

North Georgia News

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Record number of shoppers for Shop With A Cop

By Charles Duncan
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One-by-one, the shoppers loaded onto the Union County School bus at the Union County Middle School on Saturday morning.

Their destination was one of adventure and anticipation – Walmart.

Eighty-four children, ages 11 to 17, hand-selected by Union County Family Connection, and Union County school teachers, were on their way to revel in a local holiday tradition, Shop With A Cop.

The students were greeted by Walmart Manager Dean Justus, and welcomed into the store to complete their Christmas Wish lists.

"I'm wishing this is what Christmas is all about," Justus said. "Shop With A Cop is a truly blessed program. I can't say enough about what this community means to this community. We're proud to be a part of this tradition and this community."

Christmas Wish lists are what Shop With A Cop is all about.

"It really means something to see the looks on these kids' faces at the end of this trip," Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll said. "It's enough to make these tough old cops shed a tear of joy. Every one of these individuals wearing a badge can relate to these kids. It means something to them to help put some Christmas cheer into an otherwise sad situation."

"These cops know what it means. Most of them grew up with next to nothing, so, it means a whole lot for them to help make these kids' special wishes come true," Chief Carroll said.

Indeed, those wishes came true. The stuff in the store didn't match up with the items that young people tend to purchase. Some had pillows and blankets, others had multiple packs of socks and underwear. Some had food items and others had soft toys. One even had a Hamilton Beach Slow Cooker, an item that clearly was targeted for Momma.

"These kids, well, they're amazing," Chief Carroll said. "We give them a certain amount of money to spend on themselves, and they walk out of here with Christmas gifts for their families. These

See Shop, 3A



BPD's Walker nabs armed robbery suspect on Ga. 515

By Charles Duncan
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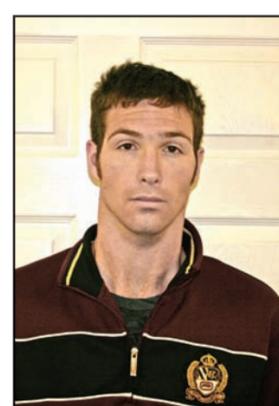
A one of a kind jacket led to the arrest of 22-year-old Blairsville man in connection with Dec. 8 armed robbery of the Dollar General Store on the old Blue Ridge Highway.

Caleb Couret Mitchell has been charged with one count of armed robbery, and two counts of aggravated assault with the use of a weapon. He is currently being held at the Union County Jail, Union County Sheriff's Det. SSgt. Darren Osborn said.

Blairsville Police Officer Dustin Walker, who also serves as a part-time Union County Sheriff's Deputy, spotted a male fitting the description of the suspect in the Dollar General Store robbery, Sgt. Osborn said.

Officer Walker, who was in the Circle K Convenience Store near Bi-Lo, saw Mitchell wearing the same jacket that was worn by the Dollar General armed robbery suspect.

"Officer Walker didn't approach the suspect, rather, he waited for Mitchell to



Caleb Mitchell

leave the store before making a move," Sgt. Osborn said. "He watched Mitchell get into a vehicle with two other persons. At about the same time investigators with the Sheriff's Office received a tip from our Facebook page that a male, wearing the same jacket, was seen earlier at Walmart."

Officer Walker observed the male get in the rear seat of a vehicle; the vehicle traveled toward Georgia 515, Sgt. Osborn said.

The vehicle then traveled west and Officer Walker

See Dollar, 2A

Julie Barton departs BOE proud of her eight years



By Charles Duncan
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District 5 Board of Education member Julie Barton will never forget serving eight years on the Union County Board of Education.

She also will never for-

get becoming the first woman elected to public office in Union County history.

"Other women had run for office long before me," she said. "It's just that I was the first to ever be elected. I thank the voters of Union

See Barton, 2A

Election results a blessing in disguise for Strickland



By Charles Duncan
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When John Strickland lost his reelection bid in the Union County Primaries, admittedly, he was disappointed.

However, as the months rolled by, and Strick-

land steps down from the Union County Board of Education at the end of this month, he has a much different attitude.

"It's been an unusual experience," Strickland said, referring to four years spent as a BOE member. "I'm very

See Strickland, 2A

Vogel tree lighting draws a crowd

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Area residents and folks from afar gathered Saturday, Dec. 13, to enjoy the 11th Annual Christmas Program and Lighting of the Tree at Vogel State Park.

Patrons of the program parked near the Pultizer Center, and tractors pulling trailers hauling guests circled around, up and down from the field where the lighting would take place.

"We get the blue tractor!" exclaimed one in excitement, and the mood was festive and bright.

About 100 volunteers from eight community churches worked hard to put the event together.

"It's not Baptist, it's not Methodist – it's a mixture of different churches," said Janet Hill, who organized the very first program and has led the charge ever since.

"We have different people that are in charge of different areas, like the hot chocolate," said Hill. "They do their thing and they answer to me. Then, we have Santa



Claus, we have cookies. All of them have their areas that they're in charge of, like the hay rides. So, we all plan that together. We have one meeting and do all of our planning at one meeting. Then, everybody does their section of the program."

Even Blue Ridge Mountain EMC chipped in to help, lending a bucket truck to aid in the decoration of the tree.

"It really is for the surrounding communities," said Hill. "We have people come from all over the different counties for this event. It's not just our county, they're from everywhere. Last year, there was a person here from Norway, so we never know."

This year, the farthest flung family in attendance hailed from Juneau, Alaska, while the oldest at the lighting

was 83 and the youngest just 5 months.

"We've had as many as 800 out here, and when we first started, we had like 150, so it's grown to about 800," said Hill. "It depends on the weather. Like last year, we probably had about 450. It was rainy and wet. Our feet were this much in mud. We do

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