

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, May 19, 2021

UCHS, Woody Gap, MECHS prepare for graduation

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For the last year, COVID-19 mitigation efforts leading to abnormal school experiences across the nation, including right here in Union County, Georgia.

Despite dramatic changes such as mask mandates and quarantine practices, Union County Schools have remained open throughout the entire year and maintained the ability to give students the normal end-of-year events that senior classes every year look forward to.

And as always, senior graduations will culminate in a experience ceremony for the

UCHS Class of 2021 on Friday, May 21, beginning at 8 p.m. at the Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Last year, the Class of 2020 took part in a drive-in style graduation due to COVID precautions taken nationwide around the onset of the pandemic. Thankfully, circumstances have changed, and 2021 will feature a more traditional ceremony.

"Masks are encouraged but not required," Principal C.T. Hussion said. "There is no max number of attendees. Each graduate has as many invitations as they want, and we want their families and people they want there to support them."

Added Hussion, "If there is a drizzle or spotting here and

there, we will probably move on as normal. If it is storming, then we will move it to Saturday at 8 p.m."

At the close of commencement exercises around 9:30 p.m., a large fireworks display will begin at the Fine Arts Center, giving students a big sendoff onto the next chapter in their lives.

"Everything since Spring Break has been normal for our kids," Hussion said. "We were able to do what I feel like is a pretty normal prom. We did Olympics the other day. It is so important for our kids to be able to get back to normal for our culture, for their social, emotional, and everything."

"I think getting back



UCHS Class of 2021 Seniors are excited for Friday's graduation ceremony, which will feature a return to normalcy after many changes in the past year due to COVID-19. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Colonial Pipeline hack causes gas shortages in Southeast

By Shawn Jarrard
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On May 7, the Alpharetta-based Colonial Pipeline Company learned of a cyberattack to its IT systems, resulting in a proactive shutdown of the largest pipeline for refined oil in the United States.

The shutdown caused widespread intermittent gasoline shortages and price-per-gallon increases in multiple Southeastern states as people rushed out to buy fuel before running dry, in many cases filling multiple cars per household and buying gas cans to fill at the pumps.

In Georgia, Gov. Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency, signing an executive order suspending fuel taxes and announcing an increase in the weight limits for trucks in the transporting fuel to provide "more supply for stations as they receive deliveries."

Additionally, the order



Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Shawn Dyer had to direct traffic at the Ingles Gas Station May 11 during a gasoline buying frenzy that started as a result of the Colonial Pipeline hack.

has prohibited price gouging "by bad actors looking to exploit the situation."

Locally, supply issues at gas stations continued into this week, likely exacerbated

by the nationwide shortage of tanker truck drivers, though renewed deliveries should begin to alleviate some of the

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Former editor leaves lasting legacy in the mountains

By Shawn Jarrard
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Charles Duncan, the former editor of the North Georgia Herald, has passed away following an extended illness. He was 60 years old.

Duncan died while being treated for congestive heart failure at Coliseum Medical Center in Macon in the early morning hours of May 14. His fiancée, Betty Jo Allison, was with him when he passed.

The career journalist suffered from several medical conditions that saw him in and out of the hospital since October 2015, though he remained in good spirits through the end of his days.

Over the past five and a half years, Duncan has enjoyed much support from the community and his readers. A prayerful man, he was always appreciative of the people who kept him in their thoughts and prayers during these challenging

times in his life.

He will be remembered for his larger-than-life persona, his sharp wit and even sharper pen, and for his tireless dedication to the communities he covered here in the North Georgia Mountains. Nobody ever accused Duncan of being a man of few words, and for all his vast knowledge of vocabulary, he never could grasp the meaning of the word "quit."

Below are passages from a February 2016 news article featuring an interview with Duncan shortly before he underwent his second open heart surgery since 2009. He gave the interview at the time because he was told he might not survive the surgery.

Fortunately, he made it through that surgery and others in the intervening years, though his time was cut short at the too young age of 60 last week.

A professional newsman for more than three decades, Duncan caught the writing bug



Charles Duncan

early; after turning in several writing assignments in the sixth grade, his teacher pulled him aside to tell him he had a gift.

"I'd always realized that I was the sixth out of six kids, and everyone above me seemed to be smarter," Duncan said, recalling his youth. "That was the first time anybody had told me I had a gift, and I took it to heart."

Those early experiences See Charles Duncan, Page 2A

Karen Carver retires from city; Blairsville gets good audit

By Shawn Jarrard
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In their May regular meeting, the Blairsville City Council and Mayor Jim Conley wished Utility Billing Clerk Karen Carver well in retirement. Carver's last official day was Friday, April 30.

Conley presented Carver with a plaque that May 4 evening thanking her for 13 and a half years of dedication to the city, and Carver said she would miss everyone and would be back to visit.

Born and raised in Union County, Carver has been working since she was 19 years old. Prior to starting with the city, she was the manager of the local Security Finance for

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Karen Carver received a special plaque from Mayor Jim Conley May 4, in honor of her 13 and a half years of dedication as the City of Blairsville's Utility Billing Clerk. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Nolte named 'Good Citizen' for DAR at MEC High School

News Special
North Georgia News

Union County is blessed with student leaders like Luther Nolte of Blairsville, who has been named the 2021 DAR Good Citizen for the Union County Site of Mountain Education Charter High School.

Nolte is the latest President of the MECMS Student VOICE/student governance team and recipient of the school's Student Peaks Award.

The Old Unicoi Trail Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution has the annual opportunity to reward good citizenship in outstanding high school seniors in Union, Towns and Fannin counties. Luther Nolte is one such leader.

As MECMS' Good Citizen, Nolte shared his thoughts on

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MECHS Senior Luther Nolte was recently administered with the DAR Good Citizen Award by Union Site Administrator Dr. Teena Atkins. Photo/Submitted

Pedestrian hit by car after stepping into traffic, GSP says

By Shawn Jarrard
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A pedestrian has been listed as being suspected at fault for an accident that resulted in this being struck by a vehicle about 200 feet west of Panther Circle on Georgia 515 last Thursday, May 13.

The pedestrian, identified by the Georgia State Patrol as Michael Moore, 31, of Forsyth, had to be taken via ambulance to Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville for treatment of a suspected serious injury. His condition was not known at press time.

It happened around

9:20 p.m. that Thursday, as a Morgantown couple traveled west in their SUV toward Fannin County, according to GSP.

"A non-motorist pedestrian was walking on the north fog line of the westbound travel lane," according to GSP. "The pedestrian attempted to cross the roadway in front of (the SUV, which) struck the pedestrian with the front left of the vehicle."

"There was no crosswalk, and the area was not lighted. Area of impact was in the westbound travel lane. The area of impact was determined by the damage to the vehicle, debris on the roadway, driver statements



A man was hit by a car about 200 feet west of Panther Circle after attempting to cross Georgia 515 on foot after dark on May 13. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

and witness statements." Additional details were unavailable at press time.

Woody Gap Band of Steel 'wows' audience with free concert

By Todd Forrester
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Woody Gap Band of Steel discharged more than a year's worth of pent-up musical energy at Saturday's Pan Rocks concert at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Coming on the heels of the COVID-19 shutdown, the Band of Steel performed its first live show in more than 15 months, featuring special guests from across the country joining them in Blairsville for the 2020-21 school year's grand-finale concert.

International steel drum See Band of Steel, Page 3A



Band of Steel members and guest musicians react to confetti cannons fired during the final song of the May 15 evening concert, which featured more than 100 people in attendance. Photo by Todd Forrester

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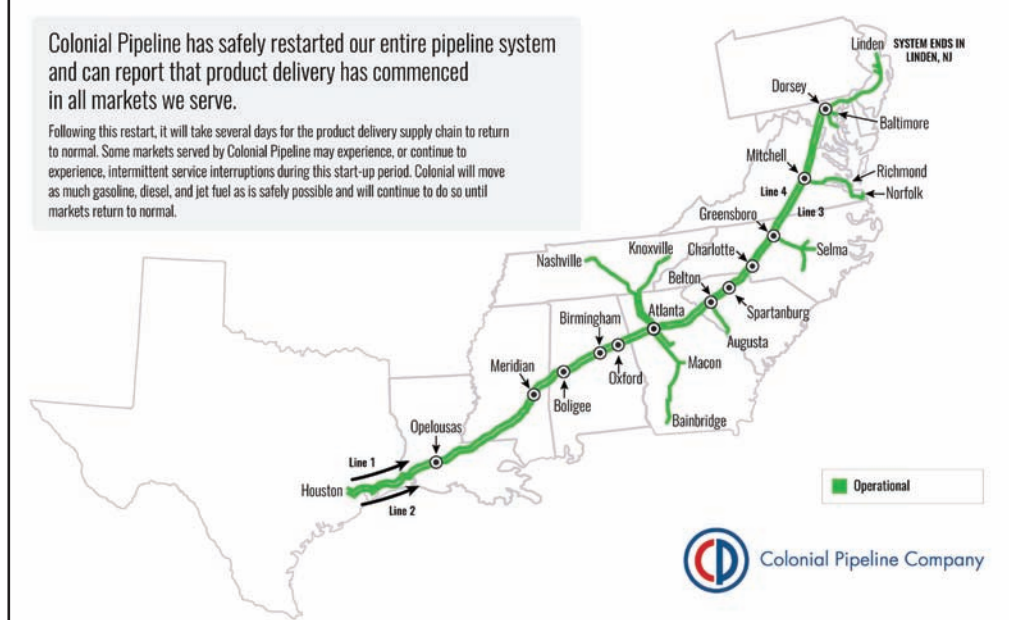
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Gas Shortages...from Page 1A

shortages soon, as the pipeline was restarted May 12.

“Colonial Pipeline has safely restarted our entire pipeline system and can report that product delivery has commenced in all markets we serve,” the company said May 15. “Following this restart, it will take several days for the product delivery supply chain to return to normal.

“Some markets served by Colonial Pipeline may experience, or continue to experience, intermittent service interruptions during this startup period. Colonial will move as much gasoline, diesel and jet fuel as is safely possible and will continue to do so until markets return to normal.”



The Colonial Pipeline system is about 5,500 miles long, beginning in Houston, Texas, running northeastward across 13 states, and ending in Linden, New Jersey.

Image by Colonial Pipeline Company

fuel as is safely possible and will continue to do so until markets return to normal.”

Fortunately, local government has plenty of gasoline at the county depot to keep first responders operating even amid a longer outage period.

The cyberattack was determined to be of the ransomware variety, which is a digital extortion scheme used by computer hackers, in this case, an Eastern European group calling itself DarkSide, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“Ransomware is an ever-evolving form of malware designed to encrypt files on

a device, rendering any files and the systems that rely on them unusable,” per the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency. “Malicious actors then demand ransom in exchange for decryption.”

Colonial Pipeline reportedly paid a ransom totaling about \$5 million and was able to restart the pipeline on May 12, stating that “we have returned the system to normal operations, delivering millions of gallons per hour to the markets we serve.”

The pipeline system begins in Houston, Texas, runs northeastward across 13 states, and ends in Linden, New Jersey, spanning more than 5,500 miles

and connecting 29 refineries on the Gulf Coast to 270 marketing terminals, according to the National Transportation Safety Board.

All told, the pipeline is responsible for delivering nearly half of all petroleum products to local markets in the Southeast, for upwards of 2.5 million barrels a day, which explains why people in this area and others have been worried about supply.

One positive takeaway from the ordeal is that the hack has sparked renewed national interest in shoring up cybersecurity for critical infrastructure here in the United States.

Charles Duncan...from Page 1A

proved especially formative for Duncan, who took special care to sharpen his writing abilities before graduating Union County High School in 1978 and proceeding on to college.

He took a few classes at Truett-McConnell College in Cleveland before switching over to Tri-County Community College in Murphy, North Carolina, to study Criminal Justice.

“I didn’t focus on writing then, but I did have some creative writing classes at Tri-County and had some classes that definitely gave me the opportunity to hone my skills a little bit,” Duncan said.

After graduating from Tri-County in 1981, he was accepted into North Georgia College, but finding himself in need of practical work, he took a job at ball bearing manufacturing plant TRW in Flowery Branch.

In 1985, then-editor of the North Georgia News Jon Moon contacted Duncan to see if he’d come aboard to cover sports in Union County. Sports were another of Duncan’s lifelong passions, and he was excited to be starting a writing career with athletics at his alma mater.

For the next seven years, Duncan provided local coverage for the Union County Panthers in his hometown newspaper, all the while continuing to work for TRW.

“And in 1992, I got a call that the Gainesville Times might be interested in having me on their district staff, so I went for a three-story tryout,” Duncan said. “Ironically, nobody ever told me if I ever passed that three-story tryout, but in 1999, I left the Times for an opportunity with Community Newspapers Inc. in Dawsonville.”

There, Duncan continued to flourish under the leadership

of Terri Blackwell, and it was in Dawsonville that he formed many friendships that have lasted to this day.

“I worked with a young gentleman by the name of Bo Wilson, and together we formed quite a team in Dawsonville,” Duncan said, noting that Wilson had traveled to the mountains to fill in for him during his first heart surgery and recovery in 2009.

Duncan remained in Dawsonville until 2005, when he received an offer to work for a paper in Pawleys Island, South Carolina. His stint there was short-lived, however, as the Dawsonville paper made him an offer he couldn’t refuse, so he returned to Georgia after just six months.

He again stayed in Dawsonville until October 2008, which is when he received the call of his lifetime presenting him with the opportunity to come back home to Blairsville.

“Kenneth West gave me a call, asked me if I’d be interested in being the editor of the Towns County Herald, and I said, ‘Sure,’” Duncan said. “So I came to Blairsville, I interviewed, and the rest is history.”

Duncan served as editor of the Herald from 2008 to 2018, and West expanded his duties in 2012 by bringing him on as editor of the North Georgia News as well, where he led the newspaper for the next six years.

Working as the editor of his hometown paper stood out for Duncan as a great moment and high point of his life and career; after all, his mother had worked for the North Georgia News years earlier, and it was in Blairsville that his work in journalism began.

“It was an opportunity to bring real journalism to the mountains and keep it going,

and to bring two top-notch newspapers,” Duncan said. “And I really feel like we do have two top-notch newspapers in the Towns County Herald and the North Georgia News.”

“We have two newspapers that bring a lot of news to those two communities each week. We do our best to keep people informed. I’m sure there are things that we could do to improve, but we’re happy to be a part of the big picture in those two communities.”

Added Duncan, “I think that we’ve raised the level, we’ve raised the bar for our competition and our neighboring counties. I think that there’s a lot of newspapers that would like to be like us, and I think there’s a lot of newspapers that take a lot of ideas from us. That, to me, the way that’s unfolding, tells me that we’re doing something right.”

Mountain View Funeral Home of Blairsville had charge of Duncan’s arrangements, with a public viewing scheduled for Monday, May 17, and a private family service on Tuesday, May 18.

To learn more about the life of Charles Duncan, read his full obituary in this week’s editions of the North Georgia News and Towns County Herald.

****Editor’s Note: Charles Duncan went out on a limb for me in 2014 when he asked Publisher Kenneth West to take me on as a cub reporter. But Charles was more than just my boss; he was also my uncle, mentor and friend.*

I couldn’t have asked for a better role model in journalism, and I couldn’t have asked for a better uncle in life.

To my Uncle Chuck, who has been there rain or shine, thank you for everything; you will be missed by me and by many.

Graduation...from Page 1A

to normal as fast as possible will help our kids and our community move forward a lot faster. We are really happy to do a normal graduation at the stadium.”

Union County High School is waiting to hear back from area colleges with scores from dual enrollment students before announcing this year’s

Valedictorian and Salutatorian ahead of graduation.

Woody Gap School will hold its graduation ceremony for seniors on Saturday, May 22, in the Woody Gap Gymnasium beginning at 10 a.m.

“It is open to the public,” Principal Carol Knight said. “We are excited that we can offer the Class of 2021 a much

more normal ceremony than we were able to do last year.”

Woody Gap Valedictorian is Grant Disser, and the Salutatorian is Wes Ponder.

Mountain Education Charter High School, including the Union Site, will be holding graduation on Thursday, May 27, at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center beginning at 6 p.m. This graduation is open to students and their families only.

Nolte...from Page 1A

“Our American Heritage and Our Responsibility for Preserving It—How do the combined actions of so many good citizens keep our nation moving forward?”

In his essay, he noted that individuals put faith in their local, state and national representatives to preserve their rights under the Constitution and keep them from being diminished. Having done this, Nolte believes that individuals have done little to nothing on their own to combat losses of the same. He would like to see individuals engage directly in efforts to protect shared culture, customs, practices and beliefs, and to demand that elected

leaders do the same.

At the time of his award, Union Site Administrator Dr. Teena Atkins noted Nolte’s unprecedented servant leadership as well as his extraordinary spirit of volunteerism.

He was selected to represent MECHS as an ambassador to Washington, D.C., where he participated in the Laying of the Wreath at Arlington National Cemetery’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

And English Teacher April Krieger said, “From my personal observations and through conversations with fellow MECHS faculty, I can say with certainty that Luther represents

the traits that are a cornerstone for the DAR Good Citizen Award: dependability, service, leadership and patriotism.”

His plans include service to his country through the U.S. military, with his sight on a future in education or a medical field. For his Good Citizen status and entering the essay contest, Nolte has received \$100 from Old Unicoi Trail and a Good Citizen pin, certificate and wallet card.

The Old Unicoi Trail Chapter, NSDAR serves Towns, Fannin and Union counties. Any DAR members who have recently relocated or if anyone interested in membership or attending a meeting of the Old Unicoi Trail Chapter, DAR, may contact the Chapter at oldunicoitrail@gmail.com.

City of Blairsville...from Page 1A

12 and a half years, and before that she managed a Circle K.

Interestingly, Carver started with the city as a temporary fill-in, though she did such a great job that she was asked to stay on full-time.

Now that she's 65 and eligible for retirement, Carver said the timing just felt right to leave full-time employment. She still plans to work a couple days a month cleaning City Hall, but mostly, she looks forward to spending time with family and taking on projects around the house.

Carver knew at the beginning of the year she would soon be retiring, though she agreed to stay on for a while in the leadup to her final days to help train her replacement, Karla Franklin, as utility billing clerk.

In her role, Carver was responsible for creating, preparing and collecting utility bills, troubleshooting usage issues and making water adjustments for customers, other collections like property taxes and alcohol fees, and more.

She said she will miss her coworkers – those who staffed City Hall and the rest of the city's employees – as well as her customers, many of whom she got to know well over the years.

"I enjoyed my job at the

city, I liked it very much, and it was a hard decision to leave," Carver said. "I just wanted to be off and do things that I wasn't able to do in the past. It was a real hard decision, because the city is a great place to work."

Also in the meeting, Mayor Conley honored City Clerk Kaye McCann with a proclamation recognizing the 52nd Annual Professional Municipal Clerks Week, May 2-8, to commemorate McCann's service to the city.

In the Public Comments portion of the meeting, Union County Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs asked the city to consider amending its Alcohol Ordinance to include provisions allowing for specialized brew pub licenses as designated by state law.

Currently, the ordinance allows beer brewing, taprooms for on-premises consumption, and restaurant sales with outside brewers, but it does not allow for brewers to serve food alongside in-house craft beers, which would make an establishment a "brew pub."

"The reason I'm asking for this is that those have been a couple of the targets of the types of businesses that we're trying to recruit to the community," Griggs said, "the reason being that they are extremely popular in Georgia and the United

States.

"And they're especially popular with tourists and visitors – so much so that it's one of those types of businesses that visitors expect to find in any given community that they might come to."

Councilman Tony Dyer said he didn't want the city to turn into a "beer joint," but he was ultimately supportive of the idea, and the council voted unanimously that evening to proceed with preparing for the amendment.

Certified Public Accountant Clay Pilgrim with Rushton Accounting & Business Advisors presented the city's 2020 audit, reporting a clean bill of financial health for Blairsville and stating that city employees, as usual, had been a pleasure to work with.

Among the many financial metrics covered by Pilgrim that evening, he said the city had a "very healthy reserve" fund of \$2,573,328, which, "if we got no further revenues at all, we could operate about 21 months."

The city held a first reading to amend its pourer and server permitting process regarding background investigations; amended the Alcohol Beverage License Fee Schedule to include increases for the amended background processing; and established a

Band of Steel...from Page 1A

musicians Tyler Thornton, Kayleen Justus, Taft Marsh and Tyler Swick brought along a few friends to participate in a three-day pan session with the Woody Gap students earlier in the week that culminated in Saturday's free concert.

"This was an amazing event because, normally when we all get together, it's in Los Angeles or New York or somewhere like that," Thornton said. "So, for us to play in a beautiful place like this that's kind of hidden away, and combined with the amazing hospitality that we've been shown, we've just been blown away."

And if the decision is left up to Thornton, Union County will become a regular stop for his steel drum band. When asked about returning, Thornton answered, "That's the plan. We would really love to come back."

Saturday's concert was nearly two years in the making after getting put on hold during the pandemic.

Woody Gap Band Director Doug Roberts was preparing to host pan musicians from

across the country for a steel drum festival at Kennesaw State University, where Justus teaches music.

But when the coronavirus brought those plans to a screeching halt, Roberts invited Thornton and Justus to Suches, and they brought along their friends.

"This week was just a fantastic success," Roberts said. "So many of these musicians are such great professionals, but they're still willing to share their time, their knowledge and their experience."

"Every single one of them stood behind the kids, they worked with them individually and they rehearsed with them, and they all came here on their own dime."

When asked to name a highlight of the week, Band of Steel Member Matthew Chapman saw the question and raised it 51 weeks.

"More like the highlight of my year," he said. "My favorite part was getting to play surf tunes."

According to freshman Band of Steel Member Jennifer

Marsh, performing Thornton's original composition, "Carpe Diem," was the most challenging and most satisfying moment of Saturday's performance.

"There is one part that we absolutely nailed perfectly that we've never nailed before," she said. "I definitely hope that we get to do this again next year."

Thornton's band opened the show with a set before the Band of Steel joined them to perform hit tunes that included Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," "Kashmir" by Led Zeppelin, "Surrender" by Cheap Trick, "Take On Me" by A-Ha, and The Who's "Baba O'Riley."

Admission to the show was free but donations were accepted for the Band of Steel. Anyone wishing to donate to the band may contact Roberts at Woody Gap School.

Separately, Band of Steel Member Haylie Woody served as a freshman on the 2021 Homecoming Court for Woody Gap. In last week's edition of the newspaper, the North Georgia News incorrectly spelled her last name as "Wood."

See Page 3B for additional pictures.

Rotary: People of Action

Roll the Press!

The May 6 meeting of the Rotary Club of Union County featured Dr. Melissa Bridges, Media Specialist at the high school and an honorary member of the club.

She thanked the Club for their annual donation of ink to keep the dedicated color laser printer of UCS's Mountain Roots and Relics project pumping out pages for the 5th edition of the Interact club's unique publication. The original book featured local senior citizens. The second year honored our veterans and the third was titled "Teachers Shape the World". Last year's book recognized medical professionals and first responders, and the book that is on the press right now highlights local entrepreneurs. Since the inception of the project in 2017, the school has produced approximately 60 copies of each edition. Books go to the folks highlighted in the publication, the students who produced the book, the school, the Historical Society, and various libraries around the county.

Bob Ramay, past president of the Rotary Club of Union County, Dr. Bridges and Christie Adams developed the project to keep alive the modern history of Union County. The Union County

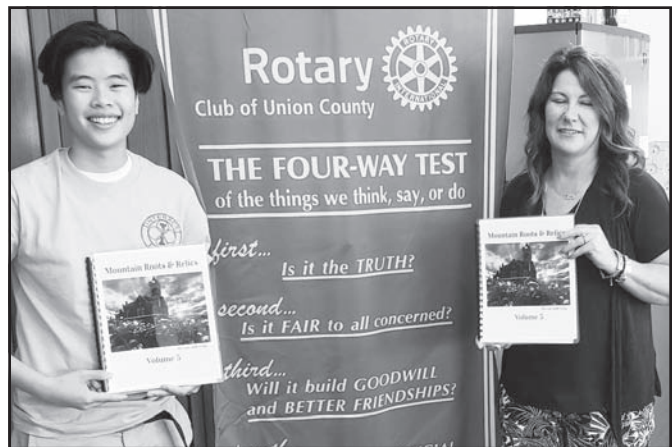
club applied to District 6910 for a matching grant for the laser printer and printing supplies and "Mountain Roots and Relics" became a reality. Melissa and the UCS Interact kids in middle and high school do the rest. Students interview the individuals, take pictures, illustrate, and write the stories. They format the material and print and produce the finished book. It's a wonderful project for everyone involved and educates students in the basics of interviewing, book design, publishing and teamwork.

Joining Dr. Bridges were Interact members Kristy Adams and Jaiden Murphy. Jaiden

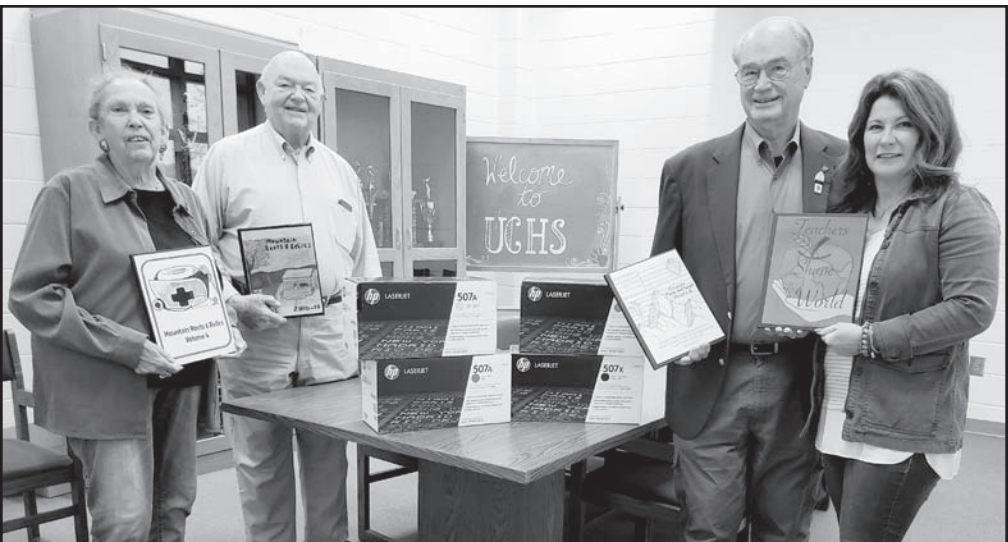
is a senior at UCS who put in many hours behind the scenes on the Mountain Roots and Relics project. She explained how Interact was her first-time doing volunteer work like this. Her post-graduation plans are to attend UNG and major in business.

The Union County Rotary club has resumed tasty lunch meetings at The Skillet on Thursdays at noon. The next meeting is scheduled for May 20th. Past District Governor, Gene Windham will be the speaker.

If you are interested in joining a fun service organization that provides vital services on a local, national, and worldwide level, think about joining Rotary. Call club president Ed Sternberg to learn more or leave a message at (706) 379-2018 or email unioncountyrotaryclub@gmail.com.



Jaiden Murphy and Dr. Melissa Bridges show off the latest issue of Mountain Roots and Relics at the Union County Rotary Club on April 29th.



Cathy O'Gara, Bob Ramay and Gene Windham deliver ink for the fifth edition of Mountain Roots and Relics to Dr. Melissa Bridges at the Union County school library. N0May19Z12/CA