

North Georgia News

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Fallen soldiers honored in Memorial Day service

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, May 28, Blairsville-Union County once again opened up for Memorial Day Weekend, starting with a colorful, well-received parade followed by the customarily held Memorial Day Ceremony inside the Union County War Memorial Veteran's Park.

The purpose of the annual parade and ceremony is to honor, respect and remember those brave Americans who fought and died for the preservation of the American Republic and the individual freedoms for which it stands.

About 100 spectators, veterans and their family members spread out around the grounds of the War Memorial near Downtown Blairsville to see the ceremony. Prominent

among them were boy Scout Troop 101, Cub Scout Troop 101 Badgers, and the Union County High School Band.

Blairsville Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7394 Cmdr. Chuck Honaker served as master of ceremonies for the memorial event.

"I stand before you on this proud day of remembrance and ask that you join me in not only remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the good of this great nation, but in truly reflecting on their legacy," Honaker said.

"There has been no other nation on Earth whose sacrifice has been greater than ours. Nowhere in the annals of history has there been a country before ours that has paid a higher price for the freedom of others."

"Sacred and hallowed ground at Arlington, and places

like Ardennes, Normandy, Pearl Harbor, and Manila are testament to the high cost of achieving and maintaining freedom around the globe.

"So, we stand together today, and we are reminded of the true cost of freedom. And while we as a nation mourn the lives lost, we celebrate the lives lived and are forever grateful.

"Above all, in an attempt to pay back our debt as American citizens, we also must not only remember the fallen, but it is our responsibility to teach our youth that nothing comes without a cost, and that sacrifices are meaningless without remembrance.

"Today, perhaps more so than any other day throughout the year, we set aside our personal beliefs regarding politics and war and unite in tribute and respect to all those who afforded us the very

opportunity to gather freely today," said Honaker, then recognizing Gold Star families in the audience, those surviving family members who still loved ones in past military conflicts.

Honaker also paused to recognize a surviving prisoner of war who was in the audience before introducing retired U.S. Army Lt. Col. Wade Smith, Vietnam veteran and founder of the Mountain Education Charter High School, as the keynote speaker at the Memorial Day event.

"Let me first address the history of Memorial Day," Smith said in opening. "The practice began shortly after the Civil War when families would go to church services, then decorate the graves of the fallen from both sides.

"That, my extended family - for we are all of one



Retired U.S. Army Lt. Col. Wade C. Smith Sr. served his country for nearly three decades, and he delivered the keynote address in the 2022 Union County Memorial Day Ceremony. Photo by Mark Smith

Parade, arts festival share Memorial Day Weekend

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Blairsville's Memorial Day celebrations took place on Saturday, May 28, ahead of the May 30 national observance. Folks showed up early for the parade, which began at

10:30 a.m., though spectators began claiming the best vantage points as early as 10 a.m.

Memorial Day is a special holiday reserved for honoring those Americans who died in military service to their country. And Union County, a highly patriotic area of the state, is one of those special

places where Memorial Day is honored with the utmost respect.

Lotey Wetzel was downtown with wife Virginia and brother Charlie along with several friends who had set up folding chairs in front of North Georgia Beverage. It proved to



The Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101 of Blairsville observed Memorial Day with a patriotic parade entry on Saturday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

MECHS graduates go forth with diplomas, wisdom



MECHS Class of 2022 graduates tossing their caps after graduating with diplomas in hand. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union Site of Mountain Education Charter High School celebrated Class of 2022 graduates during

commencement exercises on Tuesday, May 24, with 17 students from Union and Towns counties receiving diplomas that evening.

MECHS' mission is "to provide a second chance opportunity for students

across North Georgia to earn an accredited High School Diploma in a student-centered, self-paced, evening public high school."

Principal Casey Jones welcomed guests into the Union

Meeks Park Pool, Splash Pad open for cool summer fun

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

It's that time of year again for families to embrace the perfect trifecta of summer fun: no school, nice weather, and the Swimming Pool and Splash Pad opening at Meeks Park.

The lifeguard-staffed pool opened for the summer on May 28 and will be welcoming families seven days a week from 12-6 p.m., with activities for people of all ages, including youngsters, who particularly enjoy the exciting Splash Pad water equipment.

Entry is \$5 per person for one day - cash or check only - with children 5 and under getting in free. Union County residents may also purchase \$125 family memberships, or \$150 for non-residents, with \$65 single memberships available for Union residents and \$75 for non-residents.



Meeks Park Pool opened to hundreds of guests on Saturday as families enjoyed their Memorial Day Weekend with fun in the sun. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

The pool will also be hosting morning water aerobics classes Monday, Wednesday and Friday each week, and swimming lessons for kids will be available this summer starting June 13.

To inquire about classes and swimming lessons, call 706-439-6074, and for more information generally, visit <http://www.unioncountygga.gov/parks-recreation/meeks-park/swimming-pool/>.

Unfortunatly, pool parties are all booked up for the 2022 season, but visitors will still get plenty of opportunities to enjoy the pool and splash pad every day of every week for the next few months, including lifeguards on duty, rentable cabanas, concessions, showers

See Meeks Park Pool, Page 2A

DUI driver kills 1-year-old daughter in crash, GSP says

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A Blairsville man has been charged in the death of his 1-year-old daughter and the serious injury of his 3-year-old son after crashing his car under the influence of drugs on Kiutuestia Creek Road Sunday, May 22, according to the Georgia State Patrol.

Michael Zane Burleson, 51, was arrested and charged with first-degree vehicular homicide, serious injury by vehicle, possession of methamphetamine, driving under the influence (drugs) (less safe), two counts endangering a child under 14 while DUI, possession of drug-related objects, two counts of not using a child or youth restraint properly, and failure to maintain lane.

At press time, Burleson remained in custody at the Union County Jail on a \$44,000 bond.

The accident occurred around 5:35 p.m. as Burleson was driving his 1997 Nissan Sentra north on Kiutuestia Creek Road in the area of Orchard Drive, with his two children in

the backseat of the car, according to GSP.

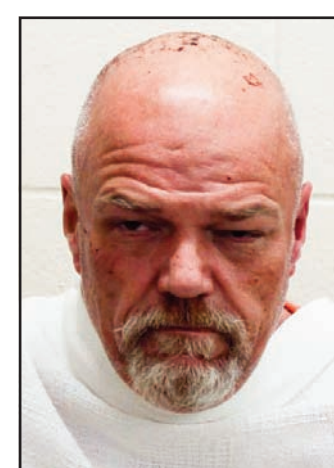
"(Burleson) failed to maintain his lane of travel," according to GSP. "(His vehicle) traveled off the right side of the road down an embankment. While traveling down the embankment (the Sentra) struck several trees (resulting in disabling damage)."

All three occupants of the vehicle were taken to Union General Hospital for medical treatment, with the children being further transported to Children's Egleston Hospital in Atlanta, per GSP.

Burleson sustained only a "possible injury" in the crash, while his 1-year-old daughter succumbed to her injuries and his 3-year-old son suffered "suspected serious injury," according to GSP.

As to why his vehicle left the roadway, Burleson told the investigating trooper that "a silver or grey vehicle was in his lane of travel, causing him to swerve to avoid a collision."

However, GSP noted that Burleson "was unable to provide any further description for the other vehicle," and that there



Michael Zane Burleson

was "no evidence or witness to support" his account.

In reference to the improper youth restraint charges, "the children were in child restraint systems, but those safety seats were not properly installed and secured," GSP said.

As noted above, Burleson was arrested on a DUI drug charge and for being in possession of methamphetamine at the time of the accident, and a blood test for drugs was pending at press time.

Vol. 113 No. 23

Arrests - 4B Legals - 3D
Church - 2C Obituaries - 4C
Classifieds - 3D Sports - 2B
Opinion - 4A

Blairsville Scottish Festival and Highland Games
June 11-12
See page 3A

Angler Appreciation Day @ Rock Creek
June 4
See page 3B

May 24 Election Results by Precinct
See page 4B

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Meeks Park Pool...from Page 1A



Meeks Pool features age-appropriate water play areas to accommodate both the little guys, who are fans of this 6-inch wading pool and the splash pad, as well as older kids.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

and restrooms.

Of course, the pool is just one of the many recreational opportunities for kids, families and residents made available by the Union County Government, which goes above and beyond to make sure children especially have access to fun activities no matter what their interests may be.

In terms of youth sports, the Union County Recreation Department offers baseball, softball, basketball, football, cheerleading and soccer on a regular basis for local families, and there's even something for kids who do not want to participate in organized sports.

Meeks Park has a skatepark, recreational basketball court and batting cages, and the county has been offering youth hiking and fishing experiences as well.

Families can take advantage of the multiple rentable pavilions at Meeks Park to host parties, cookouts and other outdoor gatherings, with Butternut Creek running through the park for more water play and a full playground for kids, complete with a swing set and equipment for different age groups.

Even the family pets can

get in on the action, with two county dog parks available for use by the public. The Farmers Market adjacent to the Farmers Market offers large and small dog areas, with agility equipment for beloved pets to get their energy out in safe and contained areas.

Then there's the more intimate dog park near the disc golf course across from the Union County Senior Center, which also features a public pavilion for get-togethers.

Speaking of the Farmers Market, the 2022 season opens this Saturday from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., and two days a week, families will be able to support local vendors by snagging "home grown and homemade" produce, items and more at 290 Farmers Market Way, with the Canning Plant opening July 5.

And don't forget the new Union County Sports Complex, which is available for both organized youth play and adult fitness classes, from aerobics to Zumba and even ballroom dancing, with programs designed to "accommodate every level of fitness from beginner to advanced."

Also for adults, Union County features disc golf, walking trails, pickleball, tennis and more, not to mention all the

family-centric festivals hosted throughout the year inside Meeks Park, like the Sorghum Festival in the fall and the upcoming Blairsville Scottish Festival June 11-12.

The county largely views recreation as a way of investing in the youth, and thereby investing in the future of Union, and county leadership is always looking for ways to expand recreational opportunities for everyone, including residents and guests from around the region.

In terms of branching out its youth offerings beyond traditional sports, the Recreation Department hosted a Fishing Day at the Reece Farm & Heritage Center May 24, which saw 40 kids and their parents/guardians participating to catch trout. More Fishing Days are in the works.

And the county is thankful for the involvement of passionate residents dedicated to furthering recreational opportunities here, exemplified most recently by the dog park patrons who volunteered to assist with the May 11 annual Maintenance Day at the Farmers Market.

Maintenance included spreading 25 tons of river sand throughout the dog park "to help their play area have a variety of surfaces, as well as help maintain the high traffic areas."

"We would like to thank all the volunteers and staff that brought their own personal equipment and spent the day making the Union County Farmers Market the fun-filled playground that all of our furry friends enjoy," the Recreation Department said last week. "And thanks to all of our furry friends and patrons for making the dog park the success that it is."

Truly, the Union County Recreation Department is working every day to live up to its stated mission:

"To enrich the lives of the citizens of Union County by providing safe, welcoming parks and recreation facilities with affordable, diverse recreational activities for people of all ages to play, learn, and develop healthy lifestyles while also being good stewards of our natural environment."



(L-R) Stuart Stovall, Aliceyn Covington, Dennis Rausch, Kristy Peney, Trey Jones, Dan Dettman, Don Alexson and Norm Bourbeau recently volunteered for Farmers Market maintenance. Not pictured: Julie Rausch, Faith Dettman and Duke Pangborn.

Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution recess for the summer

At the final meeting before the summer recess of the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR), the guest speaker was Bruce Maney. During the program, Maney traced the history of the National Guard from the French and Indian War (which preceded the American Revolution by 20-years) to the present. He described historic battles in which the National Guard played vital roles.

He relayed why the state militias changed their names to the National Guard. Before Lafayette visited America in 1825 and 1826, militias were referred to by state (for example, the Georgia Militia, the North Carolina Militia, etc.) Lafayette was the Colonel-General of the French Garde Nationale. In his honor, the state militias began changing their names to the National Guard.

Bruce Maney is a popular speaker throughout Georgia. Also, he serves as the chapter genealogist, whose expert skills have assisted hundreds of SAR members throughout Georgia to qualify for membership.

Ron Hill was recognized, in absentia, for designing and presenting the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter, SAR Challenge coins to members.

Tommy Westmoreland of Blairsville, a direct descendant of Edward Riley Sr., was recognized and inducted into the chapter.



(L-R): Bruce Maney receiving a certificate of appreciation from Chapter VP Stephen Weaver.



(L-R): Tommy Westbrook being inducted into the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter, SAR by President Sid Turner.

Memorial Day Parade...from Page 1A

be prime seating, considering the parade traveled up to and around the Blairsville Square from Cleveland Street.

"I brought up a lot of kids in the Navy," said Wetzel, a veteran. "The parents wouldn't bring their kids up, so they joined the Navy, and you have to bring them up. You have to teach them how to wash their hands, brush their teeth, comb their hair."

And Wetzel was just one of many veterans to attend the parade. Cleveland resident Steve Lucas came out with his wife Tina and dog Thor. A fellow veteran dating back to Vietnam, he described his military experiences as "tough while you're there, and tough coming back."

Lucas wiped his eyes and his voice cracked when he talked about the difficulties — and loneliness — of "coming back to the world" after having witnessed battle, but he said that, without a doubt, he would make the very same sacrifices again.

"You've got to seek out that bond that you have with other veterans, who know some of the things everybody has gone through and why they went through it," Lucas said. "Most of them feel the same way. They might have (experienced a lot of hardships), but they would do it again. The only thing they miss are the guys that didn't come back."

In the warmth of the sunshine beneath a clear blue sky, children climbed up the hill and played around Lucas. They were especially attracted to Thor, however, who was happy to sit down and oblige a few pets along with friendly licks.

"When I look around and see all these little kids running around, that's what it's all about," Lucas said. "That's why you go (to serve), for family."

The two-day Spring Arts,



Riders with the Union County Saddle Club showed up in their red, white and blue best for the May 28 Memorial Day Parade. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Crafts & Music Festival was in full swing around the square by the time the parade began, though everybody stopped to get a good look at the mobile extravaganza once it started, led by the Union County Sheriff's Office and the Fire Department.

Thereafter followed local officials like Mayor Jim Conley and Commissioner Lamar Paris, the latter of whom handed out American flags to children and adults alike in celebration of the country.

Awe-inspiring motorcycle groups revved their engines for excited kids, and the Union County High School Band rode in a trailer while they performed patriotic tunes.

The Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution marched out in their 18th century best, and a contingency of horses from the Union County Saddle Club outfitted in bright ear tassels and ribbons delighted the crowd.

Appealing to the eyes were the many floats, red-white-and-blue decorated vehicles, and classic, shimmering muscle cars courtesy of the Blairsville

Cruisers.

Most appealing to the heart of the day was the inclusion of local military groups like the Civil Air Patrol 152nd North Georgia Composite Squadron, Marine Corps League Unicoi Detachment #783, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7394, the Vietnam Veterans of America GA Chapter 1101, an increasingly rare World War II survivor, and even a van representing the Disabled American Veterans.

Serving as the Parade Grand Marshal was retired U.S. Army Lt. Col. Wade Smith, an area native and decorated war hero who helped transform regional education prospects for at-risk students by founding the Mountain Education Center in the 1990s.

For his service to his country in Vietnam, Korea and elsewhere around the globe, Smith received the Bronze Star, a Purple Heart, the Legion of Merit and many other medals and commendations.

After the parade, Smith served as the keynote speaker for the Memorial Day Service in War Memorial Park.

The concurrent Arts, Crafts & Music Festival, which acts as a joint fundraiser for the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority and Union County Historical Society, enjoyed an incredible turnout in a community still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, and there was just enough room to move comfortably as more and more folks journeyed through the event.

Guests were so jovial and invigorated that a dance party between total strangers began at the Historic Courthouse and meandered across the square, which caught the eye of Beja Barnett, a consultant of Paparazzi Accessories who had set up a trailer for her own business, Bea's Bling.

Unable to help herself, she said with a giggle, "I just started wiggling in my seat."

Sharon and Phil Iaquinto had a tent at the Old Courthouse for their business, Stones to Wear, where they sold handmade jewelry and repurposed amulets.

While not a veteran, Phil said he recognized the importance of Memorial Day not only for what it is, but for what it stands for and means for everyday civilians.

"I grew up during the Vietnam War and was fortunate enough not to get drafted," Phil said. "I went to school every day and always thought I was going to die by the time I was 19, because at 18 you got drafted, and at 19 you got killed in the Vietnam War."

"If you saw a military guy walk by (in school), he was there to take a kid out of class because their brother got killed. And I grew up that way, thinking I was going to die."

But on the first day of the festival that Saturday, he said he valued the hard-won freedom brought about by those who were drafted. In short, he believed Memorial Day was the perfect time to honor the sacrifices American soldiers gave, whether they came home or not.

Jewelry wasn't the only thing on display, though. High Lonesome, a therapeutic equestrian center from Murphy, North Carolina, sold decorative horseshoes to hang around the house, and retired art teacher Jeff Abney offered his carefully crafted works via Red Gate Pottery.

Taffa Tee Johnson started Royaltee Natural when her son suffered from dermatitis 15 years ago, and the air around her stand was fragrant with body butter, soaps and a variety of skincare products.

Originally, Johnson had been looking for new festivals to set up temporary shop at and noticed that the Blairsville Spring Arts, Crafts & Music Festival came highly recommended. She decided to take a chance and wasn't disappointed, saying she had met "some of the nicest people" here.



Many families attended the Memorial Day Parade in Blairsville, like Kay Jones, Eleanor McNair, Kala McNair, Kennedy McNair, and Panda Jones, representing four generations from the same family. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Rotary: People of Action

Charity Begins at Lunch



Rotarian Angela Sarrell greets guest speaker Michael A. Morris.

On May 26, the Union County Rotary Club enjoyed remarks by a very engaging speaker, Michael A. Morris, Chairman of the Morris Family Foundation, who has successfully balanced business and philanthropic interests throughout his career.

Michael currently serves on several charitable boards including the Georgia Aquarium, Georgia Commission on the Holocaust, National World War II Museum in New Orleans, and Friends of the IDF for the Southeast region. In addition, he is the current chairman of the Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity Foundation. Since 2014, Michael has been the owner and publisher of a weekly newspaper that has been in continuous circulation for more than 94 years.

Michael's past civic and charitable involvements include an appointment by President George W. Bush to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council in Washington, the CDC Foundation's National Advocacy Council, and the board of Zoo Atlanta.

Michael got his start in philanthropy from his parents. The Morris Family Foundation supports the worldwide growth of innovative, effective educational practices. Michael's step-father, Bernie Marcus, the founder of Home Depot, realized early

on that there would be ample funds to share with worthwhile organizations and their contributions, especially in the field of medicine, have led to numerous advances in care and science.

Of course, in some ways, Michael was preaching to the choir — the Rotary Foundation is one of the world's largest charitable organizations with a four star, 100% across the board rating from Charity Navigator the world's largest and most trusted nonprofit evaluator. Rotary Foundation grants promote peace, fight disease, provide clean water and sanitation, sustain mothers and children, improve education, and strengthen local economies.

The Foundation is a worldwide leader in the efforts to eradicate polio through its partnership in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

You can be a part of the good work that Rotary does providing networking, fellowship, and vital services on a local, national, and world-wide level. The next regular meeting is on Thursday, June 9th at The Skillet in Blairsville.

For more information about the club, call Rotary President Daniel Duello at (706) 603-3036 or incoming president, Richard Raborn at (561) 512-0755.

'Top Gun: Maverick' stars AV8RSTUFF of Blairsville

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

When "Top Gun: Maverick" premiered locally last Thursday night at Blairsville Cinema, Union County's own William "Whitey" White, a retired Navy and Air Force flyer, made sure to purchase seats for two separate shows, one ticket for a solo viewing at 4 p.m. and another to attend with family and friends at 7 p.m.

However, it wasn't his former career in the skies that had "Whitey" glued to the silver screen on opening night. His current endeavor, AV8RSTUFF, a locally based company co-owned by his wife specializing in authentic military memorabilia, was featured predominantly on the set of the sequel to Tom Cruise's 1986 blockbuster.

Whitey's involvement with the film began approximately three years ago when Paramount Pictures reached out requesting patches, coins and other memorabilia for a project called "Island Plaza."

"I thought that was a bit weird, so I went online and found out that ('Island Plaza') was a codename for 'Top Gun: Maverick,'" White said. "We supplied them with thousands of patches, coins and stuff like that, and you'll see (our contributions) on the back of the piano, on the walls and on the characters' flight suits."

In the past, AV8RSTUFF has assisted the likes of DC, NBC and Netflix on projects, but "Top Gun: Maverick" marks White's first involvement with a film based on his former career.



Be sure to check out "Top Gun: Maverick," in local theaters now, to see military memorabilia provided by William "Whitey" White's company AV8RSTUFF.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

"Being someone that flew for the Navy for nine years, this time around was really interesting, because I had some military friends, my wife, my son and some of his buddies (at the movies), and they were all pointing at our stuff," White said.

"We are very honored to be a part of this movie," he added. "We're just a small company in Northeast Georgia, so we weren't given any official credit, but knowing that we could help make the movie authentic brought a smile to my face and made me proud to help."

Although, White acknowledged that watching a military film as a military veteran is a bit different than viewing it from a fan's perspective.

"For a civilian, it looks great on the big screen during the flying scenes and the aerial maneuvers," he said. "I thought the movie looked great and is very well written. It's a high-energy, big-screen experience that's very entertaining, but as someone who has been on the

other end of it, you know that some of those things aren't very realistic.

"It did bring back a lot of memories for me. Some of the most exciting flying I've ever done has been in a fighter. The movie opens aboard the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71), which I have landings on, and seeing the catapult launches with all the guys on deck directing the launches, the engines revving up, the 'shirts' swarming like ants around the flight deck – it was very nostalgic.

"Even though I had only 239 carrier landings (and equal number of takeoffs), knowing that those guys and gals who are still serving, spending 10-12 months deployed at sea, it made me really proud to be a member of the naval aviation community."

Despite ending up in the cockpit of the Navy's carrier-based A-6E Intruder bomber and, later, the Air Force's F-15E Strike Eagle and B-1B Lancer, the Mississippi State alum originally attended aerospace engineering in college with

dreams of becoming a NASA astronaut.

White eventually received an opportunity to attend the Air Force equivalent to the Navy's Top Gun program, located at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada, which he declined.

"Being a newlywed, I didn't want to be away from my family for six months," he said. "And having a Navy background, they really didn't want to send me, but it's such a hard school, no one else wanted to go.

"But I was living in North Carolina at the time and didn't want to leave my new wife and my new home to go

off to Vegas."

With the rank of Lt. Colonel, White retired from the armed forces in 2012 with 21 years and 5,500-plus hours of flight time on his resume serving as a navigator or Mission Commander on more than two dozen aircraft in the Afghani, Bosnian and Iraqi theaters.

"No matter how much glory and credit the flyers get, the enlisted guys are the ones that make the aircraft fly," White said in closing, summarizing his more than two decades as an aviator. "They just give us the keys, and we go out, break it (usually), and bring it back.

"But the military wouldn't be what it is without those enlisted guys. It's a great group of people that all work together for the common good."

AV8RSTUFF was founded in 1998 and is the brainchild of Whitey's wife, Mechelle. The Whites have two children, Brittany and Hunter, and have called Blairsville home since 2008.

"Top Gun: Maverick" is playing locally at least through next Thursday, June 9. For show times, visit www.blairsvillemovie.com or check out page 5A of this week's edition of the North Georgia News.

Memorial Day Service...from Page 1A



As usual, the North Georgia Honor Guard played a crucial role in the Memorial Day Ceremony on Saturday, May 28.

Photo by Mark Smith

family – was the beginning of our current three-day Memorial Day holiday.

"Please have a barbecue-filled family holiday, but please remember the purpose, which is to memorialize those who gave the ultimate sacrifice – their life – in defense of our wonderful democracy, the most wonderful form of government that has ever been implemented by man.

"Since we are one family, when one of our families loses a beloved member in armed conflict, as witnessed by this beautiful memorial park, we all suffer, we all grieve. But once we get beyond grief, we celebrate the life of that fallen family member, and how wonderful it is to have had him or her with us, even if it was only for a few years. We remember them fondly and we celebrate the time God permitted them to be with us.

"We celebrate because we know that God has recalled that wonderful spirit to be with Him. We know that our fallen heroes are in Heaven, so we also celebrate knowing that we will someday join them," he said, encouraging people to embrace those families who have lost a loved one and to be of help to them in their grief and subsequent celebration.

"What an honor it has been for me to have been given the privilege of returning, living in, and serving this wonderful community, and may God bless each one of you," concluded Smith.

Following Smith's address, the newly released patriotic song by David "Eli" Grimes, "We Never Will Forget," was played over the PA system. Grimes, who lives just south of Murphy, North Carolina, was not able to attend the ceremony.

Honaker gave special thanks to retired U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Art McCann for his efforts within the Union County School System, and to retired Army Command Sgt. Maj. Roy Hamby for his efforts in the founding of Blairsville's War Memorial Park.

Thanks were given to Union County High School Band, which played a medley of service songs as each branch's flag was hoisted, Band Director Will Stafford for performing the National Anthem solo on his saxophone during the raising of the American flag, the UCHS Advanced Women's Ensemble singing "Amazing Grace" during the Laying of the Wreath, and a UCHS trumpet player's rendition of

Taps following the seven-gun salute.

Thanks were also given to the North Georgia Honor Guard; American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121, featuring the American Legion Auxiliary, American Legion Riders, and Sons of the American Legion; Disabled American Veterans Chapter 11; Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7394; Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101; Marine Corps League Detachment 783; and Navy Seabee Veterans of America Island X-3.

Thanks to the Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts who helped with preparing the park for the event, the Wreath ceremony, the raising of the service flags, and cleanup, and thanks to the Appalachian St. Andrew's Pipes & Drums for their appearance.

Finally, Honaker thanked U.S. Air Force Veteran Jim Yohe for his efforts in organizing the War Memorial event.

"Let us work to educate others on the true meaning of Memorial Day, and let us vow to stand up for those who are unable to stand up for themselves. God bless all of our departed heroes, their families; and God bless America," said Honaker just before the Retiring of the Colors.

MECHS Graduation...from Page 1A

County Schools Fine Arts Center before the recognizable "Pomp and Circumstance" signaled the entrance of the small class as students, who filtered in from both sides of the auditorium.

Emma Catherine Beckham, Ethan Shaun Bruner, Kaitlyn Amanda Daves and Abbigayle Marie Owens graduated with Honors, while Abbigail Taylor Duffey and Caylyn Faith West graduated with High Honors.

Duffey and West carried the Class of 2022's traditional "cromach," which MECHS Graduation Coach Gina Young explained was a walking stick used by ancient Scottish chieftains as a source of balance and support for traversing the rocky, often unstable terrain of the Highlands.

Similarly, students seeking a more suitable environment than traditional high school for their education could count on MECHS.

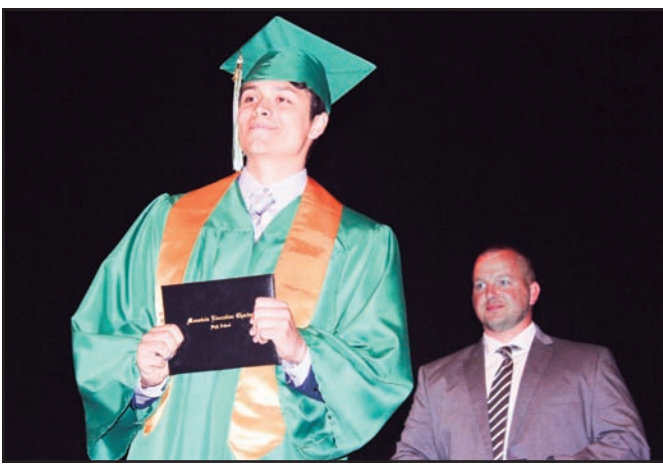
"Symbolically, the cromach represented the power of preserving good through fidelity to truth," Young said. "Often, cromachs were adorned with medallions and engravings depicting conquered territory or extraordinary feats.

"At each MECHS commencement ceremony, the High Honor Graduate from each site carries their site's cromach and leads their graduating peers in procession."

The two High Honor Graduates of the Class of 2022 had their chance then to address their peers and the proud family and friends in the audience.

"We've overcome many challenges, yet many challenges lie ahead for each of us," West said. "We are all better equipped to deal with whatever life throws at us now. As Philippians 4:13 says, 'I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.'

"Classmates, I hope you too find your strength, your



MECHS graduate Victor Devereaux triumphantly receiving his diploma on May 24 as Union Site Admin Brandon Bradburn proudly looks on.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

destiny, and your purpose, and may God bless you as you all start your journey through life."

Added Duffey, "So, fellow graduates, as we are gathered here today to honor each one of you and your hard work, I urge you to embrace the opportunity before you: Take what you have learned throughout the past 12 years ... and put it to good use in the next chapter of your life. While it may feel like this is the end, don't fret; like they say, 'Every end is a new beginning.'"

It was with humor that graduate Victor Devereaux began his speech, noting that "they skipped my part, by the way."

Originally meant to deliver the ceremony's greeting, Devereaux settled for an address that was slightly out of order. His message was no less poignant, however, and his purpose was to remind his classmates not to back down when facing uncertainty amid life's challenges.

"I was afraid of failing when the whole time I was failing by not trying," said Devereaux, describing the anxiety that came with running from intimidating but necessary tasks. "To everyone that is here graduating tonight, I want you

to know that I am very proud of you guys.

"We have all had setbacks and we have all seen our share of fear, but yet we overcame that and are here standing before everybody who helped us, mentored us, and believed in us, even when we didn't believe in (ourselves)."

This tied in to all three students thanking MECHS staff and educators for their roles in making their lives, and indeed their futures, brighter with ample encouragement and the possibility of a different path.

Because of their small size, the Class of 2022 also received recognition of scholarships that night, and no small number were gifted funds from the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship. A seat for former Union Site Administrator Atkins, who passed away in March, was left empty in her memory during the ceremony.

Other prominent local organizations that awarded scholarships that evening were the United Community Bank, the Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation, North Georgia Technical College, Appalachian Shriners, and others.

Moving onto the conferring of diplomas, as Graduation Coach Angie Burns called out their names, graduates accepted their well-earned credentials from Principals Jones and Brandon Bradburn before turning their tassels to signify the end of one journey and the start of another.

But of course, the road to life after graduation is a long one, so MECHS administrators gave the Class of 2022 a much smaller journey to complete first – a very short trip to the lower parking lot for a special dinner.

Graduates were greeted with hot dogs, hamburgers, some homemade ice cream from Nana & Papa's, and pieces of cake made by Melissa's Custom Cakes featuring the MECHS logo and sprinkled with edible pearls.

Congratulations to the Union Site Class of 2022 graduates of Mountain Education Charter High School.