

North Georgia News

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Opening ceremony speaks to 'healing process' for Veterans

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Vietnam Veterans Moving Wall in Blairsville on Thursday, Oct. 8, and visitors from around the region came together to commemorate the historic event with an opening ceremony that day.

Situated in a corner of Meeks Park next to the baseball fields to the right of the park's entrance, The Wall looked as if it was meant to be and had always been there, an austere reminder of the sacrifices made by the 58,307 service members who died in service to their country.

A stage had been erected in front of the monument to conduct the various activities and ceremonies to take place during The Wall's visit, and spectators sat in chairs and on bleachers facing the stage and The Wall.

Many in attendance were veterans, including the dozens of

members of the Vietnam Veterans of America Blairsville Chapter 1101, the group that orchestrated the coming of The Wall, as well as veterans from eras before and after the Vietnam War.

Blairsville's own Leon Davenport – a decorated veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam – was offered a front row seat for the ceremony, and Bud Johnson of Towns County, an Iwo Jima Veteran, sat nearby.

The well-attended ceremony opened with a bugle call to attention, at which point the North Georgia Honor Guard proceeded with the Posting of the Colors.

As the flags – Old Glory among them – blew gently in the breeze, Connie Duckworth Clark sang the national anthem, and the formality of the opening procession spoke to the dignity afforded to Vietnam Veterans and the memories of the fallen alike.

Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Bernie Fontaine, who served as part of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, led the ceremony with his opening



Army Capt. (Ret.) Tommy Clack remarks.

"I'd like to say that we – and I'm part of the Vietnam Veterans of America Post #1101 – we all appreciate you showing up here for this," said Fontaine, recognizing

VVA Chapter 1101 President Mike Priven and the many volunteers who helped make that day a reality.

Fred Freeman, chaplain of Chapter 1101, delivered the

ceremony's invocation, asking God for a blessing of the grounds there at Meeks Park.

"Dear Father, there will be many men and women walking on these grounds who have been forgotten, forsaken – many that will carry a hurt that could have and should have been healed long ago," said Freeman. "Father, we ask you now to help us to be those agents of healing and caring and compassion to our brothers and sisters that served and fought in Vietnam."

The words of Freeman embraced one of the goals of bringing The Moving Wall to Union County, as The Wall was meant as a welcome home to veterans who were ill-treated upon their return from the battlefield.

In recognizing the sacrifices of the service members who gave their lives, The Wall also allowed for an acknowledgment of the sacrifices made by survivors as well.

The ceremony's keynote speaker, Army Capt. (Ret.) Tommy Clack, was serving as an Artillery

Forward Observer near the Cambodian border in 1969 when he was struck by a rocket propelled grenade that resulted in the loss of both of his legs above the knees, his right arm and most of his right shoulder.

Clack, who went on to college and would spend 47 years of his career as a champion of veterans' affairs, called the arrival of The Moving Wall "a great healing process."

"It actually brings veterans out who have never acknowledged their status as a veteran, and it allows all of us to understand that the names on that wall behind me are still part of our thought process," said Clack. "I actually know 38 of those names on that wall in terms of those that died with the company that I served with, and then there's another three that I grew up with, graduated from Decatur High School in 1965."

"Those are the kind of

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Moving Wall a welcome home for veterans

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

To the Vietnam Veterans of Union County and beyond, Welcome Home.

It's hard to overstate the value of the Vietnam Moving Wall's presence in Union County throughout the days that the monument stood around the clock in a corner of Meeks Park from Thursday, Oct. 8, to Monday, Oct. 12.

Wherever it goes, The Moving Wall acts as a memorial to those who lost their lives in the service of their country – those 58,307 names currently etched into The Wall are lasting testaments to the price of freedom and the bravery of those willing to pay that price.

And The Wall offers Vietnam Veterans and the families of those who lost loved ones the ability to reflect on the war and how it changed their lives. The Wall also gives visitors who are simply

curious about the monument the opportunity to initiate a relationship with American history and the complexities of issues for those who have faced the stark realities of war.

To this day, Vietnam Veterans are still fighting the war in many ways, from those suffering with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to service members afflicted and dying from exposure to Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide deployed by the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

Visiting The Wall is an extremely personal experience for many, as the sheer sight of so many names stretching on into the distance from the beginning to the end of the memorial brings forth a mixture of emotions.

Mark Traplay, who traveled to see The Wall as part of the American Legion Post 96 out of Copperhill, Tenn., is a Cold War-era Veteran.

"It's really hard to put it into words," said Traplay on his feelings of witnessing The Wall. "It's just –



pride, that I was in a way part of this group, me joining and just doing what is right, defending our country and our beliefs. It's really sobering

to walk and see those names." Going through the memorial was a silent, thoughtful time for

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Plane Crash claims life of Union County resident

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Jasper – On Thursday, Oct. 8th at approximately 6:32 p.m. the Jasper Police Dept. responded to a plane crash on Salem Church Road where 21 year old Michael Joseph Hughes of Blairsville, the sole occupant was pronounced dead at the scene.

Hughes, a student pilot in his third solo flight, was practicing touch-and-go landings when eyewitness reports said the plane's engine went quiet and the plane, turned nose down and began to spin to the left. The plane, a single engine 1978 PA 38 Piper Tomahawk, disappeared behind a row of trees before witnesses heard the plane impact the ground.

On Friday afternoon, Sgt. Matt Dawkins of the Jasper Police Department and Air Safety Investigator Todd Gunther of the National Travel Safety Board (NTSB) held a press conference in Jasper.

According to Gunther, Hughes performed one touch-and-go landing and following the second takeoff, witnesses reported that the aircraft, "stopped making



Michael Joseph Hughes

noise."

"We don't know what that means exactly but it's something that we're looking into," Gunther said. "The airplane appeared to go into what someone described as something similar to an 'aerodynamic stall.'"

Since Gunther and his team arrived in Pickens County on Friday morning, they have been assessing the wreckage along with the wreckage path, and where the airplane came to rest.

"We will also be looking

See Crash, Page 16A

Layne Colwell named Homecoming Queen

By Todd Forrest
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Staff Writer

Last Friday night under the lights in front of a jam-packed Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium, Union County High School Senior Layne Colwell held her name forever etched into the chronicles of Union County when she was crowned the 2015-16 UCHS Homecoming Queen.

The crowning was the pinnacle of UCHS's Spirit Week that saw the excitement build each day before the Homecoming Parade led by the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band, rolled through the campus of Union County Schools with floats representing each grade.

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2015 UCHS Homecoming Court: Janey Thomas, 2nd Runner Up; Layne Colwell, Homecoming Queen, and Sydney Davenport, 1st Runner Up

46th Sorghum Festival Parade a wet success

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The 46th Annual Blairsville Sorghum Festival Parade showcased plenty of local American pride, using a patriotic theme to complement the arrival of the Vietnam Veterans Moving Wall during the first weekend of the festival at Meeks Park.

More than 40 entrants participated in the parade, which ran from the Old Middle School Gym, around the Blairsville Square, through town and back to the gym on Saturday, Oct. 10.

Hundreds of people braved the rainy weather to line the streets along the route, as members of each float and vehicle in the parade

threw candy to expectant children. The Union County High School Marching Band proudly played through the rain, giving the procession its very own patriotic soundtrack.

His Lambs Our Lambs Preschool won the float contest with its red, white and blue "One Nation Under God" float.

Blairsville's Alan Kay, winner of the History channel's *Alone* survival TV show, participated as the Grand Marshal of this 46th annual parade, riding atop a pile of sweet sorghum with his family.

"It's good to see a lot of these older guys," said Kay of several veterans of wars past in the parade, including World War II veterans. "My grandfather, he was at Iwo Jima, and I had another



Alan Kay, Grand Marshal

these older generations, it really grandfather who was at Pearl Harbor when that happened. When I see

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City Council backs Pledge of Allegiance in meetings

By Shawn Jarrard
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Staff Writer

Next month's regular meeting of Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and City Council will begin a little differently than in years past – with the Pledge of Allegiance and an invocation.

On Tuesday, Oct. 6, the council adopted a policy with respect to the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the delivery of invocations at future meetings.

Neither will be compulsory,

though participation is generally encouraged, and both the pledge and invocations will be consistent with standards provided by Georgia law.

City Council also voted to approve the cost estimate from Colwell Construction for the relocation of sewer line across the Haralson Property in the amount of \$53,742, to be paid using SPLOST IV funds.

Also in the meeting, the council passed a resolution officially designating the City of Blairsville as a Purple Heart City. Declaring Blairsville a



Blairsville City Council

Purple Heart City was a timely gesture of good faith and local

recognition for military service. See Council, Page 3A

46th Annual Sorghum Festival is under way

By Todd Forrest
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Staff Writer

The 46th Annual Blairsville Sorghum Festival presented by the Blairsville Jaycees kicked off this weekend to overcast skies and rain showers on Saturday, and following last year's rainout on the second weekend festival organizers were doing anti-rain dances hoping to avoid two consecutive washouts.

But by the time the weekend was through, the sun was out and Meeks Park was packed to the gills as festival goers ignored the leftover mud on Sunday.

The Sorghum Festival Parade braved the elements and rolled through the town on Saturday as the festival opened its gates.

"We went ahead with the parade but it was really soggy," said Blairsville Jaycees Secretary Kim Bridges.

Attendance was down due to the weather but there was definitely a silver lining to all of the clouds that hung overhead on Saturday. Crowds were slow but steady despite the games being canceled. However, the day's entertainment saw no cancellations and the bands played on.

"There was still quite a few people here," Bridges said. "It wasn't like a normal Saturday but there was still more than I thought would be here in the rain. But all of the performers came and performed and the dancers even got out there and danced in the rain."

Beginning at 10:35 a.m., From Out of the Box Entertainment's Erik Strickland and Kendra Hope performed their brand of traditional country music during a throwback 'duet fest.' The Blairsville School of Dance also performed along with Atlanta Puppet, who performed at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, the Governors Mansion, and across Europe while winning four international awards from UNIMA.

The Vietnam War Memorial Moving Wall was also at Meeks Park over the weekend which brought in crowds that eventually made their way down to the festival.

"We stopped to see the Wall and decided to go down to the bottom of the hill to see what was going on," said Alice Morgan of Gadsden, Ala. who was in Hiwassee with her husband. "This is the first time we've ever been to, or even heard of the Sorghum

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Adults and kids alike have fun at the Sorghum Festival

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Saturday
October 17th
on the Square

2004 40th Anniversary Edition
Mustang Convertible to be given away!
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WELCOME
to the 46th Annual
Sorghum Festival

SPORTS
FOOTBALL
Fri Oct. 16 @ Rabun Co. 7:30 PM
SOFTBALL
Oct 14/15 1st Rd. State Tournament
@ Home Time TBA
CROSS COUNTRY
Thurs. Oct. 15 @ Meeks Park 4:30 PM