

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Hospitalizations up as COVID surges in South

CDC approves boosters for most vulnerable

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Many parts of the United States are currently experiencing another wave of COVID-19, resulting in a rapid increase in community infection rates and hospitalizations, including in the North Georgia Mountains, according to Union General Hospital Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett.

region by Thursday last week – a hospital record for number of coronavirus patients being treated at once.

COVID has been making up about 25%-30% of emergency room visits here in recent weeks, Barnett said, with the number of inpatients fluctuating daily as new people are admitted and others go home primarily to the surrounding counties of Georgia and North Carolina.

"Our hope is that this will burn out quickly, as rapidly as it has gone up," Barnett said. "We really hope for our community's sake that that's the case, that it's just running its course really quickly, but it's too early to tell."

Hospital Surge Capacity

As for capacity, the 45-bed hospital was housing about 70 inpatients last week, with as much as 50% of admissions being for COVID-19. Barnett said the hospital has been successfully implementing its surge plan, facilitated by the fact that the staff has experience with past surges.

Seventy is well over capacity for Union General, though Barnett said they can take up to 20 more patients above recent max figures before

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Union County Schools back in full swing for 2021-22

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It was apparent on Thursday, Aug. 12, that everyone in the Union County School System had done their homework, because the "First Day Back" went off with nary a hitch. Even the weather cooperated.

"I've seen a lot of very happy faces today, both students and teachers," Primary School Principal Shane Womack said. "The Primary School is back in full swing with a lot of laughing and happy people."

Elementary School Principal Jerry Bavero concurred, describing Day 1 as being "full of energy, smiles, laughter and excitement."

"Music greeted students in the car rider line and in



Union County Schools got off to a great start last week, with homebound buses pictured here pulling onto Georgia 515 from the Glenn Gooch Bypass Thursday afternoon. Photo by Mark Smith

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Colwell remembered for commitment to public service

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Blairsville native and longtime pillar of the community Carlton Harry Colwell, 95, passed away on Aug. 9 at Union General Hospital following an extended illness.

At once a shrewd businessman and faithful public servant, Colwell leaves behind a legacy at least as long as the Georgia 515 corridor he helped to bring to the area as a representative in the Georgia General Assembly, where he served for more than three decades.

Colwell is also known for securing the North Georgia Technical College Campus in Blairsville and the Carlton H. Colwell Probation Detention Center, plus the many miles of



Carlton H. Colwell

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Beloved local restauranteur passes away unexpectedly

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Blairsville resident Karen Brendle, owner of the highly successful Blairsville's Skillet Café, passed away on Aug. 10 at Union General Hospital following a brief illness. She was 57.

"It is with a very heavy heart and great sadness that we announce that our beloved Karen Brendle has gone on to her great reward," according to the restaurant's Facebook page.

"She will be greatly missed not only at our restaurant, but also within our community." Hundreds of comments poured in for Brendle over Facebook, with people sharing memories and expressing admiration both for her

compassion as a person and savvy as a businessowner, all while sending condolences to her family.

As evidenced by her perpetually busy restaurant, Brendle's friendly demeanor, community-forward disposition, and delicious food kept people coming back.

She always allowed various charitable groups to collect money at the restaurant for good causes, and she held an annual toy drive for underprivileged children at Christmastime.

After moving from her former location to the old Steve's Steakhouse building that she renovated, Brendle assisted the Towns/Union Counties Habitat for Humanity home-building organization by allowing the nonprofit to erect a new ReStore in the parking lot of



Karen Brendle her restaurant.

Brendle was known as a strong family woman who put a successful business by putting several of her family

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Habitat for Humanity celebrates mortgage payoff

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Twenty years ago, Dorothy Mayfield was a struggling single mom with four kids – twin boys and two girls – living out of apartments.

Through the Towns/Union Counties Habitat for Humanity, Mayfield was able to buy a house in November 2000 after failing to qualify with a conventional lender. And that has made all the difference in quality of life for her and her family.

Mayfield was the first person to obtain a mortgage through the Towns/Union Counties Habitat, and on Monday, Aug. 9, she celebrated a major milestone with the organization as the first local



Congratulations to Dorothy Mayfield, who has paid off the mortgage on her home built by Habitat for Humanity 20 years ago. Photo by Mark Smith

See Mortgage Burning, Page 2A

Mike Rich's legacy continues at Georgia Racing Hall of Fame

Robert Turner also honored at ceremony

By Dave Wiley
North Georgia News

A Saturday crowd gathered Saturday, Aug. 7, in Dawsonville as Blairsville's Mike Rich, the right rear tire changer for the Melling Racing #9 Ford Thunderbird driven by Bill Elliott, was formally inducted into the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame.

Rich's tragic death triggered sweeping changes for safety on pit road, not just for stock car racing, but across the entire motorsports world.

Gene White, Ray Stonkus, Scott Russell, and Wade Knowles rounded out the inductee Class of 2021, all receiving recognition

during Saturday's affair in a room crowded with family members, friends, and former racing professionals and crew members there to show support.

"The Class of 2021 is one of the most accomplished and significant in recent memory," said Cody Dinsmore, a Hall of Fame board member and racing historian.

Hosted by the Dawsonville History Museum, the ceremony was a reunion of sorts for the crew of Melling Racing's #9 Ford Thunderbird as they descended on Dawsonville for the induction of their beloved crewmate,

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Mike Rich's family and friends at the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame Induction Banquet on Saturday, Aug. 7. Photo/Submitted

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Cooper gets probation after plea in stalking charge

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Ninth Circuit Court of Orange County, Florida, has dropped two felony extortion charges against Union County resident Norman Cooper, accepting instead a Nolo Contendere plea to a stalking charge and requiring him to serve a year on probation, according to court documents. As previously reported,

the Union County Sheriff's Office arrested Cooper, 67, for the State of Florida on Oct. 14, 2020, and he remained in custody at the Union County Jail for nearly two weeks before being transported to face the extortion charges in the Sunshine State.

According to the Orange County Sheriff's Office arrest affidavit dated Oct. 14, 2019, the original extortion charges stemmed from a 2019 dispute between Cooper and a relative

in which he alleged that \$4,000 had been wrongfully withheld from him following a death in the family.

The arrest affidavit further stated that, per emails and other communications obtained in the investigation, the Sheriff's Office determined that Cooper had been threatening his relative and her husband with public accusations of criminal fraud unless they paid him, thereby forming the basis for the extortion charges

to which Cooper pleaded not guilty.

On July 12, 2021, the Florida State Attorney's Office filed an amended charging document bringing an additional charge of first-degree stalking, a misdemeanor in which Cooper was accused of "knowingly, willfully, maliciously and repeatedly" following, harassing or cyberstalking the victims in the case.

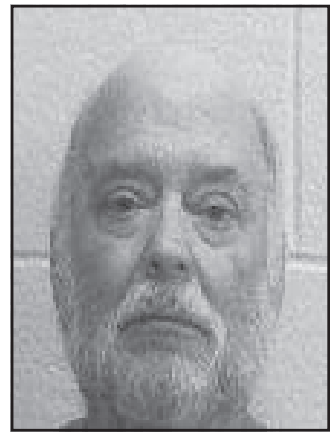
The prosecution filed its intent to drop the extortion charges on July 14, 2021, allowing Cooper to plea "Nolo Contendere" to the single charge of stalking. By court order that day, he received a disposition of "Adjudication Withheld" pending successful completion of his probationary period.

According to attorneys writing for floridabar.org, with such a disposition, "the

defendant consents to the payment of fines and a term of probation in exchange for the state's acquiescence of a withhold of adjudication. Once the term of probation is successfully completed, the court is divested of jurisdiction and there is no adjudication of guilt."

Cooper is to serve a one-year term of supervised probation under the Department of Corrections, during which he has been instructed to have "no contact (direct or indirect) with the victim or the victim's family during the period of supervision," per the court order.

Another condition of his probation was that he pay in nine months a sum totaling \$1,586.70 covering various court costs and fees associated with the case, including for his legal representation by



Norman Cooper

the Public Defender's Office and transportation costs, per another court order dated July 14, 2021.

In addition to a \$50 payment made in November 2020, court records indicate Cooper paid the remainder of that balance on July 15, 2021.

Mortgage Burning...from Page 1A

Habitat homeowner to finish paying off a mortgage.

Together, Mayfield and the Habitat ReStore held a "mortgage burning ceremony" in celebration of her last payment, with Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris and Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley also in attendance.

"She is still there, all of her kids have grown up," said Habitat Operations Manager Cathy Wheeler to a gathering of about 30 people. "She has grandchildren. And now her house is paid for, so she's ready for the next chapter."

Wheeler said Mayfield is a first-generation homeowner and that it was a sure bet she won't be the last.

"I found myself in a situation where I couldn't even afford to pay rent because it just kept going up," said Mayfield,

who has worked at North Georgia Technical College in the GED Office since 1998.

"Habitat changed my life," she continued. "It gave me a home for my four children and me. It gave me a sense of security. It was just such a blessing, and I thank God first and foremost, and I thank those who had the vision to start Habitat."

"To this day, I still drive up to my yard and I say, 'My home. That's my home, and I thank the Lord for my blessing.' It's my forever home, and I am so grateful."

Mayfield urges anyone in a situation like the one she found herself in 20 years ago to investigate the possibilities of owning a home by partnering with Habitat, which can be contacted for more information by calling 706-745-7101.

Wheeler said Habitat

raises the funds to build local homes through the ReStore.

"We buy all the stuff (to build a home, and) we have volunteers and contractors that build the house," Wheeler said. "We select the family, and then they move into the house. They have 20 years to pay it off, and we hold their hand and help them."

Habitat is working toward its 21st local home build. Wheeler said the organization used to hold mortgages but that they found a program through the USDA where, at closing, the USDA assumes the mortgage and pays costs back to Habitat so they can build another home without waiting to raise another large sum of money.

People may visit <https://www.townunionhabitat.org/> for additional information.

Rich Legacy...from Page 1A

Mike Rich.

"Finally. It took too long," the five words coming from Chuck Hill, the sentiment echoed by others on the crew.

"Take a look around," said Gene Roberds, gesturing around the room. "There's an enormous amount of talent here today that will never be recognized for what they've done for racing. This induction isn't just for Mike. It's for ALL of us."

As a small crowd circled around Saturday afternoon, Doug Shaak told the hilarious story again.

"They were lined up over there against the shop wall, and I moved down the line giving 'em all the once over. At first glance they didn't look like much. Heck, the joker down on the end was wearing Cowboy Boots!"

The Joker in the cowboy boots got that job. And now Mike Rich is in the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame.

Teresa Kelley accepted the medallion for her late husband.

Also recognized at the ceremony was race photographer Robert Turner of Blairsville, who was awarded the prestigious Jimmy Mosteller Media Award.

Turner was born in Atlanta in 1949, and he moved to Blairsville at an early age.

"His first contact with racing was helping a cousin, who drag raced a '55 Chevy in the old Cheatin' 4 Barrel class at the local drag strip, Lloyd's Drag Strip, and the old Double H in Blue Ridge, Ga.," according to Hall of Fame program literature.

"He heard his first NASCAR race on the radio, the '62 Atlanta 500, and his first race in person was the '63 Atlanta 500, the second of three wins in a row for his lifetime hero Fred Lorenzen, whom he was to meet later while photographing Cup races.

"While in college he worked at Nalley Chevrolet during the time T.C. Hunt was running the Grand American series of NASCAR. He witnessed Curtis Turner winning at Lakewood in Bruce Brantley's Chevelle.

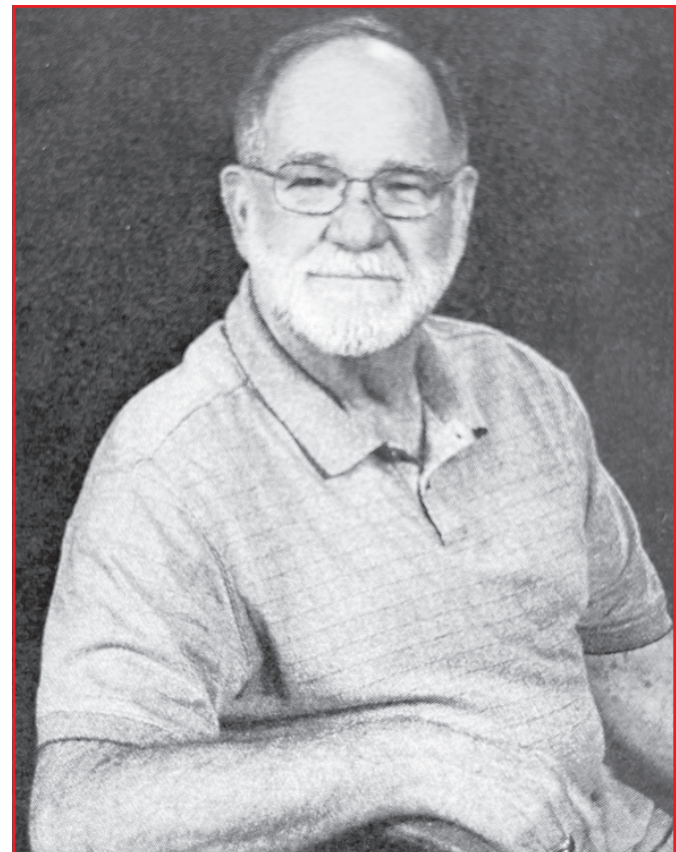
"He worked at the garage where Fulmer Lance ran out of early in his career and helped maintain and crew the cars. Traveling over the South in his work limited him to spectating until getting involved with photography.

"Living in Douglasville, he attended west Atlanta and Dixie where he met Chuck Honea, the track photographer. Chuck was involved with the NDRA group and offered him the chance to photograph for him when Chuck was away.

"The NDRA was consuming all of Chuck's time



Here is the display case honoring Mike Rich at the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame in Dawsonville. Rich was the rear tire changer for the Melling Racing #9 Ford Thunderbird driven by Bill Elliott. Photo/Submitted



Robert Turner was awarded the Jimmy Mosteller Media Award at the 2021 Racing Hall of Fame Induction Banquet earlier this month.

and he turned the track photographer's job over to him. Shooting three nights a week at West Atlanta, Dixie and Rome became a part of his life. He was providing photos for Racing News Weekly.

"He relocated to the Commerce area. Stopping to look at the Georgia International Track, he met Max Simpson and became the track photographer. When the track was sold, he remained the track photographer and wrote weekly stories for

Racing News, Short Track and Checkered Flag Racing News.

"He became a Race Director as well as doing public relations and ads. His efforts with the short tracks enabled him to photograph many NASCAR races as well as ALLPro, ASA and All-American challenge series.

"During his time in racing journalism he contributed to several racing papers, including those mentioned above. Speed Sport Racing, Super Chevy and Circle Track."

COVID Surge...from Page 1A

having to implement additional steps in the surge capacity plan, to include keeping patients in facilities other than the main hospital if necessary.

To accommodate the current level of admittance, in addition to re-opening the dedicated COVID units last used in the winter surge, the hospital is suspending some elective procedures as necessary to make more staff and space available to treat coronavirus patients.

This is different than the previous moratorium on elective procedures, as all paused procedures will resume once hospitalizations return to normal levels, Barnett said, adding that everyone with an emergency should feel comfortable coming to the ER and hospital no matter their malady.

Compared with the winter wave, testing is now being done completely in-house and on symptomatic patients only, speeding diagnoses along to get the right care to patients needing treatment for COVID-19.

Delta Variant

It remains unclear at this time whether the local rise in illness is attributable to the much-covered "delta variant" that many people have seen covered in state and national news, as local testing only determines a simple positive or negative result presently.

But based on the rapidly rising levels of transmission and all that is known about delta, including analysis by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that delta makes up most of the tested samples in the nation, Barnett believes it is safe to assume the variant is here and spreading, with early indications that patients may be experiencing more severe illness than in prior surges.

Vaccine Efficacy & Boosters

For anyone wondering if vaccinations have been making a difference amid the current upswing, Barnett said the data favoring the vaccines speaks for itself, with greater than 90% of local hospitalizations so far having occurred in unvaccinated people.

There have been "breakthrough infections" in fully vaccinated individuals requiring hospitalization here,

Barnett said, but so far, those are solidly in the minority of patients, serving as more strong evidence the vaccines provide significant protection against COVID infection.

Members of the CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices met Friday, Aug. 13, to talk Moderna and Pfizer boosters for immunocompromised individuals, recommending third shots for this group. The CDC accepted that recommendation later Friday.

Natasha Young, public information officer for Georgia's District 2 Public Health that oversees the health departments of Union and Towns counties, said last week that booster shots will be made available to eligible residents at the local Health Department as soon as the CDC provides official guidance "that clearly defines what conditions make an individual eligible for an additional dose of vaccine."

No Child Hospitalizations

By press time, there had been no pediatric COVID cases requiring hospitalization locally due to this or any previous surge, and older people and those with health conditions still appeared to be most vulnerable to severe illness, though CNO Barnett said the hospital was treating a small number of younger and otherwise healthy adults.

At present, Barnett said she was not aware of any cases of re-infection requiring hospitalization in people with a past diagnosis of COVID-19, regardless of vaccination status.

In terms of deaths, Barnett said the impact of this latest surge will become more apparent in the weeks ahead, though she added that local, state and national efforts thus far to get more and more susceptible people vaccinated are hopefully going to make a big difference in those figures.

Challenges Ahead

Union General is serving as the main facility treating the region's COVID-19 patients, with Chatuge Regional Hospital in Towns County also treating several positive cases.

In normal times, exceedingly sick patients would likely be transferred to larger hospital systems, though this is

becoming increasingly difficult as hospitals everywhere begin to fill up due to COVID-19.

Another complication is the fact that staff shortages for health care workers are occurring everywhere, even at Union General, so the immediate concern should hospitalizations continue to rise would be in terms of personnel and not necessarily space.

Despite these difficulties, Barnett said the local hospitals continue to have an incredible staff of medical professionals who, though overworked during stressful surge conditions like the present, are now experienced in treating COVID and remain committed to serving their communities.

Barnett hopes everyone will take common sense precautions like staying home when sick to decrease community spread but noted that, nearly a year and a half past the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, it is important for people to carry on with their lives as normally as possible.

To this end, the hospitals are allowing visitations under specific guidelines, to include the wearing of masks. Visitation is being limited for patients admitted for COVID-19, but even then, visitors will be permitted in the event of end-of-life circumstances.

Regarding the Union County and Chatuge Regional Nursing Homes, Barnett said staff and residents there are doing well, with no outbreaks by press time.

Vaccinations are not being mandated in any of the hospital system's facilities, and rates are above 50% for employees and higher for residents in the nursing homes.

Get Vaccinated Locally

District 2 Public Health continues to offer all three of the COVID-19 vaccines to eligible residents, free of charge and five days a week at the local Health Department, with walk-ins welcome.

"The district is again seeing a surge in COVID-19 cases, the hospitals are filling up, and it is necessary to remind residents that vaccination is important for the health of the community," District 2 Public Information Officer Young said Aug. 12.

"No matter your vaccination status, wear a mask if indoors and social distance,"

she continued. "Vaccination is the key to getting out of this pandemic. Vaccination lessens your risk of infection from the virus by three and a half times, your risk from getting ill from COVID-19 is eight times lower, and the risk of hospitalization or death is 25 times lower.

Carlton Colwell...from Page 1A

local roads he got paved thanks to his pursuit of state funding as well as his construction company.

Further, he was directly involved in the creation of the Pioneer RESA, which is an invaluable resource providing specialist assistance to the smaller school districts in North Georgia.

And he has received credit for introducing legislation that later paved the way for the creation of the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax in Georgia, which has helped school systems all over the state build facilities for children without raising property taxes.

In a 2009 interview with Bob Short as part of the University of Georgia's "Reflections on Georgia Politics Oral History Collection," Colwell describes his legacy, much of which he attributes to the relationships he formed over the years.

No matter who he was working with, be it Joe Frank Harris, Tom Murphy, Ralph Twigg, Zell Miller, Johnny

"If you still need a COVID-19 vaccine, today is the day, walk into your county health department and get your vaccine. Visit phdistrict2.org and click on locations or use the vaccine finder at vaccines.gov to find a vaccination site near you.

"If you are feeling sick and wish to be tested, District 2 has free testing available every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (from) 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. located at 2500 Allen Creek Road, Gainesville, GA 30507, at the Allen Creek Soccer Complex."

Isakson, etc., Colwell proved himself a man in search of real results through shared compromise.

"I had a lot of good help," Colwell said. "I worked real hard on the Appalachian Road. That was (some) of my hardest work that I did, because these mountains - we needed it so bad, I thought.

"And I got a lot of criticism from it, and it caused me to get opposition a time or two. But I thought that we needed it, and I think it's been a savior for this area here."

According to his obituary, Colwell served in the United States Army in 1944, after which he went to work at the Bell Bomber Plant, now known as Lockheed Marietta.

In 1948, he met the love of his life, Odetta Ralston of Fannin County, with whom he would raise a family and share 73 years of marriage. Early on, the couple moved to Atlanta, where he worked at General Motors for seven years.

He longed to return to the North Georgia Mountains, however, so he established

Colwell Construction Company in Union County, which he owned for 71 years. Colwell won election to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1964 and represented his county with honor and pride.

In his first year as an elected official, Colwell was appointed to the Appropriations Committee, where he remained for 30 years, and he described his service as "a great privilege."

A man of faith, Colwell was a member of the Blairsville Church of Christ, where he once served as an elder.

Funeral services honoring Colwell's life and legacy were held on Thursday, Aug. 12, at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center - a project paid for completely by ESPLOST.

People wishing to leave a memory or comment for the family may do so at <https://www.mountainviewfuneralhome.com/obituary/carlton-colwell>.

The abovementioned hourlong interview by Bob Short may be found at <https://ohms.libs.uga.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=russell/RBRL220ROGP-064.xml>.

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Back to Class...from Page 1A

the gym before they were dismissed to their classrooms," he said. "Students ate breakfast with their classmates and spent quality time with their teachers this morning."

"Recess time was a big hit with soccer, four square, basketball, and lots of free play on the playground equipment. Teachers are smiling, positive and on their way to our best year ever."

Principal Pat Donaldson said that Union County Middle School "overall had a smooth start to the school year. It was a wonderful first day, and students and teachers were excited to be back."

And the same could be said of Woody Gap School, which welcomed students of all grades living in the Suches area to another fruitful year on campus.

High School Principal C.T. Hussion was out directing traffic and welcoming students at the high school drop-off Thursday morning, with Special Education Director Tiffany Setzer and Assistant Principal Wesley Garrett greeting students at the front doors.

"I am glad to be back in a regular school year," Setzer said. "I think it's important for the kids to be in a structured routine, and I think it's important for them to see each other and

have that socialization. So, I'm excited."

Added Garrett, "The most exciting thing about this school year is the anticipation of normalcy. Students and faculty, and probably parents as well, maybe appreciate normal now, after not normal for a year and a half."

The High School started the day with a grade-level meeting split into upperclassmen and underclassmen sessions held at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

"These grade-level meetings are the most important part of starting the year off right," Hussion said. "We (emphasize) our main district focus, which is safety, relationships, and expectations."

"Coming back off of a pandemic, you've got a big mixture of kids here. All the new kids that have moved in, our enrollment's grown by 110, and you've got 252 freshmen that don't know what the expectations are."

"We had 200 online kids that came back to school that may not have even been to school at all last year, but they're here ... you've got to re-establish the expectations of discipline, safety, our culture, how we do it here."

Hussion said that, of course, school rules and the consequences of breaking them

must be made clear, which he did in the grade level meeting, but students must also realize that regular classes are back in session and that they can't just decide to take a 'COVID' day or week or month off.

If a student is sick, quarantined, running a temperature of 100 or more, or has tested positive for COVID, then a parent or medical professional needs to let the school know, and the student must stay home.

"But if we want to get back to normal, we've got to establish that what happened last year is not (happening) this year," Hussion said.

By the end of the first day, Hussion said that everything had gone well for teachers and students alike, with "lots of smiles, and I think everyone was just glad to be back."

Mother Jeni Roberts waited in line to pick up her son at the Primary School that first day, and she said he was happy to be back in school.

"He only went to school for six weeks last year," she said. "This year he's going all year. He loves it, and I love this school, too."

Jody Ledford, a grandmother also in line at the Primary School last week, said she was thrilled to see kids returning for another school year, "because they need it."

"They really need face time instead of something on the computer," Ledford said.



The Primary School was happy to accept youngsters back for classes Aug. 12. Photo by Mark Smith



Woody Gap middle and high school students on the first day of the 2021-22 school year. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Brendle...from Page 1A



Karen Brendle's family uploaded this montage of photos to Facebook last week showcasing happy times for the Brendles.

members to work, including her son Cody, who is head cook at the Skillet.

"Karen was a loving and caring person; she dearly loved her family," according to her obituary. "She was a loving mother, grandmother, and sister. Karen also loved being a caretaker and caring for others."

"She owned and operated the Skillet Café for over nine years, having served many meals for her loving customers."

The Skillet Café is still working out next steps as far

as re-opening the restaurant following Brendle's passing.

A viewing was held for family and friends at Mountain View Funeral Home on Friday, Aug. 13, with services postponed until further notice due to an illness in the family.

People wishing to read Brendle's full obituary can find it in this week's edition of the newspaper, and to leave comments and condolences for Brendle's family, please visit <https://www.mountainviewfuneralhome.com/obituary/karen-brendle>.

Survivors include her

loving husband, Kenneth Brendle of Blairsville; five children, Justin Brown of Blairsville, Cody and Molly Brendle of Blairsville, Haley Brown of Blairsville, Clinton and Jamie Brendle of Hayesville, North Carolina, and Carmen and Bill Rose of Blairsville; one sister, Peggy Secura of Chagrin Falls, Ohio; 10 grandchildren, Mitchell, D.J., Brooklyn, Keltsey, Keyla, Graycen, Dalton, Taylor, Ryan and Blake; and five great-grandchildren, Dominic, Leeland, Damian, Micah and Berkley.

City of Blairsville qualifying ends on Wednesday, Aug. 18

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Qualifying for the City of Blairsville General Municipal Election began Monday, and eligible residents wishing to appear on the Nov. 2 ballot will need to submit their paperwork by the end of qualifying on Wednesday, Aug. 18.

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 pa-

perwork 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 October early voting and Election Day voting will take place in November.

People may submit their qualifying paperwork and fee payments at City Hall between the hours of 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. through Aug. 18.

Residents are eligible to qualify for and hold city office if they are 21 years or older, a resident for at least a year im-

mediately 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 in November, there will be a Special Election called by the county asking voters whether they support a Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax.

The TSPLOST referendum will appear on a separate ballot, so all voters, including people living inside city limits, will need to cast those ballots at the Union County Courthouse during early voting and at the county precincts on Election Day.

If approved, TSPLOST would fund various road and sidewalk improvement projects in both Blairsville and Union County.



Union County High School students attended a grade-level meeting with Principal Hussion on Day 1 of the new school year inside the Fine Arts Center. Photo by Mark Smith