

THC Ring...from Page 1A

outstanding warrants in the case, and people with information regarding their whereabouts are being asked to call the Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066.

Nickerson was last known to be in Florida, while Wyble is thought to be in North Carolina at this time.

The following individuals have already been arrested and charged, according to the Sheriff's Office:

Joseph James Nickerson, 24, of Blairsville, for violation of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act; four counts distribution of a controlled substance; and three counts use of telecommunications to facilitate a drug transaction.

Margaret Ricera Johnston, 41, of Blairsville, for possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute.

Jordan Joseph Howell, 18, of Blairsville, for sale or distribution of a controlled substance; possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute; possession of drug-related objects; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; and use of telecommunications to facilitate a drug transaction.

Brandon Michael Lamarre, 19, listed as homeless, for sale or distribution of a controlled substance; possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute; possession of drug-related objects; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; and use of telecommunications to facilitate a drug transaction.

Joseph Nickerson was arrested about three weeks ago in Florida, according to the Sheriff's Office. He arrived last week on extradition orders at the Union County Jail, where he remains in custody without bond.

Johnston was arrested last week and is currently out on bond. Howell and Lamarre were arrested in August 2019, and they remain free on bond pending later grand jury indictment.

The above individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Cousins Thomas and Joseph Nickerson, originally from Florida, are being considered the prime suspects behind the illegal operation, which allegedly resulted in a supply chain providing underage kids and many others with THC products in Union and Towns counties, as well as in Cherokee County, North Carolina, at least as far back as April 2019, the Sheriff's Office said.

The investigation into the ring began in August 2019, after UCSO Narcotics Division investigators received information that a group of individuals were allegedly traveling from Blairsville to Miami, Florida, upwards of twice a week, "to pick up as many as 1,000 highly concentrated THC vape cartridges, many of which were to be sold locally," Lt. Tyler Miller said.

Resulting from UCSO's investigation, Thomas Nickerson was arrested in Cherokee County, North Carolina, in December

on charges related to THC cartridges, and Miller said much of the local illegal cartridge activity apparently decreased after Nickerson made bond and fled the area.

This particular drug ring has been indirectly linked with the death investigation of Mary Kerrie Davis of Blairsville, the Sheriff's Office said.

Davis died last September at the too-young age of 52 after succumbing to a mysterious vaping-related illness the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been calling EVALI, which stands for "e-cigarette, or vaping, product use-associated lung injury."

Her death helped shine a national spotlight on an incredibly important issue, as her story became one of the most widely circulated examples of people becoming sick after vaping and, in roughly 2.5 percent of hospitalized cases, dying from the pneumonia-like illness.

The number of vaping illnesses associated with this apparent epidemic experienced a dramatic increase in August 2019, only to peak in September before declining once word got out about the vaping link.

Like many Americans, Davis vaped liquid nicotine in the form of legal e-cigarettes as an alternative to smoking, and she did so safely for years.

Not long before her death, however, during a trip last summer, Davis began legally vaping THC in California, and she continued the practice upon her return to Georgia, according to her family.

Unbeknownst to family members and law enforcement until after she died, Davis had obtained a number of THC cartridges locally, and the investigation into those cartridges rolled into the already established investigation involving the drug ring, the Sheriff's Office said.

Since the vaping illness initially swept the nation, CDC officials have identified a strong connection between the illnesses/deaths and a thickening compound known to be used in illegal vape cartridges containing THC, the high-inducing chemical from marijuana plants.

To be clear, authorities have been unable to draw any direct links between this illegal cartridge ring and Davis' death, though investigators believe the ring to be one of the sources from which Davis obtained cartridges in the leadup to her demise, the Sheriff's Office said.

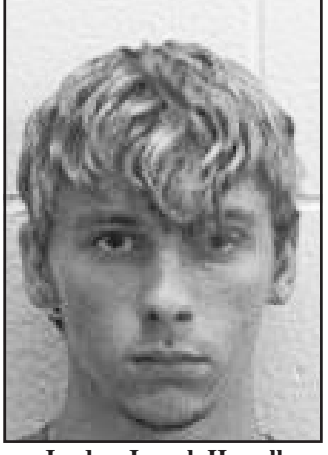
The UCSO Narcotics Division consists of Lt. Tyler Miller and Investigator Jay McCarter.

Assisting in the investigation were the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Cherokee County (North Carolina) Sheriff's Office, and the Appalachian Drug Task Force. The Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office has provided ongoing assistance and legal support in the case.

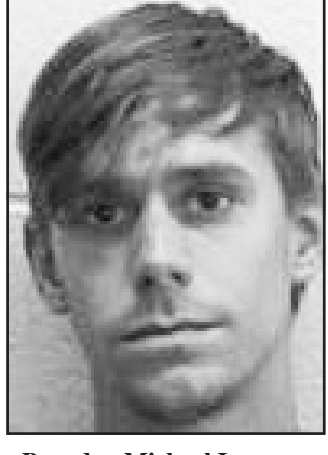
"I want to thank law enforcement for the investigation," District Attorney Jeff Langley said. "This does



Joseph James Nickerson



Jordan Joseph Howell



Brandon Michael Lamarre



Margaret Ricera Johnston

put a dent in the supply chain of these type things coming into our county. And the publicity surrounding the arrests hopefully communicates to our young people the danger of using these illegal vape cartridges.

"There is no quality control. There's no way for these kids to know what is truly in these cartridges. Therefore, every time an illegal vape cartridge is used, it's a roll of the dice with these kids' health."

As for the family of Mary Kerrie Davis, they have questioned the wisdom of a system that requires people to step outside the bounds of law to procure a substance that many believe would be largely harmless if legalized and properly regulated.

Still, they are thankful for investigators who have helped get a potentially dangerous, illegal product off the streets, and they hope people will continue to learn from their beloved family matriarch's story.

"We can't give enough credit to Lt. Tyler Miller and the Union County Sheriff's Office for their tenacity in working the case for the past six months," said Kevin Davis, husband of Mary Kerrie Davis.

According to her obituary, "Mary Kerrie was always full of love for everyone she knew, even briefly, and life with her was never dull. She enjoyed travel, working with the public, gardening, photography, trying to cook like Gordon Ramsay, and especially her golden doodle, Gal.

"Family was Auntie KK's greatest joy. She was a loving and caring wife, mother, sister and aunt. Her daughters, Maggie and Macy, were the light of her life. She could make any baby laugh and so looked forward to grandchildren. Mary Kerrie attended St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church."

Girl Scouts sew masks for local Healthcare Workers



Union County Girl Scout Troop

The Girl Scouts of Towns/Union/Fannin counties met via Facebook Live Video on Tuesday, March 24th, and coordinated efforts to do their community service during this difficult time of coronavirus. Made aware that there was a serious shortage of facemasks for healthcare workers, the girls took a short lesson on cutting fabric and elastic to be sent for sewing.

They also wrote thank you notes to the healthcare workers that will be included in the mask delivery.

One of the tenets of the Girl Scout Law is to use resources wisely - so banding together, even if virtually, to make the most of what they have in order to assist others, seemed a perfect fit.

Says Janice Waters, senior troop leader for the Service Unit, "These are a great bunch of girls, soulful and



Sample of facemasks sewn by local Girl Scouts

mindful. Thanks to the other leaders and parents who believe in their girl's development without whom this program would not be possible."

Although Girl Scouts is almost over for the year, early registration is available that will encompass the sum-

mer and next year. The Union County troops meet at First United Methodist Church in Blairsville on Tuesday nights.

For information about the local scouting program (or to donate 1/4" or 3/8" elastic for the project) please call Janice at 706-897-3378. NT/APL-ZS/CA