> <p>Girls: Fri. Feb. 12 4 PM vs. Oglethorpe Co vs. Social Circle Winner</p>
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