

North Georgia News

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Tracy, Wagner crowned UCHS Prom Royalty

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Despite a rainy evening, Union County High School students arrived fashionably dressed to The Barn on Saturday, May 10, to enjoy their 2025 prom – one final hurrah before the end of the semester and, for some, graduation.

It's estimated that almost 500 high schoolers showed up that night, attending with friends and dates to partake of the fruits of a labor that came together through true community effort.

Indeed, the school puts the event together itself, and UCHS English/Yearbook Teacher Emily Cobb also credits the involvement of businesses like Ingles and Chill & Fill for their food, and she thanks The Barn owners Wendall and Melanie Abrams.

Cobb has organized her fair share of proms, and according to her ample experience, this year was one of the most successful yet.

Long before the kids started arriving at sundown, preparations began around 11 a.m. With the decorating done, attendees could enjoy everything The Barn had to offer with a variety of activities available to make the night even more special.

Of course, there was the dancefloor in the main building featuring the talents of a professional DJ, and for those less inclined toward music, two cornhole boards were set up beneath the safety of a shed to keep the rain out.

Speaking of the rain, some brave souls ignored it to gather and socialize around the firepit, and overall, the students took in the entirety of the scenic property.

Longtime friends Luke Caputo-Sullivan and Blake Webb had been looking forward to the big night and even coordinated their outfits. Inspired by “Dumb and Dumber,” one came dressed in a neon orange suit and matching top hat while the other chose a similar getup in baby blue.

Senior Levi Abercrombie had some complicated feelings on the occasion, saying, “I wish I did more” regarding his high school experience, but he was determined to “make the most” of prom.

Buddies Morgan Gibson and Tara Herrera were of a similar mindset, delighting in a night of fun and socialization. Although Herrera is a senior and admitted that this year’s prom felt different, Gibson, a junior, promised to invite

See UCHS Prom, Page 7A



Congratulations to couple Travis Tracy and Lydia Wagner for being chosen by their peers as 2025 UCHS Prom King and Queen on Saturday.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Election-related boards to work closer together



(L-R) Elections Board Chair Libby Stevens and Board of Registrars Members Janet Chapman and Tomi McCullers on May 7.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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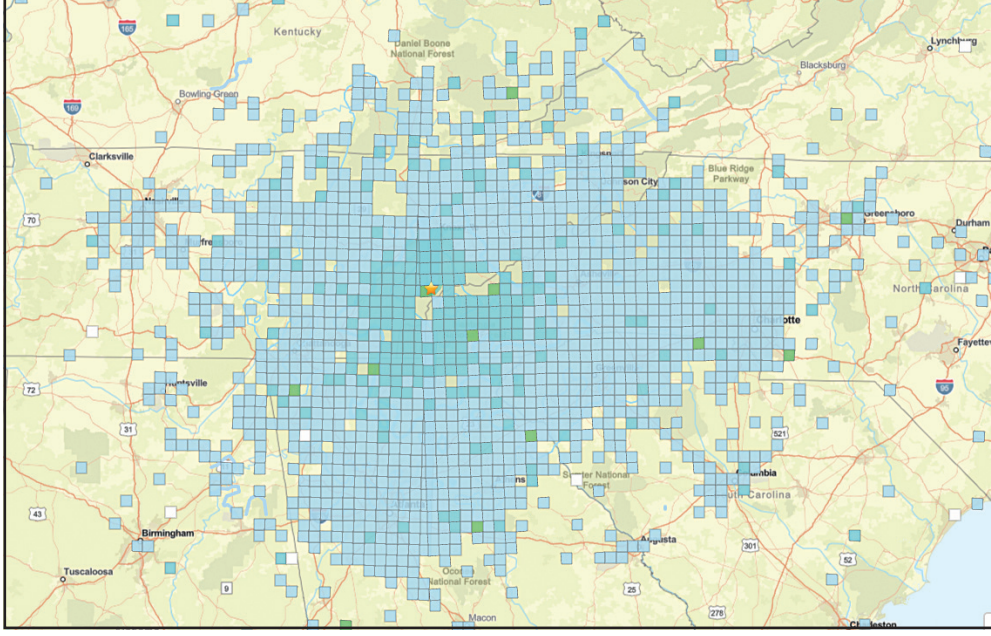
Members of the Union County Board of Elections and the Union County Board of Registrars held a joint called

meeting at the Voting Center on Wednesday, May 7, to discuss the possibility of combining into a single Board of Elections & Registration.

Both boards pertain to elections. The Elections Board manages and secures voting equipment, trains poll workers, runs Election Day voting at local precincts and certifies elections, while the Board of Registrars oversees

See Joint Meeting, Page 12A

TN earthquake shakes things up in Southeast



The widely felt earthquake on Saturday caused quite a stir in local, state and national news, as well as on social media.

By Shawn Jarrard
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Residents across the Southeast received a jolt to their Saturday morning

routines when a 4.1-magnitude earthquake rumbled out of the Eastern Tennessee Seismic Zone, shaking countless homes and other buildings for several seconds just after 9 a.m. on May 10.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the earthquake occurred about 13 miles southeast of Greenback,

See Earthquake, Page 2A

4-H Modified Trap Shotgun Team shoots its way into state tourney



Union County 4-H Modified Trap Shotgun Team Members made their hometown proud last month by advancing 25 of 27 students to the state tournament.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On April 26, the Union County 4-H Modified Trap Shotgun Team served as the

host for the annual District State Qualifier competition held alongside competitors from Gordon and Rabun counties.

At 27 students strong and having practiced three times a

week since the beginning of the season in February, Union County came prepared.

Although assigned to pre-assembled teams, each student must shoot individually;

25 clay targets are thrown per student, and depending on age, the number each shooter hits determines whether he or she makes the cut to move on to

See 4-H Shotgun Team, Page 2A

Veterans, Scouts team up for cross-county patriotism



The generations came together to solemnly observe the proper retirement of worn American flags in Hiawassee May 10.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Seven Cubs and Scouts of Scouting America’s Northeast Mountain District Pack 101 as well as 30 veterans gathered at

the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7807 in Hiawassee for a flag retirement ceremony the morning of Saturday, May 10.

A wife of a participating veteran who had never

See Flag Retirement, Page 7A



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June Election Voter Registration Deadline May 19 See Page 11B



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High Country Artisans Annual Donation supports Union County Schools Art Programs

The High Country Artisans, Inc., coordinators of the 26th Annual Butternut Creek Festival, visited the Union County School’s Fine Arts Center on May 1st to see the exceptional art projects done by students. At that time we were able to continue the annual donation to the art teachers which will help them purchase supplies, enabling students to create the wide variety of work they complete each year. Becky Dyer, Primary School Art Teacher; Rachel Spratlin, Elementary School Art Teacher; Katie Davis, Middle School Art Teacher; Stephanie Clayton, High School Art Teacher and Wendy Reynolds, Woody Gap Schools Principal each received a check in the amount of \$500 to help offset the costs of student projects. This donation, totaling \$2,500, was the result of funds generated by the Butternut Creek Festival held the third weekend in July each year. The High Country Artisans, Inc., a non-profit group, has a mission to promote quality crafters and artists in the region, and to support art programs within the community.

We look forward to this year’s 26th Annual Show. Our group appreciates the ongoing



(L-R): Stephanie Clayton, High School Art Teacher; Becky Dyer, Primary School Art Teacher; Danny Grojean, President & Show Chairman High Country Artisans; Helena Grossmann, Secretary; Katie Davis, Middle School Art Teacher and Rachel Spratlin, Elementary School Teacher. Not present Wendy Reynolds, Woody Gap Schools Principal

support from the community as we prepare for the Annual Butternut Creek Festival. The show will be held in Meeks

Park on July 19 and 20. This is a free admission, parking and entertainment event. The success of the fes-

tival will help to continue our future donations to the important art programs in our schools.

4-H Shotgun Team...from Page 1A

the State Competition at Rock Eagle.

For Junior 4-H students in middle school, that meant taking out at least 16 targets, while Seniors, or high school students, had to hit 20. That said, 25 of Union County’s 27 competitors met those qualifications.

From there, the results of the four highest-scoring students are tallied to calculate the overall team score. When it comes to both age categories, Union took home considerable bragging rights, earning First and Second Place in Senior and First, Second and Third Place in Junior.

On top of that are individual scores, which Union 4-H’ers also knocked out of the park, winning Senior High Individual courtesy of Mason Davenport along with First, Second and Third Place Junior High Individual among Logan Davenport, Austin Sayama and Samuel Gary, respectively.

The Senior First Place team was made up of Mason Davenport, Ethan Norton, Cauly Sutton, Reid Norton and Matthew Elliott, while the Junior First Place team consisted of Logan Davenport, Austin Sayama, Isaiah Owenby and Niah Abruscato.

In all, the team includes Niah Abruscato, Canaan Allen, Bentley Bell, Beau Bridges, Emma Brooks, Crews Chastain, Logan Davenport, Mason Davenport, Hudson Daves, Reid Deaver, Trenton Dyer, Matthew Elliott, Samuel Gary, Anthony Gonzalez-Nieves, Caleb Lee, Malachi Lee, Asa Lunsford, Aria Mederos, Ethan Norton, Owen Norton, Reid Norton, Isaiah Owenby, Ethan Parker, Ellianna Payne, Austin Sayama, Mason Stephens, Cauly Sutton, Walker Thomas, Carter Tippens, Markos Tyson and Bella Young.

“Competition Day was nice,” admitted Katherine “Katie” Hayes, 4-H and Youth Development Agent, grateful that the rain held off and voicing her appreciation for the Payne family allowing the team to use their property as the

new staging area.

“Students are excited for State since many are going to Rock Eagle for the first time,” Hayes continued. “(Coaches Keith Herbert, Aaron Dills and Vanna Chambers) are proud of the kids’ accomplishments and can’t wait to see how they do.”

Earthquake...from Page 1A

Tennessee, putting the epicenter less than 35 miles – as the crow flies – from Union and Towns counties in Georgia.

Earthquakes are actually pretty common in this region; however, quakes of this magnitude and greater are rare, and the moderate shaking caused by the weekend’s shallow tremor prompted a flurry of news coverage and social media posts.

Many people seemed to know exactly what the earthquake was when it happened, but others suspected various alternative causes at first, reporting what sounded like continuous thunder or a large, low-passing aircraft.

A USGS shake map of the quake showed activity as far north as Columbus, Ohio, and as far south as Columbus, Georgia – a straight-line distance of nearly 530 miles.

“Aftershocks” can still occur, that is, smaller earthquakes that follow the “mainshock.” USGS gives a 21% chance of at least one aftershock of 3.0 magnitude or greater over the next month, though the forecast predicts just a 4% chance of a 4.0-plus aftershock in the same time period.

The rate of aftershocks decreases over time, “but may remain elevated over the following year or longer,” according to USGS.

To the newspaper’s knowledge, no major or even moderate damage has been reported either locally or near the epicenter on the outskirts of the Nantahala National Forest.

Again, strong

Indeed, the next step was to head to the state-level competition on May 9, where they competed with about 1,200 other 4-H shooters from across Georgia. Results will be published in an upcoming edition of the North Georgia News.

earthquakes are rare in this region, but people experiencing significant earthquakes are advised to DROP on their hands and knees to prevent being knocked over, COVER their head and neck with both arms if no shelter is available, and HOLD ON until the shaking stops.

“If you are INDOORS – STAY THERE!” per USGS. “Get under a desk or table and hang on to it ... or move into a hallway or against an inside wall. STAY CLEAR of windows, fireplaces, and heavy furniture or appliances.

“GET OUT of the kitchen, which is a dangerous place (things can fall on you). DON’T run downstairs or rush outside while the building is shaking or while there is danger of falling and hurting yourself or being hit by falling glass or debris.

“If you are OUTSIDE – get into the OPEN, away from buildings, power lines, chimneys, and anything else that might fall on you.

“If you are DRIVING – stop, but carefully. Move your car as far out of traffic as possible. DO NOT stop on or under a bridge or overpass or under trees, light posts, power lines, or signs.

“STAY INSIDE your car until the shaking stops. When you RESUME driving, watch for breaks in the pavement, fallen rocks, and bumps in the road at bridge approaches.

“If you are in a MOUNTAINOUS AREA – watch out for falling rock, landslides, trees, and other debris that could be loosened by quakes.”

“Vaccination & Microchip Community Clinic” at Mountain Shelter Humane Society - Keeping pets healthy



Vaccination & Microchip Community Clinic

If you’re a pet owner and missed the recent “Vaccination & Microchip Community Clinic” at the Education Center located at the Mountain Shelter Humane Society Thrift Store then you missed quite a day!

Mountain Shelter Humane Society teamed up with Nottely Oaks Animal Hospital to offer our mountain community free microchipping, free rabies vaccine for dogs and cats, free DHPP vaccine (a combination against four diseases: Distemper, Hepatitis, Parainfluenza, and Parvovirus). We also offered free nail trims

and other low-cost vaccines.

The results of the clinic were exceptionally good - 100 pets were microchipped and 330 pets received a total of 607 vaccinations. These numbers were far beyond what anyone had expected. The mission of the Clinic was to “Keep pets healthy. Keep pets safe. Keep families together.” That mission was certainly achieved.

Rob Medwed, Mountain Shelter Humane Society Board President stated “We could not have accomplished all we did without the generosity and work of the amazing folks of Nottely Oaks Animal

Hospital. We are proud to work together with them in serving our community. The attendance at the clinic was remarkable and certainly exceeded what we had expected. It was a great opportunity to see and talk with many devoted pet owners.”

Mountain Shelter Humane Society is planning other community events in support of our local pets. For information on future clinics and other pet related services follow the Mountain Shelter Humane Society Facebook page or visit our website www.mtnshelter.org.

UCHS Prom...from Page 1A

Herrera next year.

“I’m not backing down from my friend,” Herrera laughed, revealing that even her dress choice was special; she wore navy, honoring her birth father’s service in the United States Marines.

“(Prom) is awesome, and I especially love interacting with my friends and just enjoying it in general,” Gibson said. “It’s a year to remember for all of us.”

It was also an evening for puppy love. Addison Bridges and Dominick Tarbert have been dating for eight months, while Mason West and Emma

Nichols were already engaged.

Another young couple who met in theater class had only been together for two months but described their relationship as “ecstatic.” All three pairs agreed that prom was a wonderful opportunity to make memories with loved ones.

And on the subject of couples, one lucky duo was called to the front corner of the eponymous barn at the end of the night to accept their crowns and sashes as UCHS royalty.

Travis Tracy and Lydia Wagner were crowned Prom King and Queen respectively,

enjoying a slow dance to Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide” while surrounded by their cheering classmates and friends.

“It feels amazing. We’ve been together for a while now, and it’s a great honor,” Wagner said of the accomplishment, with Tracy echoing the sentiment. Looking back on their relationship, they agreed that theirs was a case of friends falling head over heels for each other. Winning their crowns was just another defining moment.

The pair plan on attending Georgia Highlands College after graduating this month, though they want to go into different fields. As

an avid outdoorsman and a fan of hunting and fishing, Tracy wants to become a game warden. Meanwhile, Wagner hopes to be a dental hygienist,

having been inspired by the kindness of hygienists at her own dentist’s office.

“It’s bittersweet,” Tracy said, reflecting on prom night

as a senior, though Wagner had to admit that with their victory and the presence of so many supportive friends, it was also “the best night ever.”



A time-tested tradition, the May 10 prom offered Union County’s up and coming adults a chance to cut loose before the end of the school year.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Prom serves as a place to make lasting memories among friends, as captured in this photo of local young gentlemen dressed to the nines.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Flag Retirement...from Page 1A



Local Cubs and Scouts joined Union and Towns county veterans for a patriotic flag retirement ceremony on Saturday.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

experienced a flag retirement ceremony before that day called the show of respect “beautiful,” with grateful tears in her eyes.

“Remember that our flag is very important to us. We honor the flag, and it’s one of the reasons why we go to war – to fight for our country and fight for our flag,” said veteran Mel Halfon, opening the events of the morning after attendees enjoyed some sweet refreshments.

A brief invocation followed courtesy of Chaplain Scott Drummond, who drew parallels between the final rites of flags and people, referring to the Bible’s phrasing of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

“These flags are symbolic of the greatest sovereign republic established by mankind,” Drummond stated.

Mike Merritt, Commander of the American Legion Post 121 in Blairsville and the proud father of newly graduated scout Kevin Merritt, voiced his appreciation for having been invited out to the proceedings, and it was his son and wife who dispatched the first flag of the day.

As is custom, each child is paired with a veteran. Typically, the child is

responsible for carrying the flag, which is aged or damaged beyond suitable display. On that day, the task intimidated a few of the youngest Cubs, and so their veterans braved the smoke and heat by leading the way.

Two firepits were set up outside the VFW building to dispose of the tired iterations of Old Glory. Per the ceremony, after each child-veteran pairing approached the fire, the flag was regarded with respect and saluted during its final sendoff to be consumed by flames.

While all of the Scouts hailed from Union County, most of the veterans were Towns County residents. But no matter where they lived, they shared in the camaraderie of learning how to handle one of the nation’s most potent symbols, with can-do kids following true American heroes to lay faded flags to rest.

Because of the sheer number of flags collected for the cause, every pair made several rounds, each time treating the process with the proper dignity it called for.

Outside of important experience, kids got something else out of the event – a pamphlet detailing proper flag etiquette. While the scouts were

able to watch how to properly retire the American flag, they also took home reading that defines proper flag handling and why those customs are in place.

For example, one of the first points in the book regards the Pledge of Allegiance. Line by line, the meaning behind the vow is explained, and even the manner of delivery addressed. A step-by-step graph illustrates how to fold the flag, and there’s even a section debunking the top 10 flag myths.

Halfon surprised Pack 101 by presenting a check for \$200 to the Scouts on behalf of the American Legion, hoping to support local youth with more educational programs and access to quality equipment.

That said, there were talks between veterans and Scout leaders about organizing future collaborations, specifically a luncheon between Post 7807 and the Scouts. While there is no set date, the goal is to inspire more interest in the armed forces.

At the very least, there’s a hope that it will garner support for veterans and awareness of the issues they face when they return home – and, subsequently, how Scouts might be able to help.

Joint Meeting...from Page 1A



(L-R) Voter Registration Director Krystal Berry and Deputy Registrar Nora Milam in last week’s joint board meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

voter registrations, voter roll maintenance, and all early voting.

Only two counties in Georgia have separate boards governing elections and registration, the other being Chatham County.

Historically, the probate judge ran elections in Union County, but to offload that responsibility, state lawmakers were requested in 2001 to introduce legislation known as a “local act” at the Georgia General Assembly, which created the standalone Union County Board of Elections.

The boards have worked together and served the county well for a quarter of a century, but the population is growing, and the Elections Board noted last week that combining would put Union in line with the rest of the state and provide seamless continuity in future elections.

Additionally, Elections Board members are concerned about the quality of future elections given that current board membership will be aging out soon, and newer members appointed to replace them may not receive the same level of election training given changing state requirements.

Elections Chair Libby Stevens said this would be a good time to consider combining, especially since the boards are now conveniently located in the same building and the county has new leadership among its local political parties and the Commissioner’s Office.

Hence the called meeting, to give the boards running room to work out the details before the big mid-term elections next year.

The members of the Board of Registrars, however, showed no interest in combining the boards.

A joint board would likely require the General Assembly to pass more local act legislation, and if combined, the current boards would be dissolved, and a new five-member board would be created.

But Board of Registrars members have concerns over how members of such a joint board would be appointed.

For the five-person Elections Board, the Republican and Democratic parties each nominate two members for appointment, while the commissioner nominates a member of his own choosing. Registrars, on the other hand, are nominated from recommendations made to the Union County Grand Jury.

For registrars, the primary concern seemed to be

that people with highly partisan political motives could be nominated to a newly combined board, which in their eyes would potentially threaten the integrity of the apolitical work done by the Registrar’s Office.

The members of both boards decided to table the discussion that day, potentially to be revisited after the 2026 mid-term elections, but the boards came together on several compromises in their meeting.

In recognition that both boards serve the same ultimate purpose, that is, ensuring free and fair elections in Union County, moving forward, the boards will be scheduling their meetings together starting in July.

From a cross-training perspective, this will enable greater overlap in shared knowledge so each board is more aware of what the other is doing, and if the boards eventually do combine, the closer working relationships being forged today will make the transition smoother down the line.

The boards are also considering the establishment of a single phone number for use by the public for all registration and election-related questions to make a more efficient, user-friendly experience for voters.

County Attorney William Mercer mediated the discussion, and he will be looking into the possibility of a dedicated staff person being designated elections superintendent in place of the Elections Board, which itself is not involved in any day-to-day activities but serves as needed.

Both boards seemed amenable to housing the duties of supervising elections and registrations under one employee at the Voting Center to bring stability and continuity to these important tasks.

The most likely candidate to fill such a position is Voter Registration Director Krystal Berry, who currently works at the pleasure of the Board of Registrars. If she performed combined duties, she would be subject to oversight by both boards.

Commissioner Harold Collins attended, and these compromises aligned with his own thinking on the matter. Due to county growth, he has already budgeted for an additional Voting Center employee to help regardless of whether Berry takes over supervising elections.

Resident Sylvia Munson attended and made a couple of observations, including that operating outside the state norm necessarily results in

inefficiencies, as would being a county employee working at the behest of two different boards, and she recommended a robustly defined process for such working conditions.

The History of MASONIC APRONS

The MASONIC TRESTLEBOARD

Whitey White



History of Masonic Aprons: Part 3

According to the Museum of Freemasonry, which is associated with the United Grand Lodge of England, Freemasons have worn aprons since the first symbolic lodge began at least three centuries ago. But the ritual and practical use of aprons predates our fraternity by centuries, and they are even referenced in The Book of Genesis in the Old Testament.

Before Freemasons donned their ritualistic aprons, the stonemasons wore aprons to protect their clothing from

wear and dust. Unlike the ones we wear to Lodge, the original aprons worn by operative masons were made of leather and large enough to cover the wearer from chest to ankles. As the number and size of stonemasons’ guilds grew across Europe, they attracted others who sought the supportive community provided by the lodge. As a result, men who were not stonemasons joined the lodge and became known as “accepted” or “speculative” Masons while the craftsmen adopted the moniker of “free” Masons. Together they became known as the “Free and Accepted” Masons from which modern Freemasonry has descended.

Over time, the apron evolved from the utilitarian garment of the stonemasons to the symbolic garment worn by Freemasons. It is thought that ornate aprons emerged as a way for speculative Freemasons to distinguish themselves from the operative stonemasons.