

North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Wednesday, July 10, 2024

Freedom celebrated with fireworks at Meeks Park

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Leading up to the Annual Red, White & Blairsville Fireworks last Thursday, area families enjoyed many Fourth of July activities inside Meeks Park, such as bouncy houses, barbecue and playing ball, to name a few.

For the nation's 248th birthday, plenty of folks had a fun day that wrapped up with an explosive show in the sky.

Spread out across the upper and lower ballfields of the park, the event can almost be considered more of a meeting ground, with options for free food like the aforementioned barbecue sandwiches and snow cones made available for those who wanted to stay for the long haul.

See Blairsville Fireworks, Page 6A



Meeks Park and the immediate area filled with thousands of people – families, friends and patriots – to celebrate the birth of this great nation on July 4. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Sky over Suches lights up for Independence Day

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

SUCHES – For years, the Valley Above the Clouds' annual Independence Day fireworks display at Woody Gap School has leaned on a tried-and-true recipe of merging a city-sized spectacle with a small-town backdrop.

The July 4 event, presented by Union County Fire Department's Station No. 5, was once one of North Georgia's best-kept secrets, but as the crowds grow each year, it seems word is leaking out.

A favorite tale among the locals is how the Suches' festivities have grown from humble origins many decades ago.

While the exact year of its inception remains uncertain,

See Suches Fireworks, Page 7A



Hundreds of people attended the annual Fourth of July fireworks at Woody Gap School in Suches – and they were not disappointed. Photo by Todd Forrest

Blairsville youth remembered in 'Celebration of Life'

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

A grieving Blairsville community honored the life of 19-year-old Noah Bryant Helton during a celebration of life ceremony at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center on Sunday, July 7.

Helton passed away peacefully following a brief illness on Monday, July 1, surrounded by family at Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville.

Born May 31, 2005, the son of Nathan Helton and Tina Burnette Cunningham, Noah Helton was a lifelong resident of Union County and a 2023 graduate of Union County High School who had a history of epileptic seizures, according to the family.

Hundreds of people attended the Sunday ceremony, which was officiated by the Rev. Jerry Helton and the Rev. Nathan Helton; Kim Thomas, Ashley Helton and Madison Torres provided music.

Special speakers included Noah's brother Aaron Helton, cousin Kaylee Helton, Union County Offensive Line Coach Tyler Perry, and friends Luke Kough and Grayson Franklin.

During the opening, Jerry Helton discussed the hardships of losing a loved one at such a young age and urged those suffering to put their faith in God.

"We're going to grieve and shed tears with this family, but let's laugh and remember the goodness of God," he said. "It's (the Helton family's)

prayer that when we all leave here today, we can say that it's been good to be in the presence of God and that our eyes would have shifted from the focus of things we don't understand from this past week, and that we would lift our eyes to the glory that Noah is enjoying now."

While Noah's love for football and WWE wrestling were a common thread among all the speakers, his passion for sharing his love for Jesus Christ always struck the most resonating chord with everyone who crossed his path.

During the service, friends and family shared some of Noah's writings discovered on his phone the week following his death. One noteworthy piece on the Gospel of Jesus delivered a profound insight into his faith.

"The word Gospel means 'good news.' It's pretty important to understand that," Noah Helton wrote. "The Bible is not a book that tells us what we have to do to earn salvation, it is a book that tells us what God did to earn our salvation. What He did was send Jesus."

"Jesus did for us what we could never do for ourselves, and He paid for what we had done in His body on the cross. He died for our sins. That gave us the ability to believe in God so that we may live eternally."

Later, his stepmom Rachel Helton shared a paragraph from "The Story of Noah," a self-titled autobiography Noah was working on unbeknownst to his family. The excerpt she shared provided a touching insight into

See Noah Helton, Page 9A



Noah Helton

UCFD fights two fires after July 4th celebrations

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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The Union County Fire Department responded to two accidental fires roughly six hours apart last Thursday night into Friday morning.

Firefighters were just returning from being on hand for the community fireworks at Meeks Park when the E-911 Center dispatched them to a residential structure fire around 11:15 p.m. on July 4.

Two vehicles had caught fire at a Poppet Lane residence off Blue Ridge Highway, and the flames had spread to a garage that was attached to

See Accidental Fires, Page 2A



Firefighters believe this shed fire likely started from a fireworks accident in the early morning hours of July 5. Photo/Facebook

Wrong-way crash on 515 sends six to area hospitals

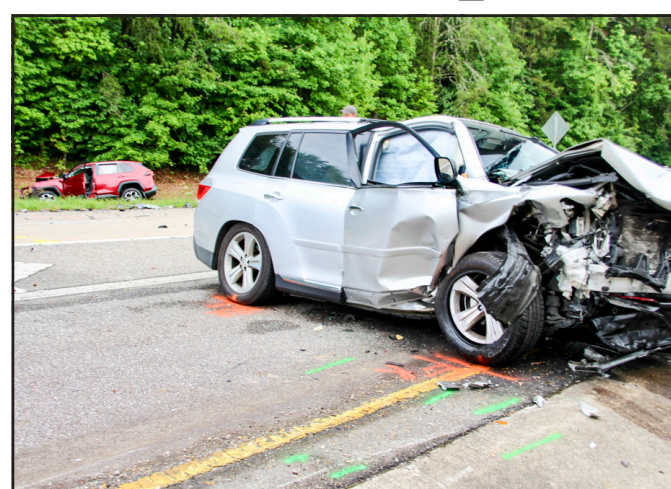
By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Four children and two adults were hospitalized for injuries sustained in a three-car accident after a Blairsville woman drove the wrong way down Georgia 515 on Friday, July 5.

At press time, the newspaper had not learned why the driver of a 2022 Toyota RAV4 was heading west toward Blue Ridge in the left eastbound lane of Georgia 515, resulting in the crash.

The accident occurred around 4:40 p.m. in the stretch of highway just west of Airport

See Wrong-Way Crash, Page 6A



The eastbound lanes of Georgia 515 shut down for about three hours Friday evening after a three-car crash that sent a half dozen people to the hospital. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Sheriff's Office recovers \$37,000 in latest scam investigation

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Sheriff's Office recovered \$37,000 for a computer scam victim last month.

Time is of the essence in such recoveries, as scams involving the internet, phone calls and even mailed letters are incredibly difficult to investigate – let alone prosecute – due to the non-local nature of the crimes.

Fortunately, this scam victim came forward quickly

enough to enable UCSO Inv. Bob Calamari to reclaim some of the money she lost, but the victim is still out \$45,000 that may end up being unrecoverable.

The scam in question first appeared on the radar of the Sheriff's Office on Friday, June 14, when the management of Ingles in Blairsville reached out to local law enforcement to describe an incident that occurred inside the grocery store, Calamari said.

An elderly woman had entered the store with a large

amount of cash and was in the process of depositing the money into a Coinstar machine when a manager noticed her and asked if she was being scammed, Calamari said.

The woman, who was on the phone with someone at the time, said no and asked to be left alone, remarking that the deposit was something she had to do. Alarmed by her behavior, the manager asked if she was sure she didn't need help, at which point she gathered up her remaining cash and left in a hurry.

Believing the woman to be a scam victim, the manager contacted the Sheriff's Office.

Calamari reviewed security footage of the incident on Monday, June 17, prior to any scam being reported. But without a victim coming forward, and with no positive ID on the woman in the video, the Sheriff's Office could not follow up for more information.

Later that Monday, a woman called UCSO to say she believed she had been the victim of a scam. The Sheriff's

See Scam Investigation, Page 2A



The Sheriff's Office has had multiple recent successes in recovering money for scam victims.



Vol. 115 No. 29

Arrests - 2B Legals - 9B
Church - 3B Obits - 4B
Classifieds - 9B Sports - 8A
Opinion - 4A

Historic Courthouse 125th Birthday Event

See Page 2A

Home & Garden Shows to Return July 20-21

See Page 1B

Union Co. Canning Plant Now Open for Season

See Page 6B



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Scam Investigation...from Page 1A

Office took a report, and when Calamari met with her the next day, he confirmed that she was in fact the woman he had seen in the security footage from Ingles.

As it turned out, the woman had fallen victim to a common computer scam, Calamari said.

While at home the evening of Thursday, June 13, the woman's computer froze, displaying a notification allegedly from Microsoft claiming the machine had been compromised. The notification directed her to call a specific

number for help, which she did.

Impersonating a Microsoft employee, the man on the other end of the line said that child pornography had been purchased on her computer, and that he could remove the images and clear the matter up without a prosecution if she made a series of payments, Calamari said.

What followed was a fleecing to the tune of \$82,000. First, she was to deposit \$37,000 for a cryptocurrency purchase at the Coinstar machine in Ingles, which she set about doing the next day.

When she withdrew cash from United Community Bank on June 14, she was greeted with skepticism by a bank employee who asked if she was being scammed, which Calamari said was protocol. Still, she insisted on withdrawing the money and subsequently went to Ingles.

At the Coinstar machine, she bypassed an alert warning people not to deposit money if they think they are being scammed, and when the manager approached, the scammer, who insisted he remain on the phone during the scam, told the woman to leave the store immediately, Calamari said.

The scammer then directed her to the Ingles in Hiwassee to finish depositing the cash, after which she

traveled to three Home Depot stores – in Blairsville, Blue Ridge and Dahlonega – to buy 12 gift cards totaling \$20,000.

In the meantime, the victim had given the scammer access to her computer, resulting in \$8,100 being drained from one of her retirement accounts, and the scam continued in Gainesville as the woman drove to a convenience store there to deposit \$16,900 in a Coinhub Bitcoin ATM, Calamari said.

After she reported the crime, Calamari called a Coinstar executive with whom he has developed a working relationship through similar past scam investigations, and Coinstar temporarily disabled the two Ingles machines to give him time to physically retrieve the deposited money.

The woman is grateful to the Sheriff's Office for returning nearly half of her cash, and at press time, reverse transactions were being sought for the retirement fund money and the Gainesville crypto machine.

Unfortunately, by the time the Sheriff's Office got involved, the victim had already turned over the Home Depot gift card numbers to the scammer, which he redeemed.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation is assisting in the investigation, and the FBI has been notified.

According to Calamari,

people fall victim to such scams because they panic at the thought of being investigated and prosecuted for crimes they clearly did not commit, becoming desperate to avoid arrest and clear their names quickly.

And the elderly are at a particular disadvantage as scam targets, as they are less tech savvy, usually more trusting of others, and much more likely to have amassed money after a lifetime of work than younger individuals, Calamari said.

To combat scams, last year, the Sheriff's Office created a new position inside its Criminal Investigation Division to focus on financial crimes and fraud. Calamari, a seasoned law enforcement officer with years of experience in criminal investigations, took on this new role.

Since then, Calamari and the Sheriff's Office have worked diligently to educate the public about scams by hosting community classes, publicizing popular scams on the agency's Facebook page, and highlighting the details of such crimes in local media.

Raising awareness is an important aspect of protecting residents from scams, as, at present day, it is much easier to prevent scams in the first place than to hold criminals accountable who may be operating from anywhere in the world.

Accidental Fires...from Page 1A

the house, Fire Capt. Justin Blanchard said.

The occupants of the home were in bed when the fire started and did not immediately react to a series of minor explosions, thinking they were hearing fireworks. The residents went to investigate, however, after something hit a window of the home.

As they were about to head outside, a third-party witness knocked at the door to alert them that their house was on fire, and they called the Fire Department.

Upon arrival, firefighters quickly extinguished the vehicle fires and flames in the garage, sparing fire damage to the living quarters of the residence, though some smoke damage occurred inside the home.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation but is believed to have started in one of the two destroyed vehicles, both of which had been driven that day, and Blanchard said no foul play is suspected.

Fortunately, no one was injured, and the Fire

Department was able to find temporary lodging for the residents with assistance from the American Red Cross.

Fire Stations 1, 2, 3, 4 and 13 responded, including both career and volunteer firefighters. Also responding were Union General EMS, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC and the Sheriff's Office.

"It was definitely good coordination between all the departments," Capt. Blanchard said. "We appreciate the Sheriff's Office coming out to assist us as well."

Firefighters left the scene around 2 a.m., with volunteers returning home and career guys heading back to Fire Stations 1 and 13. They went to bed around 3 a.m. following cleanup at the stations, only to be dispatched to another fire a couple hours later, around 5:30 a.m. on July 5.

The second structure fire occurred at a storage shed on the residential property of the owners of 7M Family Farms off Crump Creek Road, though the farm itself did not experience the fire, Blanchard said.

A family member who was passing by on their way to work saw the fire and woke up the owners.

When firefighters arrived, the shed was fully engulfed in flames that thankfully did not spread to the nearby home, though plenty was lost in the shed fire, including family photos, tools and even a wedding dress, according to the owners.

The cause is still under investigation, but the Fire Department believes the blaze started from an ember lit by fireworks that were set off on the property the night before, as there was no power to the shed or combustible equipment inside. No foul play is suspected, Blanchard said.

There were no injuries in the fire, and firefighters were able to save multiple chickens in a pen attached to the shed.

Responding were Stations 1, 3 and 13, which made quick work of the fire and cleared the scene around 7:15 on Friday morning.

Children's Summer Art Classes at Artisan Center

Mountain Regional Arts and Crafts Guild is excited to announce the 2024 children's summer art program! Classes will start the week of July 8 and run for 3 weeks. The cost per child, per class is \$12 and includes all supplies.

Classes will be held at ArtWorks Artisan Center, 243 Big Sky Drive, Hiwassee, GA. The children's summer arts program is part of our community outreach program.

Class Schedule: July 11 - 10:30 AM to Noon - Pop-up

Cards (2 of 2 sessions) - ages 6+. July 11- 1 PM to 2:30 PM - Bug Magnets -ages 6+. July 16 - 10:30 AM to Noon - Wind-chimes - ages 8+. July 16 - 1 PM to 2:30 PM - Rainbow Suncatcher -ages 8+. July 18 - 10:30 AM to Noon - Marble Mania Painting - ages 6+. July 18 - 1 PM to 2:30 PM - Bubble Painting - ages 8+. July 23 - 10:30 AM to Noon - Painted Slate Rocks- ages 6+. July 23 - 1 PM to 2:30 PM - Painted Flower on Canvas - ages 8+. July 25 - 10:30 AM to Noon - String Art - ages 8+. July 25

- 1 PM to 2:- Plastic Canvas Picture - ages 8+.

To register your child or grandchild, please visit our website www.mountainarts-crafts.org.

A link for the schedule and registration paperwork are on the main page. You can drop off the registration form at the store. Payment is required at the time of registration.

Please call for ArtWorks Artisan Center at 706-896-0932 for more information. Classes are small and fill quickly.

25th Annual Butternut Creek Festival July 20th & 21st

Twenty-five years ago a small group gathered together to create a truly traditional arts and craft show. This would be an opportunity for local artists and craftsmen to sell and share their works with the general public in a pleasant and inviting setting. High Country Artisans, Inc. was formed and they created what is now the 25th Annual Butternut Creek Festival. The show has garnered awards along the way that recognize the quality and popularity of the event.

On July 20 and 21 the Butternut Creek Festival will welcome attendees from afar and locally to a free admission, free parking with shuttle service event. In addition to 85 crafters, artists and demonstrators, there will be great food and enjoyable music for all to enjoy.

This popular arts and craft show is always held the third weekend in July. It is set along the shaded banks of Butternut Creek in Blairsville's beautiful Meeks Park. The festival hours on Saturday, July 20th are 10 AM to 5 PM. On Sunday, July 21, the show runs from 10 AM to 4 PM.

The High Country Artisans, Inc. a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization coordinates the show. Its membership consist of local artists and crafters who volunteer their time and efforts to create a show that promotes functional and creative arts for everyone in the North Georgia



Mountains. The proceeds from the show are used primarily to support the art programs in the Union County and Woody Gap School systems. In addition other art programs are helped throughout the community.

There will be a wide variety of artisans participating in the show. Old favorites that attendees look for each year will return, plus there a number of new crafters offering exciting items for our attendees to enjoy. The art categories you will see include furniture, pottery, jewelry, fabric art, pillows, purses, candles, soaps, hand-carved old world Santas, lathe turned and other wood products, oil and water color paintings, a caricature artist, photography, metal art, knives, gourds, wind chimes, glass, yard art, birdhouses, hand-crafted leather, musical instruments, scarves, quilts, sculpture and clothing.

Jason Hamilton, "I Saw A Bear", will be demonstrating his artistic chainsaw carving skills both days of the show. John, Judy and Lance Ziegler known to many in our area as the Arts of Critter Ridge, will

be showing off their blacksmithing skills, and don't forget Judy's beautiful gourds. The Blairsville Cruisers will be on hand selling their famous car raffle tickets.

Entertainment has always been a great part of the show. This year's line-up has Ben Bostick playing at 10:30 AM, Jeannie Caryn will entertain at 12:30 PM and Country River Band will start playing at 2:30 PM. Sunday's entertainment includes Gospel Favorites at 10:30 AM, Johnathon Heilbroun entertains at 12:30 PM and Country River Band is back to provide us with a great selection of traditional country music at 2 PM.

Bring your family and friends for an enjoyable day. For more information go to www.butternutcreekfestival.com, butternutcreekfestival@gmail.com, visit us on Facebook at [ButternutCreekArtFestival](https://www.facebook.com/ButternutCreekArtFestival) or leave a message at 706-781-1221. One other reminder, although we all love pets, the Recreation Department does not allow animals in this section of the park.

Blairsville Fireworks...from Page 1A

The skate park was open and there were raffles to join, such as those offered by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce and Full Throttle Ministries. Tanner Smith took home the chamber's big bundle of goodies, dubbed "Where Mountains and Memories Meet."

Full Throttle Ministries, however, had an intriguing plan for those who wanted raffle tickets for a chance to win a big-screen TV.

"All they had to do was listen to one of our people that are running around share their testimony and learn a little bit about Jesus, and then they could register for the drawing," said Monique Lloydlee, adding that one person "turned her life over to Jesus" because of the opportunity.

Others, after setting up blankets or towels and folding chairs, made their own fun. While some kids blew bubbles or kicked around a soccer ball, the Engbreth boys, Tripp and Wyatt, had a blast rolling balls down a hill.

Their father, Gunnar, said that this was the family's first time spending the Fourth at Meeks; they had previously visited for Halloween and other events, and after their church recommended the outing, the Engbreths decided to take a chance for Independence Day.

"So far, it's been great. Very friendly, very not crowded – not to say it's underwhelming, but it's very easy to be mobile and free and run around and do things. The free food is great, and it's been a great time," said Gunnar between reminding Tripp not to get too far up the hill.

Indeed, they weren't the only ones who had gathered that evening. Chamber President Steve Rowe said that last year, about 18,000 people showed up to share their patriotism around Meeks Park, North Georgia Technical College and all the way down toward LongHorn Steakhouse.

That said, Rowe and Chamber Director of Operations & Marketing Crystal Fairless agreed that this year seemed to garner more attention. There was certainly more traffic, but the weather seemed to have an impact on when people decided to show up.

"It was a late-arriving crowd because it was so hot, but they really packed in (when they arrived)," Rowe said. For her part, Fairless estimated that at least 10,000 people were at Meeks alone this time around.

Even if they were trying to beat the heat, anyone and everyone was welcome to attend because it was about more than just fireworks.

"The Fourth of July makes me appreciate being an American, because I think it gives us an opportunity to reflect on the freedoms that we have and honor independence," said Hunter Bennett, who had much on his mind, even while watching his kids play with sparklers.

"Today is the day that really gives us an opportunity to set aside political differences to really love each other and enjoy celebrating together," Bennett concluded.

For some, the holiday took on a more personal meaning. Navy Veteran Bill Earl served on a ship in Vietnam, launching planes.



Young Rosie Turner and sisters Lily and Michelle had the honor of "lighting" this year's fireworks in Meeks Park by flipping the giant switch.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

When he thinks about what the country means to him, he thinks of the friends he lost in the name of its defense, and how close he came to losing family.

"That's my brother-in-law," Earl said, pointing proudly to Joel Daniel, a retired Marine. "They threw him out in the dead pile in Vietnam. And they were loading him up to put him in a body bag, and two days later, he woke up. And he's a hero."

Earl continues to serve his country, albeit in other ways, as he helped pack up tents, cords and tables on the lower field as the sun began to set.

"It means a good deal, and this really makes me feel good, to see all these people come out," Earl said. "And all these people serving each other, that's what it's about; that's what makes it the Fourth of July."

The culmination of the day's events and the display everyone had been waiting for started a little after 9:30 p.m. As is tradition, the big "light switch" that signaled the beginning of the fireworks was flipped by some lucky viewers, and this year, that honor went

to little Rosie Turner along with sisters Lily and Michelle.

For about 15 minutes, fireworks of varying shapes, intensities, and colors soared across the stars to a backdrop of patriotic country music. Sparks flew and the blasts screamed and popped like rockets, but all eyes remained skyward for the duration of the show. Even afterward, a quick "second round" fired off as the crowds began to clear out and head home.

Charles and Leena Sutton lingered to watch the finale, and Leena was reminded of the country she was born in. So many people in the Netherlands were grateful to the American soldiers for freeing them from Nazi occupation in World War II, and she couldn't help but be reminded of Liberation Day celebrations when observing the festivities of July 4 in the United States.

"I think (the fireworks) were great. Fantastic. Beautiful," said Leena, adding that being in America, for her, means freedom above all else.

Charles Sutton, a veteran and a missionary, agreed: "She's still the greatest country in the world."



America turned 248 years old last week as people around the nation – including Meeks Park – celebrated with fireworks and fond feelings for freedom.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Wrong-Way Crash...from Page 1A

Industrial Road between Meeks Park and Walmart, shutting down the eastbound lanes of travel for over three hours.

According to the Georgia State Patrol, a 2022 Jeep Wagoneer and a 2013 Toyota Highlander were traveling east toward Blairsville in the same lane as the approaching RAV4.

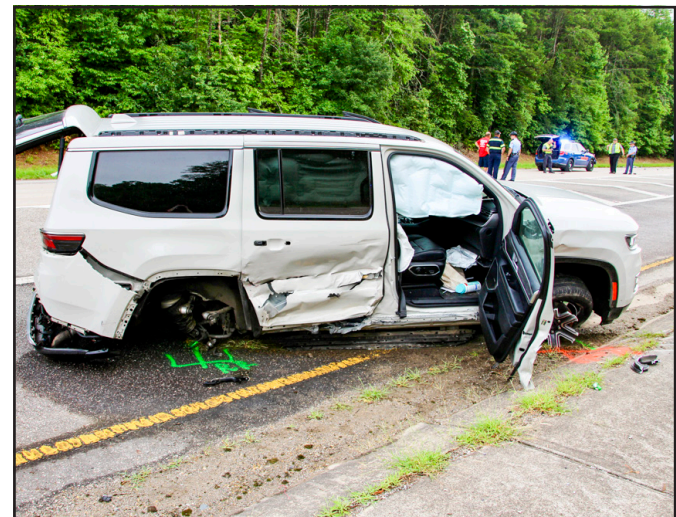
The driver of the Wagoneer swerved to avoid a head-on collision with the RAV4, but the passenger side of the Jeep was struck by the oncoming vehicle. Continuing west in the eastbound lanes, the RAV4 struck the front of the Highlander head-on, per GSP.

Multiple life flights with crews from both the AirLife and Life Force medical helicopters transported seriously injured patients to out of town hospitals, while others were taken locally to Union General Hospital.

All told, 12 people were involved in the crash that injured six, and the latest conditions of the injured parties were not available at press time.

The RAV4 had one occupant, the driver from Blairsville, who was taken to Northeast Georgia Medical Center with serious injuries.

The Wagoneer carried six people, including three adults from Blairsville and three children. An 88-year-old occupant of this vehicle went to



One of the six people traveling in this 2022 Jeep Wagoneer had to be hospitalized locally after the vehicle was struck by a wrong-way driver July 5.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Union General for treatment of her injuries.

And the Highlander contained one adult from Atlanta and four children. All the children in the Highlander were taken for medical treatment, two to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta with serious injuries and the other two to Union General with injuries.

As the crash remains under investigation, including by the Georgia State Patrol Specialized Collision Reconstruction Team, contributing factors were not

available for publication, nor was information regarding potential charges for the wrong-way driver.

Agencies responding to the accident were Union County Fire Station No. 1, Union County EMS, Union County Sheriff's Office, Blairsville Police Department, Georgia State Patrol and medical helicopter crews.

Sheriff Mack Mason mobilized a detainee crew from the Union County Jail to speed up the clearing of wreck debris from the highway, which reopened around 8 p.m. on Friday.

Suches Fireworks...from Page 1A

the tradition began with a handful of locals firing bottle rockets at the Suches General Store. As spectators gathered there over the years, it became apparent that the fireworks display needed to expand, resulting in yearly trips to Tennessee for pyrotechnics with a little more bang and boom.

However, as the firework runs became more costly, help was needed. And, once again, members of the Suches community delivered by donating money and selling food and drinks at the event to raise funds for the following year.

"It started out as a small group, mostly fire department,

gathered at the store buying fireworks out of their own pocket," said Doug Pruitt, the lieutenant in charge of Station 5. "Then the community got involved and we moved down (to the school) in the 1990s and started soliciting donations, and things just grew.

"Now, we're putting on about a 40-minute show, and we've had some really good feedback on it."

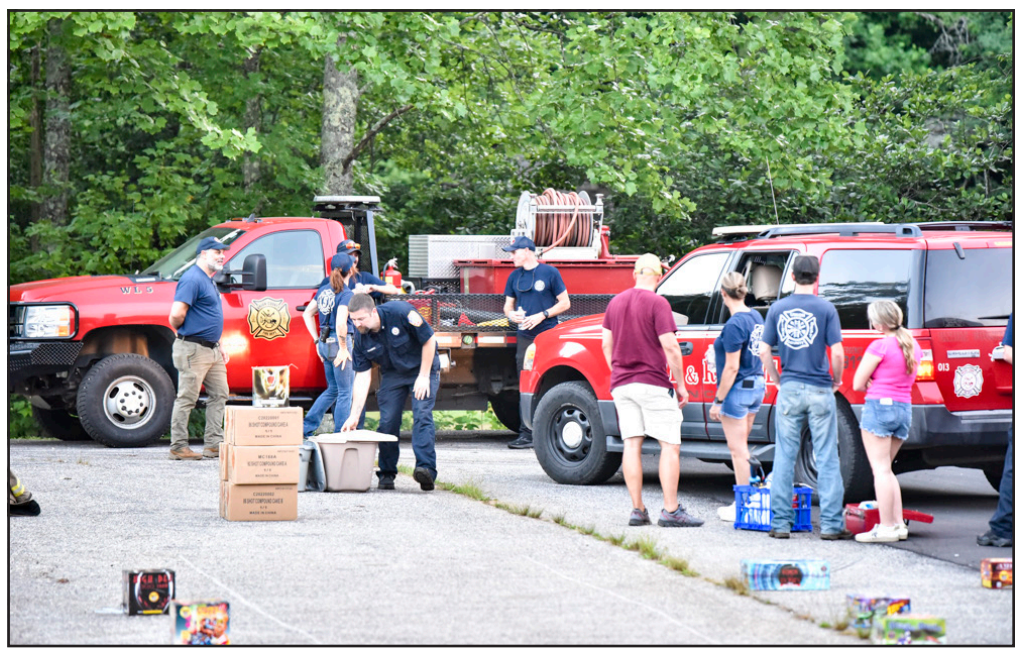
Hours before sunset last Thursday, chairs began unfolding on and around the field behind Woody Gap School, eventually filling the areas around the parking lot, gymnasium and school building.

As crowds grew, visitors

filled most of the parking lot and grassy places on the other side of Georgia 60 at the Suches Community Center and Fire Station No. 5.

Youngsters passed the time with sparklers, frisbees and footballs as the grown-ups caught up with friends and family while relaxing and trying to keep cool on the hot July evening.

Around 9:15 p.m., emcee Larry Wood stepped onstage to introduce his granddaughter Nealy Webster to perform the National Anthem. The Cleveland resident sang for another 15 minutes, allowing firefighters a few moments to put the finishing touches on their pyrotechnic



Suches Fire Station No. 5 setting up before the big show July 4.

Photo by Todd Forrest



Hours before the fireworks even began, children had fun running around the field at Woody Gap School last Thursday.

Photo by Todd Forrest

Blue Ridge Mountain Conservation District Accepting Olin Hughes Memorial Scholarship Applications



The Blue Ridge Mountain Conservation District is accepting applications for the Olin Hughes Memorial Scholarship. This opportunity is for college sophomores, juniors, and seniors from the district which includes Towns, Union, Rabun, Fannin Counties. The

\$1000 scholarship is for students actively engaged in a field of study related to agriculture, forestry, environmental science or soil and water conservation. Please visit the Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District web page to download the application. Applications should be completed and returned to BRMSWCD 165 Wellborn St, Box3, Blairsville, Ga 30512 by September 9, 2024.

The Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conserva-

tion District is a unit of state government that manages and directs natural resource management programs in Fannin, Rabun, Towns and Union Counties. The District works with farmers, landowners, homeowners, and with other units of government to educate and actively promote programs and practices that support the conservation, and use and development of soil, water, and related resources. More information can be found at www.gacd.us/blueridgemountain.

extravaganza.

At approximately 9:30 p.m., Wood offered one last call for visitors to find their preferred vantage points as the final bit of daylight disappeared from the clear Suches night.

For over 40 minutes, an assortment of colors filled the darkened sky, slightly ahead of the blasts reverberating through the nearby hills and hollers of Southern Union County.

According to Lt. Pruitt, there is much more than

just lighting fuses on July 4. Station 5 undergoes the Georgia permitting process, ordering fireworks through the vendor and then estimating the crowd size before stocking concessions.

For the display itself, Station 5 relies on about 15 people, including all the necessary precautions such as a safety briefing ahead of the event.

"This is strictly a fire department-sponsored event,"

he said. "We have a lot of people that help out with money and people that walk through the crowd with a boot to accept donations.

"I've never gotten a true count on the number of people that attend, but they are happy to be out here and glad to help in any way possible. We want to thank all our sponsors; we couldn't do it without them and everyone who comes out to celebrate our nation's independence."

Noah Helton...from Page 1A

Noah's relationship with his father, Nathan.

"Now let's talk about my dad," Noah wrote. "(He is) the best father I could have ever asked for. He is very strong in his faith in God, and that's most important. Dad had just went through a very traumatic time and he showed us he was Godly and trustworthy throughout it all.

"I have very fond memories of playing games with my brothers and my dad. Dad would always make sure we felt his love and his support. Above all, Dad led us with scripture and biblical knowledge. We prayed together and read together every night, and I am thankful."

Noah is survived by his brother Aaron Helton and

sister-in-law MaKenna Helton; brother Elijah Helton; sister Miriam Grace Cunningham; brother Zeke Ellis; grandparents Terry and Darlene Helton, and Ron and Susie Winkler; and girlfriend Ineska "Inna" Harbovska.

Pallbearers included Aaron Helton, Zeke Helton, Elijah Helton, Brayden Torres, Isaiah Ortiz and Franklin for

the graveside service that occurred on Monday, July 8, at House of Prayer Church Cemetery. The Union County Panthers football team served as honorary pallbearers.

At the family's request, donations may be made to Luther Jones Football Camp or to Canal Lake Bible Camp in Noah's memory.



UCHS offensive line coach Tyler Perry speaks during the service.



Noah Helton served as a team captain during the 2022 season.



Noah Helton (No. 67) with family during his Senior Night recognition in November 2022. Photos by Todd Forrest

Retirement...from Page 8A

going back to Kolt in 2008," Allison said. "But things really started rolling in 2013 with Joe, who came in right after T Bentley, who was another good quarterback. But when Joe took over we had a phenomenal run with Joe, Cole and Pierson.

"It shows that when you have a consistency with your coaching staff, things start to build and build. I think that was a huge part of it. Administratively, we were in a good situation in that time period. The community was supportive and overall, it was a great time to be a Union County Panther."

On top of the graduation losses of Pierson Allison, Sawyer Drake (WR) and current FSU star Kyle Morlock (WR) in 2020, COVID-19 threw another wrench into Brian Allison's final season. Forced to rework their schedule and pick up games during the season, the Panthers still finished third in 8-AA with a 4-6 overall record but suffered a last-minute playoff loss at Heard County in Brian Allison's last game with the Panthers.

"That was a crazy year with no spring practice and social distancing," he said. "I hope and pray that no one ever has to go through that again. It



L-R: Todd Forrest, Brian Allison and assistant coach James Avery following a Union win. Photo/Jenni Dixon

was miserable. Everything has changed since then in the way education is done."

Brian Allison left to take over a brand new program at East Forsyth in 2021, leading the Broncos to their first playoff appearance in 2023.

"Thirty-six years of coaching has led to some back issues and I just felt like it was time to do something different," he said. "I'm working with [wife] Pam and [daughter] Riley in real estate now. They supported me during my coach-

ing career and now I think it's time to support them the same way they did for me.

"I have to thank all the players I've coached over my 36 years, specifically the 19 years at Union County," he added. "We've had some really good assistant coaches. We were very fortunate to maintain consistency on the coaching staff. Over the last 13 years [at UCHS], Howard McCombs and Robby Roxbury were there for every step of it.

"I'm thankful for all the

businesses that supported our football team, but I can't say enough about the former players and administration. I also appreciate all the coverage and support from the North Georgia News. You guys have been fantastic and made me sound good over the years."

In closing, Mancuso speaks for everyone with these final remarks to his coach.

"Congrats on a great career and happy retirement," he said. "I know Mrs. Pam is happy."

Racing: McClure leads wire-to-wire in Cumming



Levi McClure wins the Senior Honda Nascar Youth series race at NGQMA in Cumming. Levi qualified on pole and led all 40 laps of the main event. Special thanks to our sponsors: Nelson Tractor, B.E.L.L. Equipment, Joey Martin Auctioneers, Charles Kelley Construction, MBC Trading, Brock Kelley Trucking and Shook's Welding.

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