

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, August 11, 2021

## Union County Schools to welcome students back Aug. 12

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill welcomed the district's entire faculty and staff for a 2021-22 school year kickoff meeting at the Fine Arts Center on Monday, Aug. 2, a full week and a half before the official start of classes this Thursday, Aug. 12.

"It's a blessing to be here today. It's a blessing to be here in person. It's a blessing to actually see your faces. So, we're really excited for this year," Hill said, alluding to the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused society-wide changes since March 2020.

Hill went on to recap how, with the help of such an amazing staff, the school system was able to adapt practically overnight and continue to serve the community at the onset of

the pandemic. "We had a lot of teacher-leaders that pitched in, school nutrition changed what they did, and the result for us was actually a pretty remarkable event," Hill said.

Continuing, "The Union County School District was actually recognized as Business of the Year (by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce) for your efforts during the pandemic," Hill said to the nearly 500 teachers and staff in attendance that Monday.

The superintendent asked the personnel of every department to stand and be recognized, with each receiving a warm round of applause from Hill and the rest of the audience.

"You guys were focused on students and their outcomes and our community, and that's

why we accomplished what we did," Hill said. "We had people that love children, and we had people that lived 'Union United.'"

Moving along, Hill referenced the district's vision statement, saying that everyone must "keep focused on success for all students" in the coming school year. He strongly encouraged employees to work together to "nurture a passion for learning," and to "invest in each other."

Additionally, he stressed the importance of soft skills for Union County Schools, saying they were just as crucial to student success as academics.

"We have to teach kids to be employable or we're going to have problems," Hill said. "We want kids to be employable when they graduate high school. That's the goal."

Going forward, Hill said

See Back to School, Page 6A



Union County Elementary School Faculty and Staff for 2021-22

Photo by Mark Smith

## Hannah Taylor joins UCHS as a teacher, FFA adviser



CTAE Director Josh Davis, Ag Teacher Hannah Taylor and High School Principal C.T. Hussion at the Board Office last week.

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Union County native Hannah Taylor is thrilled to be returning to her alma mater as the new Agriculture Education

teacher at Union County High, and just in time for the start of the school year.

"I'm excited to work with the kids and be able to give back to the community that's given so much to me,"

Taylor said. Taylor is a member of the Class of 2014 who moved to Tifton after graduation to study agriculture at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.

See Taylor, Page 2A

## Backpack 2 School Bash a resounding success in '21

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Tricia Wallace beamed as she watched waves of school kids of all ages head through the doors of the huge indoor recreation area at First United Methodist Church of Union County to receive free school supplies on Saturday, Aug. 7.

She was beaming because, after months of planning and scheduling, the culmination of her and her team's work for the 2021 Backpack 2 School Bash was turning out to be a gigantic success, and just in time for a new school year to start Aug. 12.

"We're the host, so this is a community event, not a church event. It's taken a lot of people in the community to get this (going)," Wallace said, noting that there are few centrally located places in Blairsville-Union County big



More than 400 students lined up to participate in a super cool school supply drive on Aug. 7 - the Backpack 2 School Bash.

Photo by Mark Smith

enough for a private event such as the Backpack 2 School Bash. Open to all comers and

not means tested, the massive school supply drive began six years ago as an effort to

See Backpack Bash, Page 6A

## College and Career Academy to be ready for 2022-2023

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Union County Schools is proud to announce that construction of the Union County College and Career Academy will begin soon, with a groundbreaking ceremony for the new 16,000 square foot facility to be held Aug. 25.

Once built, the academy will assist generations of students in pursuing their career goals by expanding current educational and vocational offerings and opening the door for additional programs to serve specific area needs that arise in the future.

See Employability, Page 2A



CJ McDonald with Charles Black Construction Company is the project manager overseeing the upcoming College and Career Academy build.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Williams faces murder charge in beating death of Hatchett

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

HAYESVILLE, N.C. - The charge against Darrell Dywayne Williams in the beating death of Sarai Hatchett, both of Blairsville, has been upgraded from assault with serious bodily injury to murder.

This occurred on Wednesday, Aug. 4, after a Clay County, North Carolina, grand jury found the evidence against Williams compelling enough to bring the more serious charge.

His bond remains the same at \$2 million, according to Clay County Sheriff Bobby Deese.

Williams, 47, was arrested on July 25 for the assault against Hatchett, during which she sustained severe injuries she would eventually succumb to later that same day at Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville.

Around 3:25 a.m. on Sunday, July 25, authorities responded to a 911 call alerting them to "an unconscious 43-year-old female" located inside

See Murder, Page 3A



Darrell Dywayne Williams

## City of Blairsville qualifying to take place Aug. 16-18

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

It's that time again for interested and eligible City of Blairsville residents to decide if they wish to run for local office, with qualifying set to take place next week for the Nov. 2 General Municipal Election.

The office of mayor and two council seats are up for grabs in this year's electoral

contest, with those positions currently being held by Mayor Jim Conley and Councilmen Robert "Buddy" Moore and Tony Dyer.

To make it to the ballot, residents will need to fill out the appropriate qualifying paperwork and pay a fee. Fees are set by state law at "3% of the total gross salary of the office," so the qualifying fee for mayor is \$1,080, and the fee for

each council seat is \$162. Qualifying packets can be picked up now during regular business hours at City Hall, which is where early voting will occur in October and Election Day voting will take place in November.

People may submit their qualifying paperwork and fee payments at City Hall starting Monday, Aug. 16, through

See Qualifying, Page 3A

## River City Bank celebrates Union County grand opening



River City Bank President and CEO Jamie Tallent cuts a ribbon in celebration of the Union County bank location, pictured here with friends and coworkers.

Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

River City Bank held its grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony on Tuesday, Aug. 3, with a barbecue luncheon for guests outside the bank office at 215 Blue Ridge

Street in Blairsville. About 50 people attended the event, including Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley, and several members of the Blairsville-Union County business community. Founded in 2006, River

City Bank is a state-chartered community bank based out of Rome, with current assets totaling \$200 million. Bank President and CEO Jamie Tallent said they entered the Union County market about nine months ago after realizing

See River City Bank, Page 3A

Vol. 112 No. 33  
4 Sections 24 Pages  
Weather  
Thurs: T-Storm Hi 85 Lo 66  
Fri: T-Storm Hi 87 Lo 66  
Sat: T-Storm Hi 86 Lo 65

Inside  
Arrests 5B  
Church 3C  
Classifieds 3D  
Opinion 4A  
Legals 5D  
Obits 5C  
Sports 2B

**SPORTS**  
**FOOTBALL**  
8/13 @ Southeast Whitfield  
7:30 PM Scrimmage  
**SOFTBALL**  
8/11 vs. White Co. 6 PM  
8/12 @ White Co. 6 PM

**Maters & Music Festival August 14**  
See page 5C

**UCS**  
**New Student Registration**  
See page 5B

**Georgia Mountain Fair Schedule & Info**  
See page 6A

# Taylor ...from Page 1A

from which she graduated in May 2018 with a bachelor of science in agriculture concentrated in livestock production.

"I stayed down there for about a year and a half working, and it will be two years in December since I moved back home," Hannah said, noting that living in the Union County School District was one of the big reasons for her return. "I was able to purchase my new home, got engaged, and I've

been working in the poultry industry for the last year and a half."

As agriculture teacher, she will benefit students out of the gate with her educational background and industry experience, including her most recent work at OK Foods out of Baldwin that regularly partners with the Blairsville-based Aviagen hatchery.

She actually applied for the position a couple of years ago when she was still living

in South Georgia, but it didn't work out at the time. So, when the opportunity came along to apply again, Taylor jumped on it and got the job.

Taylor is currently working out her notice at OK Foods on a flexible schedule, allowing her to start the school year normally. She will be filling the shoes of Ag Teacher Haley Sosebee, who decided to pursue another opportunity following the 2020-21 school year.

The position has experienced quite a bit of turnover in recent years,

even back when Taylor was a student, as well as the recent hire who decided only a month after taking the job earlier this summer not to pursue the opportunity.

When she was a student here, Taylor was heavily invested in the Future Farmers of America program, having served as treasurer her freshman year and president the remaining three years of her high school career. Now, she'll be leading students as the new High School FFA Adviser.

And since she's officially a member of the High School faculty, Taylor said she is

committed to working in the district for the rest of her career, with plans of raising a family in her hometown and putting her children through the Union County School System and FFA program.

"I know what it feels like to have that turnover," Taylor said. "When I went to school, there were two teachers that came through, so I just want to be that source of stability for those kids so we can really get this thing off the ground and get it moving."

Taylor was hired in Aug. 5 called meeting of the Board of Education, with everyone

offering her a warm welcome following the meeting.

"We feel awesome about Hannah," Career, Technical and Agriculture Education Director Josh Davis said. "She's local, she was the FFA president when she went to high school here for three years, so she's got that kind of knowledge."

"She's worked in the industry for four years, which is bringing a whole different aspect to the program. And she wants to be here for another 30-year career. So, with the challenges we've had (with retention), we are confident we've fixed it."

# Employability ...from Page 1A

As previously reported, Gov. Brian Kemp and Technical College System of Georgia Commissioner Greg Dozier announced in December that Union would be receiving \$3 million in grant funding to go toward one of three new College and Career Academies in the state.

Union County has partnered with North Georgia Technical College to form the academy, with official guidance from local businesses, area schools and others in the form of a Governing Board.

The academy is a major milestone in the system's pursuit of "Success for ALL," as the facility will provide hands-on vocational training to students from around the region to bolster local job creation and enable options for children that area natives could only dream of not too long ago.

This facility will be in addition to the many college and career track options already available to students, such as the STEM Academy that focuses on engineering, agriculture, and health care sciences; many Career Pathways including recently expanded computer science offerings; copious dual enrollment opportunities; Advanced Placement courses for college credits; partnerships with local industry professionals establishing a graduation-to-job pipeline and more.

Union County Board of Education members met for a called meeting on Thursday, Aug. 5, to advance construction of the project, approving the "guaranteed maximum price" of \$3,834,066 by construction manager Charles Black Construction.

As the name suggests, this guaranteed maximum price is the most the district will pay to complete the project, with Charles Black Construction committing to cover any additional costs.

The final project budget came in well under the initially budgeted amount of \$4.075 million; after applying the \$3 million in state grant funds, the remaining cost will be \$834,066, to be paid for with ESPLOST proceeds – and it is possible final costs will come in under that amount also.

Cleveland-based Charles Black has completed two projects for the district, the new Fieldhouse at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium in summer 2020 and High School cafeteria renovations this summer.

Construction is expected to be completed in time for the 2022-23 school year, according to Project Manager CJ McDonald, and will entail the building of a brand-new facility at the High School as well as renovation of the existing vocational building.

The existing facility currently houses the High School's programs focusing on an array of skills in construction, automotive, welding and metals, engineering, and manufacturing, all in partnership with local businesses like Snap-On Tools, which are both supplying equipment for students to use and hiring students trained in these programs after graduation.

Building the new facility and renovating the vocational building will allow the school to separate these programs into two buildings, thereby doubling the space available for each program, with construction and automotive going into the new facility, and the 15,000 square foot renovated building to be dedicated to the school's welding, manufacturing and engineering disciplines.

Superintendent John Hill said he was particularly excited about the construction program, which will have the space to work on pre-engineered homes for the local Habitat for Humanity, benefiting families in need of lodging, and students with experience in all things homebuilding.

"To get kids real experience, they need square footage," Hill said in the called meeting.

Hill has been focused on expanding the soft skills education and employability options for students since

before he came aboard as superintendent, back when he was principal at the High School, and the new project backed by major state funding is another big step toward that aim.

Also renovated recently were classrooms in the school's C-Wing, which houses the Avis Shaw Health Care Science Lab, the Sports Medicine Lab, Entrepreneurship Lab, and a pair of computer science labs that, thanks to input from local professionals, are now oriented toward real-world team collaboration.

Additionally, the school system has a large agriculture classroom complete with its

own science lab in the C-Wing as well as the state-of-the-art Agriscience Center for the many students involved in the Future Farmers of America.

And when the new College and Career Academy is finished, the High School will have gone a long way toward future proofing its capabilities of providing any program necessary to fulfill the needs of students and local industry alike.

"As the years go, we will be able to modify and offer different programs or different pathways within the programs just depending on what local and regional industries are telling us we need to focus on," Career, Technical and Agriculture Education Director Josh Davis said Thursday.

# Author Glenna Orr at Book Bound Bookstore August 14th



Ms. Orr with Armed Forces Retirement Home resident Mr. Webb.

Reading specialist, director/president of Kind Kids, Inc. and children's author Glenna Orr will be at Book Bound Bookstore in Blairsville on Saturday, August 14th from 11 AM - 2 PM.

Ms. Orr is a reading specialist who has two masters degrees and has taught school in five states and in the Department of Defense school system in Germany and is a board member for the Reading is Fundamental group of Northern Virginia. She is also the director of Kind Kids, Inc., a nonprofit organization based out of Arlington, Va., that focuses on instilling volunteerism in community activities while promoting reading for kids. Ms. Orr's books all promote the Kind Kids focus on community volunteerism.

While volunteering at the Armed Forces Retirement Home, Ms. Orr discovered the importance of intergenerational learning and as a result,

began writing her books about the heroes of WWII from the stories that had been shared with her. Her book *Courage From the Heart*, pays tribute to United States Army and Navy Nurses stationed in the Philippines from 1941-1945. In her other two books, *Remembering with the Heart and Hearts Always Open*, she shares the stories of residents from the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington, D.C. whose lives were spent in service to our country. Through storytelling and beautiful illustrations all of her books exemplify the importance of sharing those stories with the younger generation.

Ms. Orr will be signing her books and will be available for questions and discussions about her volunteer organization, The Kind Kids, Inc.

Book Bound Bookstore is located just off the square at 35 Blue Ridge Street in Blairsville.

# Murder ...from Page 1A

a travel trailer at a campground off Gilberts Way on NC 175, southeast of Hayesville and just over the Georgia/North Carolina line, Deese said.

The 911 center actually received two calls regarding the situation, according to authorities, one from a member of her family and another from Williams himself, who had called the family member first to report Hatchett's condition. The family member urged him to call 911, after which both did.

A Clay County deputy was first to arrive at the trailer and quickly secured the scene for EMS and investigators, and

Hatchett was discovered inside the trailer, unconscious and visibly injured from "blunt force trauma," Deese said.

Williams' initial charging document for assault notes that Hatchett suffered from "multiple skull fractures, extensive bruising over the entire body, (and) missing teeth."

Deese said Hatchett's skull injuries extended all the way around the circumference of her head, and that the evidence pointed to Williams allegedly having used his hands to inflict the injuries that ultimately resulted in her death.

Hatchett did not regain

consciousness prior to being transported for treatment at Northeast Georgia Medical, Deese said, and she passed away nearly 18 hours later at 9:07 p.m. in Gainesville.

Next steps in the case include receiving the official autopsy report and processing any remaining evidence, at which point the case will be ready for trial, Sheriff Deese said.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation assisted the Clay County Sheriff's Office with obtaining evidence in the case, GBI Region 8 Special Agent in Charge Kim Williams said.

Williams has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

As previously reported, Hatchett's sister Rachel Lindley made a social media post July 27 detailing the family's heartbreak over the tragedy and letting people know some of what happened to her sister in her final moments.

"Our baby sister, Sarai Hatchett, has unexpectedly been taken from this life," Lindley posted. "She was strong and stubborn and mean, yet she had the biggest heart you can imagine. Even as a young girl, she provided shelter, food, and love to all people and creatures she found in need. This love was extended to so many throughout her life."

"During a domestic dispute, Sarai suffered major

head trauma which resulted in brain hemorrhaging and a massive stroke, cutting off all oxygen to her brain. Sarai was pronounced brain dead at Northeast Georgia Medical Center on Sunday, July 25, 2021. Sarai's partner, Darrell Williams, remains in custody with Clay County NC Sheriff's Department.

"Sarai's departure leaves an immense void. We may see an abundance of missed opportunities, but I ask instead that each of us focuses on and celebrates the beautiful moments shared with her. I pray that we each find comfort in sweet memories, the love of our family and friends, and in our Heavenly Father who knows all things and

has a plan for us all.

"If you have information that might assist law enforcement's investigation, please reach out to Lt. Heath Woodard with Clay County NC Sheriff's Office (828) 644-4217 and to Special Agent Derek Glasco of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (706) 348-4866."

"At this time, we ask that the family's privacy be respected. We welcome your love and prayers and offer ours in return."

A memorial service honoring Hatchett was held on Friday, Aug. 6, inside the Mountain View Chapel of Mountain View Funeral Home.

# River City Bank...from Page 1A

the potential of the area.

"We're excited about bringing our style of banking here to Union County," said Tallent, an area native who came on board at River City Bank in March 2019 with more than 20 years of industry experience.

"We operate two locations, of course Rome, and now here in Blairsville, and

we employ approximately 50 (people)," Tallent continued. "If you're wondering what kind of banking style we have, we have a classic community bank. Customers are paramount in everything we do. We want to earn your business and your trust as we move forward in this community."

Commercial Relationship Manager and Senior Vice

President Scott Nanney, also a local, said Tallent had identified a need for a community bank in Blairsville.

"We decided to come up with an option for local people here in the area to bank locally and make decisions locally," Nanney said. "So, we organized this loan production office of River City Bank here in Blairsville."

"Basically, what we do is construction loans, mortgages, home equities, (commercial lending); any type of loan-related products, we offer."

Nanney added, "Now, how are we different than any other bank in the area? We speed the market. We make decisions locally (as opposed to some nameless person in a big city office). We can turn things around very quickly. We provide that personal touch."

Senior Loan Officer Tammy Collins, who came over to River City Bank from United Community Bank after 34 years, echoed her colleagues' sentiments.

"We feel like we need a community bank in the area," Collins said. "I'm local. I grew up here. We have a vision for this area to bring community back to banking, and we felt like it was a good time to open up an office."

Senior Credit Officer and SVP Jonathan Jones said plans are in the works to open a full-service office in Blairsville soon, where checking and savings products as well as wealth management services will be offered. And the rest of the team concurred that they are excited for the future.

"Here we are just nine months later, enjoying the opportunities that we've been given with respect to how much the community and county and the citizens and businesses have already embraced us," Tallent said. "We're far exceeding our projections of where we thought we would be today in our pro formas."

"And with that robust momentum coming in right out of the gate, it's allowing us to start making decisions in advance of when we thought we'd be making them as far as more of our permanent plans here in Union County."

For more information, visit <https://rivercity.bank>.

# Qualifying...from Page 1A

Wednesday, Aug. 18, between the hours of 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. each day.

Residents are eligible to qualify for and hold city office if they are 21 years or older, a resident for at least a year immediately prior to the election date, a registered and qualified voter in the Municipal Election, and they must continue to reside in the city during the term of office.

Terms of office will begin Jan. 1, 2022, and run through Dec. 31, 2025.

Voting in the municipal election will be open to eligible residents of the city. The registration deadline to cast a

ballot in the Nov. 2 election is Oct. 4, so people who have yet to register should do so at the Union County Registrar's Office inside the county courthouse.

Also appearing on the ballot will be an initiative asking voters whether they support a countywide Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, which, if approved, would go toward funding various road and sidewalk improvement projects in Blairsville.

County voters, or those living outside Blairsville City Limits, will be able to participate in a Special Called Election featuring just the TSPLOST ballot initiative in November.

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# Back to School...from Page 1A



Woody Gap School Faculty and Staff for 2021-22

Photo by Mark Smith

the three areas of focus in the coming school year will be safety, relationships and expectations.

Whether it's a student, teacher, staff member, parent or visitor, everyone's safety is a concern, Hill said. And safety on the internet is as important as safety on a bus, in a classroom or on a football field, he noted.

Expectations must be tempered with the fact of the limitations imposed on students by the pandemic, Hill said,

while adding that all students must be brought up to speed as soon as possible.

Opening the systemwide meeting last week was local Bank OZK President Jason Karnes, whose organization sponsored a breakfast in the High School cafeteria for all teachers and staff prior to the big meeting.

Karnes serves as a Business/Community Representative on the High School Governance Team.

"If I leave you today

with one word, it's the word 'encouragement,'" Karnes said, stressing that the most important thing a teacher or a staff member can say to a student is "I believe in you."

Prior to the final adjustment in student enrollment that takes place about 10 days after the start of classes, the total number of students enrolled in the school system was more than 3,000 for the first time in school history. And as of last week, the schools were employing 489 people.

# Backpack Bash...from Page 1A



Kids loved playing in the bounce houses outside First United Methodist Saturday during the annual Backpack 2 School Bash.

Photo by Mark Smith

relieve some of the pressure put on Union County Family Connection at the end of summer break.

For years, kids went to "Meet Your Teacher" day, got their student supply list, then went over to Family Connection to get supplies for the first day of school, which was the next day. Family Connection was overwhelmed year after year, said Wallace, herself a Primary School teacher.

"There had to be a better way," Wallace said. "So, a few of us got together and we brainstormed, and we checked with other counties to see what they do at their events."

And that's how the Backpack 2 School program came into existence, with the Bash as the finale each year.

Wallace described the program as a Family Connection support group where, if there are any school needs that aren't met at this event, Family Connection can request it and the Backpack 2 School organization will purchase it.

"It's about meeting the need," Wallace said. "And I think people are surprised at how much need there is in our county, because so many people are not from here. We are a Title I school district."

Wallace said it is always imperative for organizers that the Bash serve to simulate regular back-to-school shopping experiences, like getting to go to Walmart or Target, rather than volunteers simply handing out pre-packed backpacks. After all, kids like to shop, she said.

"It's expensive to bring

kids back into school, and if someone needs help with that, we want to be that help," Wallace said.

As noted above, the Backpack 2 School program is not income based, and registration requires only a student's name, gender, and what grade they are going into in the Union County School System.

In addition to school supplies, the Bash provides children with a nice free lunch and much fun thanks to an outdoor area featuring games, bounce houses, and plenty of family-friendly activities like arts and crafts.

All Union County Schools' administrations – Primary, Elementary, Middle, High and Woody Gap – were represented at the Bash, along with the School Registration Office.

"If a parent has a concern about a teacher or a schedule or accessing the PowerSchool (program), they're here to help with that," Wallace said, adding that Family Connection, the school nurse and First Readers were there also.

Like so many other Union County parents, Montana and Andy Tinchler attended the Bash to get some school supplies for their kids, but also to let the kids enjoy the many attractions set up outside, such as the snow cones and face painting, all complimentary.

The Tinchlers said it was fantastic for the community to be able to help struggling parents with school expenses for their children through the Backpack 2 School program.

School fees, supplies,

shoes, clothes – all these items add up for parents when the school year begins. Parents with primary and grade school age kids can save hundreds of dollars at the Bash, and parents with high school age kids can save thousands of dollars, Wallace said.

The first year of the Bash, Wallace said she and her fellow volunteers did 99 backpacks. This year, they did over 400, and any supplies left over go directly to Family Connection.

"I can't say enough about our sponsors from the community and from churches and from businesses," Wallace said. "They have rallied around every time and always met the need. And this event has no overhead. Every dime we collect goes straight back into the event."

"When I sit down and think about it, I kind of get overwhelmed by how generous our community is and how much they have taken it on."

One major community partner this year was United Community Bank, which borrowed a school bus to promote its "Stuff the Bus" campaign encouraging bank customers to donate supplies for this year's Bash.

Of particular assistance to the bank's efforts was the local women's group Community Connections 101, which donated over 30 backpacks, 50 rulers, composition books by the dozens, hundreds of pencils, 50-plus supply holders, 50 protractors, pencil sharpeners, multiple 3-prong folders, tons of paper, binders, folders, index cards, scissors, glue, highlighters and more.



Erin Foisie and Kathi DeSilva showing off the amount of school supplies the ladies of Community Connections101 donated to this year's Backpack 2 School initiative.

Photo/Submitted