

North Georgia News

4 Sections 20 Pages

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Shop With A Cop brings joy to Christmas morning

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Dec. 10, Christmases were once again made merry and bright for many underprivileged children of the community when the Blairsville Police Department teamed up with local volunteers to host the 22nd Annual Shop With A Cop at the Blairsville Walmart.

Participating children received a \$250 shopping spree for gifts while police officers and volunteers took them around the store to share in their enjoyment as the kids picked out items not just for themselves, but selflessly for family members as well.

"We take kids everywhere from first through 12th grade

See Shop With A Cop, Page 6A



Local law enforcement first up with civic-minded volunteers to host the 22nd Shop With A Cop at Walmart on Saturday.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Sixth-grader touches hearts with Veterans Day card



UCMS sixth-grader Adalin Davenport receiving recognition from the North Georgia Honor Guard this month, pictured here with her parents and Mark Harbison of the Honor Guard.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

There's a tradition among Union County Schools to honor those who have served their country on Veterans Day. Part of the tradition is students from Union County Middle School providing special hand-

cards to set at individual seats during the annual Veterans Breakfast.

On Friday, Nov. 11, Sr. Vice Commander Mark Harbison of the Eastern Division of the North Georgia Honor Guard happened to sit down at the seat featuring young Adalin Davenport's card.

"It just struck a chord

with all of us; it was a little bit different from most of them," Harbison said, adding that as soon as he saw the card, he became emotional. Impressed and overcome with tears, he shared it with his fellow servicemembers.

The reason Harbison See Veterans Day Card, Page 6A

Union County man faces murder charges in shooting

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Last week, the Union County Sheriff's Office arrested a locally registered sex offender accused of murdering 38-year-old resident Eric James Heritage. No motive for the shooting was known at press time.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation, which is handling the case, has charged Wade Allen Huffman, 32, of Blairsville, with murder and is facing additional charges for a Sex Offender Registry violation and two felony probation violations.

"On Thursday, Dec. 8, 2022, at approximately 7:20

p.m., Union County 911 received an open line call from a residence located on Fortenberry Rd.," GBI said Friday. "During the call, dispatchers could hear screaming and dispatched deputies to a dispute call.

"Deputies arrived at the residence to find Wade Huffman, 32, of Blairsville, waiting on the front steps of the residence. Huffman was taken into custody on outstanding warrants for failing to register as a sex offender.

"Officers discovered that Eric Heritage, 38, of Blairsville, had been shot inside the residence. Deputies provided life-saving measures, but Heritage died at the scene from his injuries. Huffman has See Murder in Blairsville, Page 2A



Wade Allen Huffman

Budget Blinds of Blairsville announces new ownership



L-R: Nick Frechette receiving the keys as the new owner of Budget Blinds of Blairsville from DeeDee and Rick Siefken.

News Special
North Georgia News

Budget Blinds—the largest window covering franchise in North America and celebrating their 30th year anniversary – is announcing new ownership of its convenient, shop-at-home services in Blairsville and surrounding counties.

Rick and DeeDee Siefken are pleased to announce that they have sold Budget Blinds to Nick Frechette, who has been a 17-year employee of Budget Blinds. The company offers a wide range of custom window treatments including blinds, shutters, shades, and window coverings for commercial space.

The Siefkens started the business 20 years ago and have built their franchise to

be one of the most successful in the Southeastern United States. They have received many accolades over the years from Budget Blinds Corporate and the vendors they have supported.

Seventeen years ago, Nick came on board with Budget Blinds after eight years of being in operations retail management. He has been a great asset to the business working as the lead product specialist and installation expert. Within the last decade, his expertise in motorization and home automation has helped keep the local Budget Blinds a leader in the industry.

"We have full confidence in Nick's ability to operate the business at the standards Rick and I have had since the birth of the franchise," DeeDee said.

"Our customer service goal has always been to treat our customers the way we would want to be treated.

"I may be a bit prejudiced, as Nick is my son. I am excited to see him carry on the local family business into the future."

Rick stated that he will miss the great friendships he has built over the years with his customers, many of whom have become good friends.

Customers in the Northeast Georgia area will still see the Budget Blinds van and showroom hard at work as the transfer of ownership appears seamless to existing customers.

"I am delighted to take ownership of the Budget Blinds franchise with a showroom See Budget Blinds, Page 2A

Organized crime at work in North Georgia Mountains

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Authorities are investigating suspected organized crime activity in the area after two incidents with similar details occurred last week in Union and Towns counties involving allegedly stolen digging equipment.

On Monday, Dec. 5, a male driver with a female passenger pulled up to Rick's Rental of Blairsville in a Chevy Tahoe looking to rent an excavator, Union County Sheriff's Lt. Lamar Dyer said.

The woman entered the business, presented her driver's license, filled out a contract and provided a credit card to pay for the rental, Dyer said.

After the equipment was hooked up and hauled away, the credit card declined, and the business contacted the Sheriff's Office Dec. 7 to say it could not reach the "customers."

Dyer was able to connect



Kendra Ashley Simmons

the vehicle used locally to another incident that took place Dec. 6 in Morgan County, where three males were arrested "after attempting to rent a mini skid steer and were unable to provide a work site location," according to the Madison Police Department.

"Upon searching the vehicle – a 2001 Chevrolet

Tahoe w/Texas temp tag – drugs, guns and money were seized," Madison Police continued. "It is believed that the vehicle was used in multiple thefts of rental equipment in the Atlanta area."

Madison Police came into contact with the woman who was in Union County on Dec. 5, and Dyer, who questioned the woman over the phone, asked Madison authorities to take her into custody to face arrest here.

Kendra Ashley Simmons of Stone Mountain was arrested Dec. 8 on a felony theft by deception charge. She was released from the Union County Jail over the weekend on a \$30,000 bond.

According to Dyer, Simmons claims to be a victim of circumstance, having been offered a job by the male driver whom she had only just met earlier the day of the crime, and that he essentially used her to rent the equipment.

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Warnock wins runoff despite strong local support for Walker

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Incumbent Democratic U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock won the Dec. 6 General Election Runoff, beating Republican Herschel Walker by about 97,000 votes statewide. The defeated challenger conceded the race several hours after polls closed.

Starting in 2023, Warnock's re-election will produce the Senate's first party majority in two years with a 51-49 split in favor of Democrats.

Roughly 3.5 million Georgians cast ballots in the runoff election, down about 400,000 votes from Nov. 8

General Election participation. The turnout among all active registered voters for the General Election was 57%, whereas just over 50% of voters took part in the runoff.

Warnock won the race with 51.4% of the vote, garnering 2.8% more votes than Walker.

Here in Union County, the results looked decidedly different. Of the 12,640 ballots cast locally, more than 80% of voters supported Walker over Warnock, showcasing the deep red leanings of the rural North Georgia area.

Union Countians cast 10,214 votes for Walker versus 2,426 for Warnock, with 62% of the county's 20,409 active registered voters participating in the Dec. 6 runoff, compared

to the 71% local turnout in the General Election.

Like the November election, Union easily made the Top 10 among the state's 159 counties for highest voter turnout in the runoff.

In many ways, Georgia has become a purple state, contributing to the likelihood of split-ticket voting, e.g. the electorate simultaneously ushering in Republican state leadership and Democratic federal leadership.

As demonstrated in Union County, the partisan makeup of Georgia's increasingly purple political environment seems to be a tale of geography versus population density; the state is redder on a map but bluer in highly populated areas like Atlanta.



Raphael Warnock
U.S. Senator
Precinct Specific Unofficial Results Available on Page 3A

Murder in Blairsville...from Page 1A

been arrested and charged with murder and felony murder in the death of Heritage.

"This is an active investigation. Upon completion of this investigation, the case will be given to the Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office for prosecution."

Huffman initially registered as a sex offender on Sept. 7 and became wanted by law enforcement Halloween night after he absconded from his Buford Drive residence while under curfew, UCSO Capt. Daren Osborn said.

His whereabouts remained unknown until Dec. 7 when a woman came forward

to report that a man who had been staying with her had inappropriately touched her underage child, Osborn said.

After further investigation, the Sheriff's Office discovered that the man was Huffman. The woman had kicked him out of her home before filing the report, so deputies increased patrols of the area in hopes of taking him into custody, Osborn said.

He ended up returning the next evening to the woman's home, where he allegedly shot and killed Heritage, Osborn said.

This was not Huffman's first run-in with local law

enforcement. The Union County Sheriff's Office took him into custody in 2013 for extradition on a fugitive warrant out of his home state of Ohio, where he was wanted for felony assault charges.

Prior to extradition, he had also failed to register as a sex offender here following a 2010 conviction for unlawful sexual conduct with a minor in Ohio.

Murder is rare in Union County. The last one occurred in August 2015 when Randy Siggers was killed by Eric Dohnert, who ended up receiving a life sentence for his crime.

Budget Blinds...from Page 1A

located at 566 Murphy Hwy, Ste 105 in Blairsville," Nick Frechette said. "Budget Blinds has always been a leader in providing window coverings solutions for every homeowner's needs, such as child safety, motorization, and energy efficiency.

"Owning a company that helps transform and enhance a person's home and their life is a very rewarding job."

The Budget Blinds

concept is unique in that consumers can schedule free in-home consultations. Using a comprehensive collection of reputable brand name manufacturers, Budget Blinds Style Consultants bring the showroom into a consumer's home so they can better determine what works best with their existing décor.

They also provide complete design, professional measuring and precise

installation services backed by the best warranty in the business. This complete approach creates a one-stop-shop for everything window coverings.

For more information or to schedule a free consultation, call 706-745-0009 or visit www.budgetblinds.com/blairsville. Also follow Budget Blinds on Facebook: www.facebook.com/budgetblindsblairsville.

Organized Crime...from Page 1A

Unfortunately, the equipment taken from Rick's Rental was reported as having been abandoned on the side of Interstate 20 near Madison, and it had yet to be recovered by press time.

The Sheriff's Office is continuing to investigate the whereabouts of the equipment and identity of the driver, UCSO Capt. Daren Osborn said.

In a separate incident on Wednesday, Dec. 7, a Towns County resident reported to the Towns County Sheriff's Office that he was in the process of purchasing a Kubota Excavator from an individual valued at \$23,000.

The resident became concerned that the equipment might be stolen, so TCSO opened an investigation and determined that the equipment had been rented out of Tennessee.

"Wednesday evening, a sting was set up to purchase the equipment," the Towns County Sheriff's Office said. "The transaction was made by an undercover Towns County investigator, after which the individuals attempted to flee and attempted to run over one of our Deputies.

"A felony pursuit began on Highway 17/76 toward Young Harris and continued for two and a half miles where

speeds did not exceed 80 mph.

"During the pursuit, the suspect attempted to ram our patrol units. We are very fortunate one of our officers was not seriously injured or killed as one of the suspects, wearing an ankle monitor, was out on bond from DeKalb County for murder."

Towns County deputies were able to successfully initiate a felony stop at the intersection of US 76 at Georgia 66, and four suspects inside the truck were taken into custody without incident.

"The suspects were heavily armed with two 10 mm handguns with extended magazines, which were confiscated," the Sheriff's Office said.

Dekarius Christopher Pitts, 22, of Dacula, was charged with three counts of felony aggravated assault on law enforcement officers; felony fleeing and attempting to elude law enforcement officers; felony tampering with evidence; felony obstruction of a law enforcement officer; felony theft by conversion; reckless driving; no valid insurance; driving on a suspended license; failure to maintain lane; and further charges are pending.

Zackeri Alexander Leonard, 22, of Stockbridge,

was charged with felony possession of stolen property; felony possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime; and possession of marijuana.

Jontavius Clark, 23, of Decatur, was charged with felony theft by conversion; felony obstruction of a law enforcement officer; felony fleeing and attempting to elude law enforcement; felony possession of a firearm by a convicted felon; and no valid insurance.

Ronequa Shaunae Jones, 22, of Decatur, was charged with felony possession of stolen property.

Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson commended his deputies on the stop last week.

"Their training and experience paid off to avoid a dangerous felony stop," Sheriff Henderson said. "Investigators indicate this is an organized crime ring out of the Dekalb/Lithonia area, and the investigation continues."

Investigators with the Union and Towns sheriff's offices met on Friday, Dec. 9, to discuss how the two cases may be related.

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

Shop with a Cruiser, Shop with a Cop a huge success for children in 2022



The Blairsville Cruisers Car Club "Shop With A Cruiser" on Saturday, December 3rd at Walmart took 80 needy children shopping for Christmas. The annual program grows each year with the club adding more children to the program. The Cruisers want to thank all club members, law enforcement personnel and the general public who helped out with the program.

The Blairsville Police Department "Shop With A Cop" was held the following

Walmart with 150 needy children participating in that annual event. The law enforcement community and volunteers from the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club, other organizations and the public were on hand to help out the children with their Christmas shopping.

In addition the car club made cash donations to other area programs for the children's Christmas programs. The club donated totaling over \$6,000 to the following: Union County Sheriff's Give-A-Gift, the Towns County Sheriff's Shop With The Sheriff, the Clay County Sheriff's Cops 4 Kids, the Hiwassee Shop With A Hero and other local church programs.

The club also offers three \$500 scholarships each year for local trade or techni-

The Blairsville Cruisers Car Club's motto is that "no child does without at Christmas". The club also supports programs year around for children and families in need as well the club's programs for veterans needing a helping hand through the "Salute to Veterans Car Show" held annually on the first Saturday of November. The 6th annual car show will be held November 4, 2023.

A big thank you to our members, sponsors, donors and the public for supporting these efforts.

The club annually raffles a car as it's main source of funds for supporting these programs. More information is available on the website Blairsville Cruisers.com and on Facebook: Blairsville Cruisers

Shop With A Cop 2022...from Page 1A



Fellowship of the Hills Church always has a blast during Shop With A Cop, handing out food baskets to families of participating students. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Veterans Day Card...from Page 1A

was so moved was because Davenport had created the card as a memorial to her great-grandfather, William Audrey Deyton, who passed away just a month and a half prior in September.

Artwork on the front had been drawn by the sixth-grader, depicting a smiling likeness of Deyton proudly holding an "Army flag."

The Honor Guard decided to recognize Davenport for her heartfelt message in a very special way, organizing a gathering at the Middle School on Friday, Dec. 2.

Davenport, along with her art teacher and classmates, her parents, and a few select faculty members assembled in the Middle School Library to meet Harbison alongside Art McCann, a retired Army Ranger and staff member at the Union County School Board Office.

The Honor Guard had quite the surprise waiting for the student.

First, Harbison gave the entire class "a little history lesson" featuring a quote from Founding Father Gen. George Washington:

"The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation."

This brought him to the importance of thanking veterans for their service and in turn thanking the students for their involvement in Union County's honoring of local servicemembers.

Although Harbison appreciated the entire class for their cards, he pointed out the reason why Davenport's contribution was special and read her handwritten note aloud.

"I know you're not here anymore," she wrote, "but in my heart, you are. And I'll always remember your honesty and bravery. In Memory of William Audrey Deyton. 4-1-1925 - 9-27-2022."



The North Georgia Honor Guard presented this handmade plaque to Adalin Davenport to show their appreciation for the way she honored her great-grandfather and veterans everywhere. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Admittedly, his voice broke when he shared the result of Davenport's care.

"Those few words had a lot of impact on us; they're very powerful words," the Honor Guard Commander said. "All of us at the table were tearing up. I went up to find Mr. McCann to see if he could help me find who this young lady was. I couldn't read it to him. I had to hand it to him (and) said, 'Read this.'"

The Honor Guard felt that a response to the card was needed. If Davenport's great-grandfather couldn't show his pride in her, his fellow veterans would.

Presented to the girl's parents was a wooden placard emblazoned with the front and back of Davenport's card. In the middle, the Honor Guard had immortalized their own response, which Harbison shared with those gathered.

"Adalin, as we sat down for breakfast, we noticed all the great cards that you and your friends had made for us. When we read your card, we knew your great-grandfather would have been proud of you.

"You wrote a message directly from your heart to a special man on a special day. You wrote your feelings

on a card, then gave it away, knowing that you would never see it again. That selfless act, and the simple, yet powerful words that you wrote, brought a tear to our eyes.

"Since you two had a very special bond, we remade your card on wood so that it would last for a very long time. Remember all the good times you had and hold his memory in your heart, that way, it will be with you forever. (Signed), Your friends from the North Georgia Honor Guard."

Davenport's father is also a veteran, and her mother was spotted wiping away tears as Harbison presented the wooden placard with pride.

It's difficult for paper to stand the test of time, but now, Davenport and the rest of her family have a more permanent memento of how much Deyton meant to them all. That and, of course, how grateful other veterans are for Davenport's mindfulness.

And with a family tradition of serving the country, perhaps Davenport will go on to serve as well. Regardless, she will always have the support of the local Honor Guard, who keep an eye on her on Earth as her great-grandfather does from above.

who are in good standing with attendance and grades in the Union County School System," Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter said. "Besides the shopping, they are being treated to a free donated meal from Chick-fil-A and a \$100 grocery card.

"This is the biggest one we have had yet; we took 150 kids this year, which is 25 more than last year. The need is there, and I think our economy has a lot to do with it along with a growing population.

"We live in a great place, but there are still folks who don't have as much as others, and we are here to make the difference. Hands down this is my favorite part of my job, and there's no doubt this is what we live for every year.

"If we can ever make an impact on one of these young people, then we've accomplished our goal. I can't reiterate enough on how much I appreciate this community for stepping up to help us in this event. They are this event through donations and fundraising, through civic groups, business sectors and churches; they really make this happen through their participation."

Brady Tanner was a first-time volunteer for the event and gleamed with joy for his

involvement.

"My girlfriend, Devyn Duncan, who works in the (District Attorney's Office) of the courthouse, volunteered and asked me if I wanted to help out, and I said I would," Tanner said. "I have known of this for many years, and I think it's awesome.

"It makes me feel great knowing that they're getting a lot of things that they want and needed. It's just a great program and makes me happy seeing all the kids getting taken care of, and I've seen that they also want to share that with their families, too, and that is very admirable. I would love to help out here every year if they need it."

For more than 10 years, Fellowship of the Hills Pastor Marty Duncan and church members have supported the effort with free food baskets for each family.

"It's just a blessing for us to be able to do this," Duncan said. "I remember the moment we found out about it, we immediately got involved. I would say Christmastime is my favorite because it gives us an opportunity to give the gift that brings the reason behind the season, which is the birth of Christ.

"My next favorite (time of the year) is Easter, being the

gift of Jesus going to the cross and walking out of the tomb for us. To show and to share the love of Christ is our motto.

"I think we are seeing a greater need in the changing of our economy, and we're blessed to be in a community where everyone from all walks of life and backgrounds and churches that are united on this front come together as a big family to provide and meet the needs of our community.

"And we will be out on Christmas Eve delivering packages to various families throughout the community. Having an opportunity to help people on any given day never goes out of style."

The Blairsville Police Department works in partnership with Union County Family Connection in the school system to select children to the Christmas program. People looking to refer children for Shop With A Cop can contact Katy Jones with Family Connection at 706-835-4351.

Blairsville PD accepts donations for Shop With A Cop all throughout the year, with 100% of proceeds going to the Christmas shopping experience for local children. Donations may be made at police headquarters in Downtown Blairsville during the week.



Local Wreaths Across America Ceremony Saturday, December 17th at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center



Ira Weaver American Legion Post Christmas Party

Blairsville's Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 hosts the local ceremony for Wreaths Across America Saturday, December 17th beginning at 10 AM in the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

"We encourage everyone interested in saluting the lives and sacrifices of our Union County veterans to come out for this brief acknowledgement of the vital role our military servicemembers have played throughout America's history," Mike Merritt, AL Post 121 commander said. It is suggested that those attending the ceremony use the 926 Panther Overlook gate entrance to the Fine Arts Center,

Following this ceremony, volunteers will transport wreaths to both Holly Hills and Memory Gardens local cemeteries and while placing the

wreaths pause for a moment of silence and say the names of both the service member and their spouse, if also buried at the same location.

Antioch Baptist and Coosa Methodist Churches have also obtained wreaths for their Veteran grave sites. Anyone with Veteran family members there should

For more information contact Ron Tanner at iwpost121@gmail.com

The monthly January 16 meeting will include an overview of 2023 Post activities, current information on Post finances and committee updates developed by Post leadership in December.

All members, and interested veterans, are encouraged to attend the meeting at the Veteran's Center, 78 Blue Ridge Street. It's a great opportunity to become engaged

in the community and to establish strong bonds with fellow Vets. The Legion Auxiliary, for spouses of Veterans, will begin its meeting at 6:30 PM in the same building on the same day. Additionally, the Sons of the American Legion and the Legion Riders will have their joint meeting beginning at 5 PM.

The American Legion is the largest and one of the oldest and most inclusive of all veterans' organizations worldwide and devotes itself to mutual helpfulness, mentoring youth, advocating patriotic honor, promoting strong national security, and continued devotion to fellow service members and veterans.

For more information on the meeting or any Post activities email the Post at alpost121@gmail.com, visit the website at legionpost121.org or follow us on Facebook.