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Union County Middle School, then traveled by bus to Walmart, where refreshments awaited all the volunteers and children present to take part in Shop With a Cop.

"I think for the most we try to do anything that gives back to the community," said Justin Chandler, Walmart Store Manager. "This is one of those things, whether it be this or helping out with some of the churches locally. If someone reaches out to us, we try our best to help."

Those involved in Shop With a Cop want to make sure that the most children possible have a special Christmas, and that includes the Blairsville Cruisers.

The Cruisers raise money throughout the year to give to efforts like Shop With a Cop, and the group even hosts its own shopping experience in the same likeness as Shop With a Cop, known as Shop With a Cruiser.

As in previous years, the Cruisers also acted as chaperones and guides for kids while they did their shopping last Saturday.

For many involved with the event, the reward is simply in being able to see the bright smiles of the children as they shop, both for themselves and

for their families – something that warms the hearts of all those volunteering.

"We have done this for many years," said Michael "Bear" Baxter, Assistant Chief of Blairsville Police. "This is our 16th year. We have had great success with Shop With a Cop."

"There are many underprivileged folks who live in this county, and we couldn't do this without our community. This isn't about us. The people in this county are very generous. "The businesses are very generous. Whether it's a civic organization, a church or whatever, everybody springs in to help us. We couldn't do this by ourselves. That's the most important thing I'd like to stress."

"You get a lot of satisfaction in doing this for these kids. In less than a week, there's no telling how many thank you cards we'll get in the mail, handwritten by these kids. That's pretty rewarding."

"Over the years, we've helped a lot of kids, and one thing I've noticed with them is they're very appreciative of it. I think this time of year we all need to be helping each other."



Blairsville Municipal Court Clerk Cindy Neely and Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll.



Shop With A Cop is a good way for law enforcement to reach out to kids in the community.



Dozens of volunteers helped to make the 2016 Blairsville Shop With A Cop a huge success.



After the kids finish their shopping, volunteers load up the presents and transport them back to the middle school.

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Christmas program.

Every year, Tree Lighting organizers ask guests to bring new, unwrapped toys for children, and Dyer collected those toys as visitors made their way up to the site of the Christmas program.

"We got a lot of toys," said Dyer. "People did a really good job bringing out the toys. They brought a whole bunch of toys this time, which is really going to help us out with our toy drive. It made a big dent in what we were needing."

Janet Hill organizes the

event year after year, with help from Mike and Cheri Young to coordinate the musical talent for the evening.

"This year we had about 10 churches that volunteered to help put it all together," said Hill. "We came out and decorated the fences, and got everything decorated about the week before Thanksgiving."

The churches and their members, all volunteers, prepared hot cocoa and cider, painted kids' faces, helped children make beaded candy canes, handed out cookies and

more. Santa and Mrs. Claus – Arthur and Nancy Heller – graciously took children's requests and wished Merry Christmas to all.

This year's program featured pre-program music from Sweet Tea & the Blue Grass Boys, Children of the Promise, as well as Jim and Lydia Cox.

Vogel State Park Manager Jack Becker and Hill opened the program with words of welcome, and Mike Young asked people where they were from, the person from the farthest away having traveled from Tampa, Florida.

As is traditional, organizers figured out how old the oldest visitor was that evening – 85 years old – as well as the youngest, who was 9 months old.

A round of Christmas carols followed before Young performed "Mary Did You Know?" just prior to Doug Merk, a missionary to Notla River Baptist Association, who read aloud the story of Christmas.

Mike's sister, Ami Young, sang "O Holy Night," which led into the lighting of the tree by Becker.

Many more carols ensued, including the candlelit "Silent Night," and both Becker and Hill gave parting

words to the more than 600 in attendance.

Pastor George Cline of Antioch Baptist Church offered a prayer before the closing of the evening.

Event organizers and the park would like to thank everyone who made the event possible, including the churches, park volunteers, those in attendance, and workers from the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, who helped to decorate the big tree and the visitor's center.



Jack Becker is the new manager of Vogel State Park, having been here since May. Photo/Lowell Nicholson



Live music is always present during the Vogel Tree Lighting and Christmas Program. Photo/Lowell Nicholson



The good people of Pine Top Baptist Church supplied more than 500 cups of hot cocoa and cider at the Dec. 10 program. Ten other area churches pitched in to make the event extra special. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

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