

North Georgia News

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County honors Firefighter Lee for heroism; Dec. 19 was Dustin Lee Day

By Charles Duncan
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Thursday was a special day in the life of Union County Firefighter Dustin Lee.

He gathered with his family at the Union County Courthouse for a proclamation in his honor. Dec. 19th was Dustin Lee Day in Union County.

The dedicated firefighter was recognized for his actions of going above and beyond the call of duty to save an elderly couple from their burning home on Dec. 3.

Everyone in the courtroom, where the monthly county meeting took place, either had tears in their eyes, or smiles on their faces.

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris said Union County was blessed to have firefighters like Dustin Lee.

"It was a God thing," Paris said. "Dustin was in the right place at the right time. There were so many things that came together to allow Dustin to be where he was needed,



Left, Union County Firefighter Dustin Lee and his family listen as Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris reads a proclamation declaring Dec. 19 as Dustin Lee Day in Union County. Right, Paris presents Lee with the proclamation. Photos/Charles Duncan

we're just proud that he was there for what ever the reason was."

Also in attendance was Union County Fire Chief/EMA Director Charles Worden. Chief



Worden said that he was proud to have firefighters like Dustin Lee within his department.

"It is a great feeling to know you have a firefighter like Dustin, that is dedicated,

and although, he went against his training, he saved lives," Chief Worden said. "He did what he was trained to do and what he had to do."

Lee shrugs when he is called a hero for saving an elderly couple from a burning home on Ivy Log Creek Lane.

"I did what any Union County firefighter or public servant would have done," he said. "The Good Lord put me in the right place at the right time. I utilized my firefighter training and my instincts just kicked in."

"Am I a hero? Maybe to Larry and Lavonne Bennett, but I was just doing what I'm trained to do," he said. "I'm proud I was there to help. I'm proud Larry and Lavonne Bennett are okay."

Lee was on his way home when a call was dispatched regarding a garage fire at the Bennetts' home on Dec. 3. Lee, who lives a short distance from the Bennetts' home, was right on top of the situation when the call came out.

Without aid of firefighter See *Dustin Lee, 2A*

Give-A-Gift reaches 100 children

By Charles Duncan
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Pop guns, and bicycles, roller skates, and drums, tricycles, checkboards, tricycles, popcorn, and plums!

And he stuffed them in bags. Then the Grinch, very nimbly, stuffed all the bags, one by one, up the chimney!

Unlike the poor Whos, living in Who-ville, there will be no Grinches allowed in Blairsville-Union County at Christmas.

You can thank Union County Sheriff Mack Mason and Union County's finest, for that fact.

There will be 42 families and approximately 100 children benefiting from the Sheriff's Give-A-Gift program in 2013.

One by one, deputies bagged the toys, clothes and shoes up on Monday and made sure that they made it to specified destinations.

Instead of pop guns, bicycles, roller skates, and drums, and checkboards, tricycles, popcorn, and plums, children received dollies, hand-crafted Model A trucks, various toys, babydoll cradles, clothes and yes, even a Mr. Potato Head.

Most of the toys given during the 2013 Give-A-Gift celebration were brought to the Sheriff's Office as unwrapped gifts. Other gifts, such as clothing and shoes, were purchased using private donations.

The most unusual toy that will go home with a lucky boy or girl, is Mr. Potato Head.

First manufactured in 1952 by Hasbro, Mr. Potato Head still enjoys popularity with today's youth.

In fact, Mr. Potato Head



The Sheriff's Give-A-Gift elves are hard at work making Christmas bright for approximately 100 Union County children. Pictured, Mary Fortenberry on the phone, and Ginger Carey holding Mr. Potato Head. Photo/Charles Duncan

is now married. However, Mrs. Potato Head is sold separately, as are the couple's children, the Spuds.

Mr. Potato Head made a significant impact after co-starring in *Toy Story* with Buzz Lightyear.

Mr. Potato Head is still his smiling self, and, yes, most likely to star in another *Toy Story* movie in the near future.

And on Christmas Day, 100 smiling faces will light up the skyline in Union County as their Christmas wishes are coming true.

The program began in 2001, Ginger Carey said, and

served more than 120 children in 2012 with support from the community.

"We recognize that the economy is still in rough shape," Carey said. "The need for this program is greater than ever because of that."

Union County Chief Deputy John George said that the program works with the community's help.

George said things are indeed tough. A lot of children out there aren't expecting much if anything at all for Christmas this year.

See *Gifts, 3A*

Paris approves \$14.03 million budget

By Charles Duncan
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The 2014 Union County government budget comes in at \$14.03 million.

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris approved the county budget on Thursday during the December meeting at the Union County Courthouse.

For the fourth consecutive year, Paris has been able to cut property taxes. It's a fact that he's most proud of accomplishing.

"Property values have continued to drop, so that makes it difficult to avoid raising property taxes," Paris



Lamar Paris

said. "However, this is the fourth year in a row that we've

been able to do just that," Paris said. "The biggest surprise is this upcoming year, we'll only take in roughly \$20,000 more in taxes than we did in 2008."

"That's a credit to the hardworking employees we have," he said. "We're working hard to be more efficient and we're accomplishing that goal."

The largest pieces of the pie go to the Union County Sheriff's Office at \$2.09 million, the Union County Jail at \$1.32 million and Highways and Streets at \$1.05 million.

Paris said the increased spending at the Sheriff's Office and Jail fit more in line with

See *Budget, 3A*

Sheriff breaks bread with family, deputies

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With the holiday season upon us, Union County Sheriff Mason wants to remind everyone to play it safe before they get behind the wheel and while they are traveling on the local roads and highways.

"We will be on duty through the holidays trying to make sure that everyone is behaving themselves," Sheriff Mason said.

Sheriff Mason, friends, family and Union County and Blairsville's finest met last week at the Brackett Room of United Community Bank for the Union County Sheriff's Office Christmas Party. The event was sponsored by private donations and catered by Jim's Smokin' Que. The restaurant in turn donated the catering fee to the Sheriff's Give-A-Gift Christmas Program.



Union County Sheriff Mack Mason hosts his department's first Christmas Party at the Brackett Room at UCB. Photo/Todd Forrest

Sheriff Mason reflected on the upcoming Holiday Season. He urged travelers to keep an eye out for wintry weather and to use caution when it comes to getting out in icy conditions.

"We will do our best to

make sure that travel is not obstructed in anyway," Sheriff Mason said. "But you never know what can happen. In this part of the state, we're subject to have inclement weather,

See *Sheriff, 2A*

Dr. Williams: 'Union County High School graduation rates rank sixth in Georgia'

By Charles Duncan
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Union County High School ranks sixth in the state in graduation rate, according to Assistant School Superintendent Dr. Jeremy Williams.

The Georgia Department of Education recently released the 2012-2013 Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate for Georgia and all 180 school districts, Dr. Williams said.

"I am proud to report that Union County School System had a graduation rate



Dr. Jeremy Williams

of 92.8 percent, which ranked 6th in the state," Williams said. "Even more impressive is the graduation rate of Special Education students of 77.8 percent, which ranked second in the state."

In May, approximately 165 graduates walked the aisles in Union County.

On Friday, May 17th, 161 Union County High School graduates flipped their tassels and became alumni of their alma mater. The ceremonies

See *Graduates, 2A*

Sentencing for Brown rescheduled

By Charles Duncan
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Sentencing for Ronnie Dale Brown on his conviction for kidnapping his estranged wife and other charges has been rescheduled for Jan. 21 at 10 a.m. at the Union County Courthouse.

Brown, 57, was scheduled to be sentenced on Thursday, Dec. 19.

Brown, a Union County native and longtime businessman, was convicted Dec. 13 of kidnapping, aggravated assault in violation of Georgia's Family Violence Act, two counts possession of a firearm during the commission



Ronnie Dale Brown

of a felony, possession of an illegal weapon, and terroristic threats.

Another charge, false imprisonment, was merged with Count 1, kidnapping. Union County Superior Court records show.

Jurors went into deliberations Friday afternoon, Dec. 13 and returned with a verdict before midnight.

Brown, represented by Richard Ryzczek and Andrew Dowdy, and his estranged wife Debra Brown, were going through a divorce at the time the incident occurred in June 2012.

Senior Judge Frank

See *Brown, 2A*

Vol. 104 No. 52 Inside

2 Sections, 20 Pages Arrests 7A

Weather Church 8A

Thu: Clouds Hi 49 Lo 25 Classifieds 2B

Fri: Clouds Hi 50 Lo 26 Opinion 4A

Sat: Clouds Hi 50 Lo 27 Legals 4B

Obits 10A

Sports 12A

Merry Christmas To All

... And to all our sincerest warm wishes for a holiday season that's truly satisfying in every way.

from the Staff of the North Georgia News & West Printing Company