

North Georgia News

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Evening with STARs honors scholastic excellence

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Feb. 10, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce hosted its annual Evening with the STARs Banquet to honor students of Union County High and Woody Gap School for exemplary performances in their academic careers.

Also highlighted that evening were several educators who have helped make their successes possible.

Sponsored by Blue Ridge Mountain EMC and SouthState Bank, the banquet took place inside the ballroom of the Union County Community Center, where guests were treated to a formal evening and dinner to make them feel truly special.

The night began with an introduction from Chamber President Steve Rowe, and North Georgia Technical College President John Wilkinson also attended to offer words of encouragement

to the students.

"Congratulations on this achievement," Wilkinson said. "Y'all are the ones who are going to have the big offices downtown someday, or maybe even be a doctor and come back to our rural communities."

Assistant Superintendent Dr. David Murphy spoke on behalf of the school system that night. Keeping with the STARs theme, Murphy started by drawing comparisons between prominent figures in astronomy and the accomplished students and teachers shining that evening.

"Yes, our honorees shine a little brighter, lighting the way for others to follow, and ultimately affixing themselves as landmarks in the constellation of success," he said.

First to be recognized was Reaching for the Stars Award winner Landen Gray, who was approved to graduate early in January. Murphy noted Gray's "higher level of maturity, impeccable work



Union County Stars, L-R: John Hill, April Krieger, Caley Davis, Landen Gray, Emma Thompson, Logan Disser and Althea Cantrell. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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Local Henderson case makes international headlines

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Sheriff's Office and Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office are under fire after a local misdemeanor reckless conduct charge from May 2020 began making international headlines last week.

At the heart of the story is Melissa Henderson, a Union County resident who tasked her 14-year-old daughter with babysitting the teen's four younger siblings toward the onset of the pandemic.

Schools were out and daycare centers were shut down due to COVID-19, and Henderson needed to work; as a

single mom, she seemed to have little choice in the matter.

Per guidelines previously issued by the Georgia Department of Human Services, this was a perfectly acceptable arrangement. But Henderson was charged anyway and is apparently fearful she may face up to a year in prison for the crime of allowing her old-enough daughter to babysit.

Based on multiple media reports, while the eldest daughter was busy with online learning, her 4-year-old brother wandered outside and made his way to a neighbor's house to play with a friend. After discovering him missing "10 to 15 minutes" later, the girl quickly located her brother safe.

But the neighboring

homeowner had called 911 in the meantime, and Union County Sheriff's deputies responded to the scene. Henderson was questioned by deputies, who left that day without taking any action, only to return about a week later to arrest the mother of five.

Henderson was humiliated by the ordeal, which included being handcuffed at her home and driven for booking into the local jail, and she said she stopped going to work thereafter for fear of facing further legal persecution.

Her tale appeared on FoxNews.com more than a year later in June 2021, about a month before a court hearing in which she was optimistic the charge would be dropped. To

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Melissa Henderson and her five children.

Photo/Facebook

Empty grocery store shelves have variety of causes

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

For months now, grocery store shelves around the country have been bare than usual, with various household products going in and out of being hard for customers to find. Sometimes it's juice and lunch meat, other times it's dog food and paper towels, but all the time it's frustrating.

The problem stems from a series of national and global issues that have affected not just shelves but prices also, with many consumer goods costing much more today than they did this time last year due to inflation. So, what gives?

Foodland Grocery has been in continuous operation



Foodland Owner Rick Abercrombie, right, talking fresh ground beef with customer Michael Hill. Foodland is known for grinding its own beef in-store every day, with no fillers or sprays. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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New retail grocery store on its way to Union County

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County Clerk Jennifer Mahan led an informational Public Hearing announcing the transfer of a half-acre strip of Union County Farmers Market land to the Union County Development Authority on Thursday, Feb. 10.

"The purpose of this meeting is for the Office of the Commissioner to provide the public with information regarding a 0.51-acre strip of property that is being declared surplus to property," Mahan

said. "No action will be taken tonight."

A (currently undisclosed) desirable business has been working with the Union County Development Authority for several years to identify a location that would be suitable for their business.

"The business identified a privately owned lot at the corner of (US) Hwy 76 and Farmers Market Way as a site that would work for their business. The company's engineered site plan showed that this business needed an additional half an acre to sit properly on that particular lot."

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Mitch Griggs
UCDA Director

Michael Lindsey to perform with All State Chorus Feb. 19

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Melissa Pilote has not had a student go to the All-State Chorus in any of the four years she has been the chorus teacher for Union County Middle School - until now.

Eighth-grade bass Michael Lindsey recently learned that he had the honor of being the first, and he will be heading down to Athens on Feb. 17 to participate in the event.

Just like the All-State Band, the All-State Chorus is hosted by the Georgia Music Educators Association, and

students from all over the state will have three days to practice and then perform, putting both their vocal cords and their sight-reading skills to the test.

A student must pass two rounds of auditions to make All-State. For the first round, a song is assigned to students in a particular age group to perform in front of a judge, and they must also submit to three sight-reading tests.

Only if a student obtains a high score on the initial performance and all three attempts at sight-reading will they advance to the second audition.

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Michael Lindsey

UCHS students heading to SkillsUSA state competition



Union County High School students Kendall Conley, Denver Bradley, John Kluth and Isaiah Gray will compete at the SkillsUSA state competition later this month. Photo by Jeremy Foster

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UCSO warns against increased scam incidents

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Make no mistake: scammers are working around the clock to steal people's money. Social Security funds, retirement savings, hard-earned wages – scammers don't care; they'll take it if they can, and they're good at it.

Which is why the Union County Sheriff's Office wants to remind people once again to remain vigilant when it comes to protecting their personal information and monitoring their finances, as local reports of scams have been on the rise over the last couple of months.

One of the more recent scams to impact Blairsville residents and businesses involves mobile deposits of fraudulent checks.

"We've been having a lot of scams here lately," UCSO Lt. Daren Osborn said. "The biggest of the scams involves people from out of the state getting into some local people's bank accounts.

"What they do is, they get their bank account information, and they make counterfeit checks and put the stolen bank account information on these checks, then cash them for ungodly amounts of money in other parts of the country.

"(The scammers will) deposit the fake checks into their account, and as soon as they get the cash in there, they'll close that account and move the money to another account, withdraw that money, close that account out, and they're gone."

And while it's not yet clear how they accomplish this, somehow, scammers are gaining access to account numbers, either through phishing for passwords, acquiring biographical information in victims' social media posts, directly soliciting information or some other means.

So, what can people do to protect themselves against methods that aren't fully known to law enforcement?

Regularly monitoring account transactions and statements can quickly clue people into fraudulent activity, hopefully in time to reverse

unauthorized charges, transfers or withdrawals, and people can talk with their banks about the possibility of refunds even if it is too late to reverse.

Of course, the tactics scammers use to defraud people of their money vary widely. Some scammers pretend to be a relative in dire need of money. Other scammers act like law enforcement officers threatening arrest unless people pay to clear up bench warrants.

Still others act like legitimate bill collectors, saying that legal action will be taken if a past due bill – which may or may not actually exist – is cleared up immediately, and scammers will even spoof local numbers to make it seem like they are calling from within the region.

Really, the types of cons used against unsuspecting people are limited only by the imaginations of the perpetrators, who use any form of communication, from email to text messages, phone calls, social media and computer viruses, to reach their victims.

The elderly, who tend to be more trusting in nature, are a huge target for scammers, and Union County's population consists of a disproportionately older population compared with other areas.

But given the realities of the internet, where many folks tend to dole out the most intimate of details regarding their everyday lives and use easily guessed passwords, potentially anyone can be the target of a scam.

"People give out too much information on social media," Osborn said. "Their birthdays, Social Security numbers and things like that. They take these social media surveys, answering questions like, 'What was the first car you've ever driven?'"

"A lot of people use this kind of information for their passwords and answers to secret questions to get into their bank accounts. How do the scammers do it? I don't know, but they can hack people's bank accounts, and they're getting better at it, so people need to guard against that."

Conducting personal



finances has never been easier thanks to the internet, but Osborn said mobile banking in particular can be a double-edged sword. After all, being connected to the internet means that, if an account holder can access their account from anywhere, so can scammers.

"People get on their phones, and you have to have internet access to get your bank account pulled up," Osborn said. "If you're accessing your accounts through public Wi-Fi, that's a potential safety breach right there."

If people think they have been contacted by a scammer, Osborn advises them not to engage in conversation but to end communication right away and use independently verified contact info for their financial institutions to double check any claims being made by a potential scammer.

Credit and debit cards have toll-free numbers people may use to call about such issues, and folks can also check their official financial statements for contact information.

"We need to reach out to people and tell them not to give their personal information out," Osborn said. "You've got to be careful who you give it to by knowing who you're giving it to."

For more tips, people can visit the Federal Trade Commission's Consumer Information page at <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/what-do-if-you-were-scammed>.

Osborn also wants people to be aware that there has been a recent uptick in "porch pirate" incidents involving packages stolen from doorsteps. He said one way to protect against this is to have cameras installed, such as Ring or Nest video doorbells.

Henderson Case...from Page 1A

date, that has not happened, and her attorney filed a new motion last month in hopes of getting the case dismissed.

Central to Henderson's outreach efforts regarding her plight have been two figures associated with advocacy organizations that specialize in parental rights, ParentsUSA and Let Grow.

Representing Henderson pro-bono is David DeLugas, founder of ParentsUSA, a nonprofit organization that fights for "parents whose rights are violated as they make decisions about their children, without causing harm to them, a standard the U.S. Supreme Court established."

He is arguing that Henderson has been charged for making a completely normal parenting decision, and that such charges were previously declared unconstitutional by the Georgia Supreme Court.

For DeLugas, stories like Henderson's have implications for parents everywhere by causing "a chilling impact on everybody in the state who hears about this type of thing," he told Fox News in 2021.

And the story took on a life of its own last week following a Feb. 8 report by Lenore Skenazy of Reason.com. Skenazy founded the "Free-Range Kids" movement and is a co-founder of Let Grow, a nonprofit that promotes "childhood independence and resilience."

Briefly mentioned in both the Reason and Fox News articles is a previous incident from 2019 involving the same children in a similar situation, where the brother wandered outside the home under the daughter's supervision.

This previous incident, which did not result in arrest but instead a period of supervision by the Division of Family & Children Services, and details surrounding it played a major role in local law enforcement's decision to charge Henderson after the same thing happened again for a second time in under a year – so, not simply because of the babysitter's age.

But such a justification doesn't hold water for the single mom's attorney.

"They claim that the same thing happened a year earlier," DeLugas told Fox. "So, you're saying a year earlier, she left her children in charge of her then 13-year-old, almost 14-year-old, and somehow two rights make a wrong. It wasn't wrong

then, and it's not wrong now."

Since the Reason article's publication, multiple major media outlets and figures have picked up the story, including Jesse Watters of Fox, Glenn Beck's TheBlaze, The Daily Mail of U.K. and others, engendering widespread outrage over what many see as a clear overstepping by law enforcement.

The case has yet to be resolved, however, and much of the perspective from local law enforcement has gone largely unreported while the case remains active.

Union County Sheriff Mack Mason declined to comment on specifics, citing pending adjudication, but he did say there was more to the story.

"We investigated the case and turned over the findings to the district attorney, which we often do, since he makes the decision on whether to prosecute," Mason said. "He saw fit to draw up a warrant, a judge signed it, and we were compelled to arrest the individual."

Added Mason, "There is an old cliché that oftentimes there are two sides to every story. This is definitely one of those times."

District Attorney Jeff Langley offered a statement Feb. 11, speaking to some of the publicly available details of the case and touching more generally on wider misconceptions, like confusion over babysitting, that have been circulating since the story hit national and international news outlets last week.

"A local misdemeanor case has recently received a great deal of public attention," Langley said. "Individuals have called to inquire is it OK to have a teenager babysit? In general, of course you can."

"If there is a particular history or facts involved that would make it unsafe, then those must be considered. The current case is based on particular facts in this case and is not primarily based on the age of the babysitter. No one is saying, in general, that 14-year-olds can't babysit."

"The national news stories have been based on an incomplete and inaccurate portrayal of the facts. Only one of the national networks reached out to me, and that network as far as I'm aware then decided not to run the story. Fox News has not reached out to my

office as of Feb. 11, 2022.

"Unfortunately, State Bar Rule 3.8 forbids me from attempting to release all the details while the case is still pending."

"In general, cases of reckless conduct or child neglect involve a close judgment call that reasonable people could often disagree on. The interests of individual liberty and a child's safety must be carefully balanced."

"Every county in Georgia has a 'Child Fatality Review Process' in which my office has to participate in the creation of a report on every child death, whether criminal or accidental, and consider how it could have been prevented."

"Therefore, my awareness of every child death in four counties for the last 20 years probably colors my view regarding the safety of small children – but no one in my office has any interest in interfering with normal parental decisions."

"The case currently in controversy was not a one-time incident. A simple reading of the publicly filed criminal charge shows this was at least a second incident. Many of the incomplete and misleading news reports do not even mention the prior incident involved in this case."

"The first incident was on July 3, 2019, and involved a 2-year-old and a 3-year-old. I did not recommend a criminal charge at that time, viewing it as a family matter and a child services issue. After the second incident in 2020 involving one of the same children, the defendant was charged with misdemeanor reckless conduct."

"But imagine the outrage if the news story had been, '911 calls ignored as local citizens reported a child in danger on two different occasions and law enforcement refused to act and now a tragedy has occurred.'"

A GoFundMe page has been set up for the Henderson Family at <https://www.gofundme.com/f/benefit-melissa-henderson-single-mom-arrested>, with more than \$16,000 having been raised by press time.

Separately, DeLugas has established a legal defense fund at GoFundMe in support of his organization's efforts in the case, having raised more than \$46,000 by press time: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/14-yr-old-at-home-melissa-henderson-arrested>.

STARs Honored...from Page 1A

ethic, and dedication in the work field as an extremely talented mechanic.”

The next course of business was to introduce the winner of the Alumni Pacesetter Award, this year presented to U.S. Army Capt. David Harris, a Union County Class of 2009 graduate who went on to develop a military career in the Georgia Army National Guard.

Initially an infantryman for five years, he then moved on to join the University of North Georgia Board of Cadets, where he received a Bachelor of Arts and History.

He deployed to Afghanistan in 2017, and he currently serves as a tactics instructor until 2023, after which he will take on a new position at Fort Stewart as a commander in the Armor Brigade Combat Team. While unable to attend, Harris recorded a video response to this accomplishment.

“I just wanted to express my gratitude for being selected for the Star Alumni Award,” Harris said. “I am deeply humbled, and I wish everyone back home the best. Stay safe and healthy.”

Next was the Shining Star Award for student Caley Davis, who was referred to as “the epitome of what a Panther should be.”

In terms of extracurricular activities, Davis is involved in three sports, and academically, she takes advanced courses. Additionally, she is involved in multiple student organizations

and, notably, the Student Leadership Team, showing exemplary care toward her community.

Rather than going to a student, the North Star Award was instead granted to School Superintendent John Hill.

Awarded to a figurehead who stands stalwart in times of change and exhibits commendable strength, the recipient of the North Star Award was compared to the unmoving Polaris, which is used as a guide to the lost.

“Leadership during these last two years has been especially tough for everyone; every decision that is made is scrutinized and second-guessed,” Murphy said, illustrating the difficult decisions Hill has had to confront as top administrator over the course of the pandemic.

It was here that Principal C.T. Hussion took over the podium. Briefly, he explained the process of choosing the STAR student, who must not only be one of the Top 10 students of their graduating class, but must also earn the highest score in one sitting of the SAT.

Before revealing her name, Hussion described the STAR student as “a really great person” and listed her achievements, which included being involved in the Student Executive Board, the Computer Principles Board, Junior Board, the Spanish Club Honor Society, the Book Club, Musical Theater and Chorus, and, in Hussion’s words, “a

little bit of everything.”

Emma Thompson, Union County High’s 2021-22 STAR student, accepted her award with a moving speech chronicling how her relationship with her STAR teacher changed from the moment she first met Krieger to today, and just how it had impacted her life on a personal level.

Thompson said Krieger has helped her “put to rest the idea that we have given up” and “put to rest the thought that (our) dreams may be in vain.”

In a callback to the first book Krieger assigned her to read, “Fahrenheit 451” by Ray Bradbury, Thompson said she wished for her outdated, negative outlook of the world “to burn, to incinerate,” and for the hope Krieger instilled in her to “illuminate” and ignite inspiration.

“The influence of people like Mrs. Krieger will extend through generations into the future as actions, as beliefs, as hopes, because teachers have a funny way of changing the world with passion, and I’d like to thank mine,” Thompson said, calling Krieger a hero. “Though I’ll never again have the honor of sitting in Mrs. Krieger’s class as a student, I will do my best to honor her by making my changes, no matter how small they may be.”

For her part, STAR Teacher April Krieger reaffirmed that students like Thompson were the reason she chose to become an educator.

“I can say with certainty that Emma is easily one of the

most persistent, focused and adaptable individuals I have had the privilege of teaching in 22 years,” Krieger said. “She’s quiet when you first get to know her, but don’t let that fool you; she has a lot to say. She’s the type of individual that, when she speaks, we should listen.”

After taking a moment to build upon what Hussion said about the process of selecting a STAR student and teacher, Woody Gap Principal Carol Knight introduced her school’s shining STAR.

Woody Gap’s 2022 STAR student “is a model of work ethic that (the school) would like all students to aspire to, and that work ethic is not only academic, but also athletic and vocational.”

Indeed, it should be noted that Logan Disser utilized all of her extra credits to graduate early and has already fully enrolled at North Georgia Tech.

In her acceptance speech, Disser asked attendees to recall their own high school years and the hardships that came with them. Her STAR teacher, Althea Cantrell, made Disser’s navigation a bit easier with patience, kindness and a sense of humor.

“(Mrs. Cantrell) was honest and direct with us, understanding that we were mature enough and deserved to be spoken to like adults,” Disser said. “Sometimes, her honesty was brutal or it wasn’t what we wanted to hear, but she knew it was what we needed to hear in order to overcome any

challenges and succeed.”

Disser went on to say that Cantrell inspired her to further pursue her path toward becoming a teacher herself, and she also thanked her parents for their role in teaching her the value in good morals, which she would pass down to the students one day in her care.

Woody Gap STAR Teacher Althea Cantrell congratulated Disser for her accomplishment as STAR student, and went on to say she was “so honored” that Disser felt she had made such an impact on her life.

Additionally, Cantrell thanked Disser’s parents for the valuable roles they play in the Suches community as coordinators of school activities and as emergency volunteers.

“Logan is such a talented and amazing young lady,” Cantrell said. “In all my years of teaching, Logan truly stands out as one of the most gifted students I have ever encountered, not only

academically, but in many different avenues ... I am truly in awe of this young lady and what she can do.”

To close out the night, Steve Rowe thanked the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC for their involvement in the Shooting for the Stars Golf Tournament, which supplies a portion of the funding for important scholarships open to dedicated seniors.

“For each of the past three years, we’ve been able to contribute \$4,500 each year that goes to a deserving senior that graduates from Union County High School,” said Rowe before calling up BRMEMC General Manager Allan Glidewell to present a check to John Hill, the latter of whom finally took his chance to speak briefly but genuinely.

“We’re very thankful and very proud of our young people and our educators and thank everybody for being here tonight,” Hill said.

Correction:

In the Feb. 9, 2022, edition of the North Georgia News, the newspaper mistakenly reported the individual household trash rate to dispose of small garbage bags at the Union County Transfer Station as \$1.25 per bag.

The actual price for small bags up to 30 gallons is \$1.50, which was raised in October 2021 by former site operator Waste Management Inc. from

the longstanding price of \$1 per small bag.

At the time, Waste Management cited “global inflation” and “delays to our supply chain” as the main reasons behind the local increase in residential bagged garbage prices.

Also, the correct address for the Transfer Station is 348 Transfer Station Lane in Blairsville.

Public Hearing...from Page 1A

“The company proposed that they acquire a half-acre strip of land from Union County on the northern side of that commercial lot, which would be on the southern side of the Farmers Market property.”

Mahan said Union County Government is planning to build a Youth Sports Complex on the 10.43-acre parcel adjoining the privately owned, commercial lot in question, but that the loss of the half-acre strip would not affect those plans, and therefore, could be deemed surplus property.

The benefits to the community, said Mahan, are that the company will purchase a strip of land that has no practical, financial or developmental value for the county, and that the company’s investment will enhance the tax digest and generate significant sales tax revenue.

It will also capture retail dollars that are benefitting other communities who host this particular business and will “enhance the quality of life for Union County citizens by bringing a popular, highly desirable retailer to the community,” she said.

Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs was on hand to field questions from attendees.

One attendee asked the name of the business, to which Griggs replied, “As a

professional courtesy to the company, when we’re dealing with a company, we let them make their announcement on their own terms.”

“It’s not another chicken place, is it?” asked the attendee. “Or a bank?”

“I will say it’s not another chicken place and it’s not a bank,” Griggs responded. “I will say it is a national brand retail grocery.”

Griggs said the company has agreed to purchase the half-acre property for \$42,500.

Another attendee said she calculated the value of the land, based on current market value, at approximately \$140,000.

Griggs responded that the frontage property does, in fact, command a high price, but the half-acre of land in question is “effectively worthless.”

“It’s worth something to the company because they can’t site the business on the (existing site as it is),” Griggs said, adding that the 0.51-acre piece is a slope with a little drainage ditch that the county can’t do anything with otherwise.

“We’re taking a piece of property that the company can utilize,” he continued. “Their loading dock (will extend) about 10 feet beyond the site boundaries of the private parcel. Once you go out 10 feet, you’re into the slope, and then ... you’re encroaching on

that ditch.

“The company is going to take care of the drainage structure itself. They’ll pipe it, go to the expense of making it a better drainage structure.”

When asked about the impact of increased traffic in that vicinity, Griggs said, “That intersection is already scheduled for significant improvements as far as the (scheduled Georgia) DOT widening of Hwy 515.”

Griggs also noted that the county will not be responsible for any road improvements at the intersection.

“The county can’t just sell land to private individuals,” he said. “The Development Authority can. The Development Authority can sell land for commercial construction and commercial development.

“So, to effect this transaction, the county can quitclaim that strip to the Development Authority, then the Development Authority can sell that land, (and the proceeds will be remitted back to the county).”

If the deal falls through, then ownership of the land will revert back to the county.

“But there is every expectation that this will go through,” Griggs said.

Finally, Griggs said that, barring any major delays, the store might open as early as September 2022.

All-State Chorus...from Page 1A

“Due to COVID, the second audition did not happen this year, but it really is to basically make sure that the kids know their music,” Pilote said. “So, they will go in and they’ll start the music in the middle, and they have to start singing with it.”

Interestingly, despite the decision to cancel the second audition due to health concerns, the actual All-State performance will be in-person.

Lindsey and his teacher will practice for two and a half days before the performance on Saturday, Feb. 19, and Pilote will not be the only one present to celebrate his accomplishment. His family will be coming along as well, and they are just as excited.

“Of course, the rest of the family is very proud, but not terribly surprised,” Lindsey’s mother Elizabeth said. “He’s a natural performer.”

Lindsey’s involvement in music began with a third-grade talent show. He turned heads and raised brows as a pint-sized Elvis, kickstarting his interest

not just in classic rock but other genres as well. It will also come as no surprise that he can play the guitar, too.

This predisposition to entertain helped Lindsey when it came to his All-State auditions. Out of four tryouts, he made the cut because of his confidence and perseverance. That being said, there was something he had to admit.

“I got in with a score of 53 out of 60,” said Lindsey with his trademark humor, “which is the lowest you can possibly get.” Nevertheless, he is proud of the feat and plans to continue his study of music when he moves on to high school next year.

He and his mother both attribute his success to the hours Pilote spent practicing with him after school, especially leading up to the second audition.

“You know, she’s a teacher and has a little child at home, and she stays after school to help him,” Elizabeth said. “So, her dedication, I’m sure, is a big reason why he’s gotten as far as he did in this

process. We’d just like to thank her for being there, going above and beyond.”

And while he is incredibly grateful for the dedicated help of a passionate instructor, Lindsey says he can’t envision himself becoming a singer after graduation.

Rather, he has his sights set on a different kind of stage, with plans of becoming a comedian. According to those around him, he has gotten a great start already with his knack for performance, and it’s worth noting that he does know when to be serious and give his all.

“He’s a very school-dedicated child, so getting him to put the effort into work is not hard,” Pilote said. “He usually has things done before I even ask him to do it. He’s just a great kid.

“Michael is one of those students who doesn’t come along very often; he’s a jack of all trades. He can sing, he can act, and he’s funny.”

Pilote said that Union County chorus is always striving for excellence, and she wants to make sure that any child wishing to succeed or commit to extracurricular activities gets those opportunities.

Ultimately, Pilote is proud of her students, as they are willing to put in the hard work it takes to improve their talents and broaden their horizons.

Lindsey’s enduring passion for performance and acceptance into All-State Chorus is a direct testament to that.

UCHS students heading to SkillsUSA state competition

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County High School is proudly sending four of its students to the upcoming SkillsUSA State Leadership & Skills Conference at the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta Feb. 24-26.

SkillsUSA is a national nonprofit organization that helps high school and college students seeking careers in trade, technical and skilled service occupations, including health occupations as well.

“We provide quality education experiences for students in leadership,

teamwork, citizenship and character building,” per SkillsUSAGeorgia.org. “We build and reinforce self-confidence, work attitudes and communication skills.

“In other words, SkillsUSA not only helps students for lucrative, in-demand occupations, the program also encourages personal responsibility and imparts the ability to excel in those occupations.

“For example, in order for a student to compete at the regional level, he or she must submit a resume in addition to having the skills to compete, just like in the real world. And students must work for the

opportunity to compete, just like in the real world.”

SkillsUSA is just one of the many tools at the disposal of Union County High School students, who benefit from a robust Career, Technical and Agricultural Education program affording them skills for use in any number of post-graduation employment opportunities.

Union County students competed in the SkillsUSA regional competition on Jan. 27 at North Georgia Technical College in Clarkesville, with four kids advancing to state level competition.

The competitors are senior Kendall Conley for Metal-Working Display, junior

Denver Bradley for Metal-Working Display, junior Isaiah Gray for Electrical Construction Wiring and junior John Kluth for Cabinetmaking.

Conley and Bradley will be working on the same project in the teamwork division at the upcoming competition, and Kluth and Gray each earned Third Place in their respective divisions at region to qualify for state.

Conley said he has his sights set on going to welding school after graduation, while Bradley would like to go to either welding school to be a welder or lineman school to be a lineman.

Gray wants to get his

master’s degree and conduct an apprenticeship to be an electrician before owning his own business so he can retire young.

And Kluth does not yet have any post-graduation plans, as he is currently “going with the flow.”

Charley Cattanach is the Union County High School construction teacher and has mentored these young men in preparation for everything they have done so far.

“One of the most important things about SkillsUSA is that it gives students the chance to gain more motivation about the crafts they are interested in,” Cattanach said, “and

competition builds upon that motivation to desire more.

“It is a great pathway into building bridges between high school into careers. And it is great to have programs like this because hands-on job skills are progressing, and this school understands the need for those kinds of jobs, so we are trying to place a great emphasis on that.”

Added Cattanach, “We are seeing interest in things like this slowly gaining back popularity since we have had to deal with COVID, and it is great for students to have extracurricular activities to stay focused on good things that can help their future.”

‘Shine-Thru Parade’ continues Night to Shine tradition

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It was all smiles at the First United Methodist Church of Union County on Feb. 5 as the usual “Night to Shine” gala became a daytime “Shine-Thru Parade.”

Historically, the annual formal event celebrating the area’s special needs residents has taken place in the evening, but amid a world still reeling from COVID-19, organizers opted to bring the event back with some creative wiggle room in 2022.

Night to Shine came about in 2014 thanks to the efforts of the Tim Tebow Foundation. Set up like a prom night, anyone 14 and older can participate as a guest for a dedicated time of enjoyment honoring individual

“Kings and Queens” with special needs from Towns, Union, Fannin and beyond.

The nationally recognized event is hosted by local churches, and Blairsville’s First United Methodist Church was no exception, with the 2022 Night to Shine having been organized by Joe and Kim Tatman, who celebrated their fifth year putting on the event.

“Because of COVID, both last year and again this year, we cannot host an indoor prom,” said Kim Tatman, who remained determined to let folks with special needs know that they are still loved.

Last year, party favors and food were delivered directly to the homes of caretakers and participants in lieu of a gathering, but this year, with the advent of the “Shine-Thru Parade,” the Prom Kings and Queens were able to return to the church.

Guests attended in everything from trucks and vans to sleek cars and sizeable busses passing through the parking lot to stop at various decorated stations. By 9:45 a.m., there were 13 stops in total manned by a variety of volunteers decked in colorful clown costumes.

With contributions from Sicily’s Pizza, Ingles, Dunkin’ Donuts, Chick-fil-A, and of course the hardworking members of the First United Methodist Church, there was plenty of food to go around.

Jackie and Lamar Franklin had charge of Table 6, where they handed out jewelry to ladies and combs to gentlemen. Looking back on past events, the couple compared 2022’s layout with the way things were pre-COVID.

“We had a hospitality room for the caregivers, and we played Bingo and they served dinner,” Jackie said. “And they could just let go because we took care of them. Lamar did photography that time, and the next time, he was a server at a table.”

Still, they greatly enjoyed being able to help host an in-person event, and both made their way to the passenger sides or back seats of vehicles to personally offer gifts to King and Queen attendees.

Just up the parking lot at Station 5, Kathy Cook handed out chicken biscuits. After telling her granddaughter Savannah about the event, the latter was so excited that she drew up an “Eat Mor Chikin” sign to adorn Cook’s table.

In fact, there were several



Union County Fire Department and Mascot Sparky Dalmatian enjoyed the “Shine-Thru Parade” as much as the guests earlier this month at First United Methodist Church of Union County.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

cases of volunteers putting their best and more into presentation, as just down the way at Table 11, Maggie Guerrier took her clown costume to another level by adding a fanciful bright red superhero cape that helped her cut a striking figure.

Guerrier joked about being part of the “cool group,” despite the fact that her team enjoyed a bit more heat under a coveted spot in direct sunlight.

But it wasn’t just volunteers dressing up and having all the fun. More importantly, many guests of honor wore their best getup despite not getting out of their vehicles until the firehouse photo op at the end of the Shine-Thru Parade.

Ariel Sutton, 30, grabbed attention with a gorgeous dress covered in sequins that dazzled the eyes in the morning sun and perfectly matched her deep purple lipstick.

And CJ McGuire, wrapped snugly in a blanket, sat atop a truck-shaped chariot decorated with balloons and a poster bearing her name with heart-shaped

tinsel. Clyde Williams’ family drove all the way from Toccoa, and he said he was having a lot of fun so far – and this was only at Table 8.

“This is my first time doing the Night to Shine Drive-Thru,” Williams said with a smile on his face, “but I’m going to try to do it again next year.”

Sydney Davenport tries to attend every Night to Shine, and while she admitted that it is more fun to dress up for an indoor night in the church’s ballroom, she was still able to enjoy the parade.

Once guests had moved through the other stops, they were invited to get out of their vehicles and take a photo with the Union County Fire Department mascot Sparky the Dalmatian.

Of course, Sparky could also come to them, as demonstrated when the daring dog crawled into a van and nearly had to be “extracted with the jaws of life.” Sparky was a big hit with more than a few Kings and Queens, one of whom insistently kept taking his paws in an attempt to

warm up. Joe Tatman offered a comically oversized but delicately decorated picture frame prettied up with roses. From his vantage point at the very end of the event, he was able to keep track of the fruits of his and his wife’s labor of love.

In total, about 90 volunteers participated, whether they were from the church and its youth group or from the Boy Scouts and Union County Cheerleaders.

Of the approximately 60 guests, 40 were present for the parade, with the other 20 residing in Blue Ridge and being unable to attend, though the Tatmans had committed to delivering food and party favors directly to the honored recipients.

The joyful event was augmented a week later on Friday, Feb. 11, with a “Night to Shine Virtual Celebration.” Watching from home, incredibly loved Kings and Queens got to enjoy a virtual walk down the red carpet, karaoke, dancing and special guests.



2022 Night to Shine Queen CJ McGuire made quite the entrance for the Feb. 5 parade on her very own chariot.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Empty Shelves...from Page 1A

for more than four decades, and Owner Rick Abercrombie confirmed that, while empty shelves essentially boil down to “supply and demand,” it’s not a single factor but a variety of reasons why fewer items are in stock of late.

“It started in 2020 with the tissue paper and disinfectant – the sanitizing wipes, disinfecting sprays” Abercrombie said, referencing the mad rush to stores brought on by all the uncertainty surrounding the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, there was such a run on hand sanitizer that people started making their own at home, and Granddaddy Mimm’s Distilling Co. even diverted part of its moonshine operations to distilling liquor to manufacture hand sanitizer.

As time went on, people calmed down enough to realize that, as long as they stopped panic-buying, there would be enough supplies on shelves. But the difficulties took on new dimensions as the pandemic drew out, month after month, and now year after year.

For Foodland, the problem manifests nowadays during receipt of deliveries, with the grocery store never knowing what items will be missing from its orders until vendors begin checking in groceries. And often, prices have increased between deliveries as well.

Abercrombie said one thing that has continued to affect supply chains is labor shortages in multiple industries, compounded by the phenomenon of factory workers getting COVID and shutting whole facilities to causing “so it doesn’t spread through their entire workforce.”

He also thinks some of the labor shortages experienced around the world could be due to vaccine mandates forcing out workers who wish to make their own medical decisions, including among thousands of truck drivers who play an indispensable role in distributing goods.

Then there’s the bottleneck at American ports causing delays in ships being able to deliver any number of imported products, and ongoing tariffs on foreign goods have also played a role in increasing prices on shelves.

For complicated domestic and foreign political reasons, oil and gas prices have gone

up, too, resulting in increased shipping costs, which in turn translates to greater costs to transport both raw materials and finished products into the hands of manufacturers and consumers alike.

Concerning raw materials, these have also been harder to come by since the onset of the pandemic, with newfound scarcity driving up demand by manufacturers, which increases costs to produce goods.

Supply woes have caused an uptick in demand for products that are no longer readily available, driving consumer prices higher in markets already impacted by the U.S. Government injecting trillions of dollars into the economy during COVID, effectively diluting everyone’s purchasing power.

So, goods cost more because demand is up, and they also cost more because people’s money is worth less.

“I really started noticing prices going up last summer,” Abercrombie said. “We are in business to make a profit – no business is a nonprofit. When (vendors) go up on us, we’ve got to go up on our customers; that’s just the way it works.”

That’s not to say business hasn’t been good. During the pandemic, grocery stores and other types of consumer goods outlets have benefited above and beyond pre-pandemic levels.

Some of this is from people staying home more. Initial lockdowns kept citizens in their homes, and fewer people wanted to venture out anyway for fear of risking potential exposure to the virus.

The pandemic and the bureaucratic response to it also heralded unprecedented closures of and restrictions on restaurants, entertainment venues, and other “non-essential” sectors of the economy, by design giving people less to do in public.

“In my lifetime, we’ve never been through something like this where a large part of our entire economy has been shut down for a period of time,” Abercrombie said. “There have been viruses before, but the whole world didn’t get shut down over them. This is all new territory.”

These factors have conspired to cause spending habits to change, channeling more money to venues like grocery stores, which further

benefitted from all the money the federal government was printing in the first two years of the pandemic to send to families as “COVID relief funds.”

Instead of traveling, seeing movies or dining out, for example, people with suddenly fewer available activities started putting their federally deposited dollars into home entertainment options and began doing more around the house, including making more meals at home.

That has been a boon for grocery stores, even if prices are going up and many goods are becoming harder to acquire.

“Two of the busiest occupations since this pandemic started have been the health care and the grocery business,” Abercrombie said, noting that other factors have played into Foodland’s ongoing success, such as store upgrades and the pre-pandemic closing of competitor Food City.

Ultimately, the reasons for item shortages and price increases are myriad – such as extreme winter weather causing delays in truck deliveries – and Abercrombie reiterates that, in the end, it all comes back to supply and demand.

And right now, demand is outstripping supply for many goods, to include access to products that actually aren’t in short supply but have been held up for shipping reasons.

“I don’t look for it to get any better this year – I’m just hoping it doesn’t get any worse,” Abercrombie said. “It seems to be constantly changing, but it just is what it is; that’s just where we’re at right now, and we’ve just got to deal with it.”

“I’m not talking about milk and bread and eggs (being completely out). One week it might be I can’t get this size of milk, or maybe the next week I can’t get my brand of bread in the whole wheat gluten-free. We’re accustomed to more variety, and we’ve had our variety cut back just a little bit.”

“It’s been a change for people. Nobody’s starving, nobody’s doing without. They just might not be able to get every little thing that they want, and we’re not used to that. I’m not saying that’s a good thing, but maybe it’ll kind of make us realize how good we had it.”

Located at 34 Pat Haralson Drive just off the Blairsville Square, Foodland is the only local hometown grocery store in Union County.