

# North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, August 21, 2024

## Suches Fire welcomes residents in Open House

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Locals say that part of Suches' charm is that it's a small community, but many came out to support their first responder heroes during the annual Union County Fire Station No. 5 Open House on Saturday, Aug. 17.

Located beside the Community Center and MedLink Clinic, the outreach event started that evening around 4 p.m., easy to spot with all the firetrucks on display for curious residents.

The Pruitt family was recognized by Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris for their commitment to keeping

Suches safe; Derrick and Doug Pruitt were inspired to take after their father, Ernie Pruitt, who serves as the only full-time firefighter at Station 5.

"Y'all are blessed here in Suches; we're blessed here in Union County," Paris said. "We wanted to mention that we're proud of Station 5."

Now a lieutenant, Doug Pruitt welcomed the guests there that day, inviting them to "make (themselves) at home" with good food, good times and good opportunities to learn. Adults and youngsters alike checked out firefighting equipment, including how much it weighs and how long it takes to prepare for a call.

Daniel and Christy Dixon

shared that while the heaviest item a firefighter carries is the self-contained breathing apparatus, the helmet, boots and other protective gear require just as much strength to carry. On top of that, any given firefighter must take no more than two minutes to get completely dressed and equipped to safely handle the flames.

Meanwhile, Derrick Pruitt explained how a new piece of machinery – the LUCAS device – has greatly improved patient care for emergency response calls, and showed how in-field tests can be sent directly to area hospitals.

Having a doctor pre-

assess the damage of, say, a cardiac event can cut down on response time. As noted by Pruitt, it takes time for ambulances to reach such an isolated mountain town, but if doctors are already preparing for the patient, the hospital can send out a helicopter. Sometimes, that helicopter arrives quicker than an ambulance.

Union County Fire Chief David Dyer noted that many of Station 5's firefighters have training equivalent to that of a paramedic, so they can work to stabilize patients while waiting for help to arrive. This can mean all the difference when every second counts.

See *UCFD Open House, Page 6A*



Potential future firefighters were just some of the community guests who attended the educational celebration of Fire Station No. 5 in Suches on Aug. 17. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Audit report, budget talk highlight county meeting

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

People who have attended Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris' regular meetings in the past will have recognized guest presenter Clay Pilgrim on Thursday, Aug. 15. Pilgrim is a certified public accountant with the independent auditing firm Rushton and Company.

Each year, Rushton audits the county government's previous year of financial statements, with a goal to "express opinions on the fair presentation of the financial statements."

Once the audit is complete, required by the state to be prior to June 30 every year, Pilgrim presents the findings in a county meeting, as he did last week.

An audit is a compre-



CPA Clay Pilgrim with Rushton and Company gave an audit presentation in last week's county meeting.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

hensive review of the many financial documents generated by the various county departments, undertaken using generally accepted accounting standards "and Government Auditing Standards issued by

the Comptroller General of the United States."

For Fiscal Year 2023, Pilgrim said the audit revealed an "unmodified" or "clean" opinion, which is good news

See *County Meeting, Page 6A*

## GBI seeking information on Cornwell cold case

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation observed the 15th anniversary of Union County resident Kristi Cornwell's disappearance by asking the public for information regarding her abduction and murder to finally bring closure for her family.

"Sunday, Aug. 11, 2024, marks 15 years since 38-year-old Kristi Cornwell was abducted while walking down Jones Creek Road in Blairsville," GBI said last week. "Cornwell's remains were discovered on Jan. 1, 2011, in a wooded area off Moccasin Road in Blairsville."

The cold case remains open, and GBI is requesting that anyone with information call the GBI Tipline at 800-597-8477 or the Union County Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066.

Cornwell's tragic fate



came to light the evening of New Year's Day 2011 when her brother Richard discovered her skeletal remains about nine miles from where she was abducted on Aug. 11, 2009, ending her family's hopes that

See *Cornwell Cold Case, Page 3A*

## Farmers Market makes farm to table easy doing



Produce sales are going strong at the Union County Farmers Market, every Tuesday and Saturday through October.

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Union County Farmers Market continues to go strong every Tuesday and Saturday this season, making summertime produce available to anyone interested in buying locally and supporting area farmers.

Right now, tomatoes are a big hit, and sweet corn is highly sought after, but watermelons are also a favorite.

In addition to mainstay crops, mushrooms foraged fresh from the Appalachian

wilderness such as laetiporus – more commonly known as "chicken of the woods" for its taste and texture – are dried and offered for sale as a way to step up the dedicated chef's cooking game.

Another unique crop is the scuppernong, also known as the "scupadine" or "scufadine." Some people may be familiar with the heavy berries known as muscadines, but if muscadines are compared to red grapes, then scuppernongs are white grapes.

Like the muscadine but green instead of deep purple,

the scuppernong is native to the Southern United States and named after the Scuppernon River Valley of North Carolina. Muscadines and scuppernongs are consumed in preserves or fermented for wine, but the variety sold at the Farmers Market is typically presented just as they are, handpicked.

Along with produce of course are crafts, and Jan and Joe Valencia of Beautiful Home Accents are no exception. The couple both work with wood, though their specific crafts are unique. Their Etsy

See *Market News, Page 7A*

## Benefit concert to raise money for cancer fight

News Special

Numerous local artists and musicians are rallying around Union County High School sophomore Trace Hancock as he battles his fight against cancer.

"Band Together for Trace" will be held on Saturday, Aug. 24, at 6 p.m. inside the Union County Fine Arts Center located at 926 Panther Overlook in Blairsville.

Seven bands and artists will be performing as they present a free benefit concert for Trace: Tommy Townsend, Gavyn Thorsell Band, Teddy Baker, Shin Splints, Supercluster, Dr. Dreadhead, and Brother.

Donations can be made to the family at the concert to help with Trace's ongoing medical-related expenses. There will also be a raffle of local gift cards and gift baskets as well as a 50/50 drawing.

Multiple local businesses have already committed to sponsoring the event and more are being added. This is the community's chance to show this young man what living in a small town is all about! Organizers are asking community members to please support Trace by showing up to this event and packing out the Fine Arts Center.



Trace Hancock is a sophomore at UCHS.

Trace, 15, has his own passion for music and also plays electric guitar, so a concert in his honor is only fitting! It's time for the town to rally around him with all the love and support this community can show him at the event.

Any businesses interested in sponsoring the concert are being asked to please contact the "Band Together for Trace" Event Coordinator Kendra

Thorsell at 352-478-1180.

Trace's journey began at just 3 months old when he was diagnosed with Kawasaki disease, a rare condition that caused four giant aneurysms to develop around his heart. This was compounded by the discovery of an aortic bicuspid valve, a congenital heart defect that required constant monitoring and care.

See *Trace Hancock, Page 3A*



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# Cornwell Cold Case...from Page 1A

she might turn up alive. The Moccasin Road location was established as a search area based on information obtained by the GBI while investigating a man who would become the prime suspect in Cornwell's kidnapping and murder: James Scott Carringer of Young

Harris. Carringer was wanted for the April 2010 kidnapping and rape of a female relative in Gilmer County, and in investigating that case, the GBI discovered that a vehicle matching his had been spotted in this area and his cellphone had pinged a tower in northern

Union County the night Cornwell disappeared. These developments came after police entered a three-hour standoff with Carringer in Atlanta while trying to arrest him on his Gilmer County charges, and he shot himself dead in his car on April 8, 2010 – about

eight months after Cornwell's abduction but before her body was found.

"We have no direct evidence that Carringer is the murderer of Kristi Cornwell," then-GBI Director Vernon Keenan said in 2011. "He remains our prime suspect based on a series of circumstances that point to him."

"Because we have no direct evidence, this will remain an active and open investigation at GBI. We are still pursuing investigative leads as they relate to Carringer, but we will also pursue any other leads that come in, although he is our prime suspect."

"We are not willing to close the case and identify him as the murderer. We have done a tremendous amount of work into his background but cannot conclusively say he is the murderer."

"This remains an active case, and we would like to bring complete closure to the Cornwell family by being able to identify the murderer of Kristi Cornwell. But we are unable to do that at this point."

# Trace Hancock...from Page 1A

From a young age, Trace faced significant medical challenges, but his spirit remained strong. At the age of 15, life threw another curveball his way. Trace was diagnosed with T-cell Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (T-cell ALL), a rare and aggressive form of cancer.

The diagnosis marked the start of an intense and grueling treatment regimen that would test Trace and his family in unimaginable ways. He spent 45 days in the hospital following his initial diagnosis, a period filled with uncertainty and fear.

The treatment plan for T-cell ALL is long and

arduous. Trace has already undergone multiple rounds of chemotherapy, enduring side effects that would weaken anyone's resolve. Despite this, Trace's courage never wavered. He faced each treatment with a determination that inspired everyone around him.

Chemotherapy has been a constant part of Trace's life since his diagnosis, with treatments scheduled to continue until April 2027.

In addition to chemotherapy, Trace has had to endure spinal taps, a painful procedure necessary for his treatment. Out of the 24 spinal taps required, he has bravely completed 12, with 12 more

to go.

Complications have arisen along the way. Trace developed multiple blood clots in his arm, adding another layer of complexity to his already challenging treatment plan. Each setback has been met with Trace's unwavering resilience and the steadfast support of his family.

"As his parents, watching Trace endure this journey has been heartbreaking," said Rachael and David Hancock. "The strength and bravery he shows daily leaves us in awe, but it also fills us with an indescribable fear and anxiety."

"We wish every day that we could take his place, bearing his pain and suffering ourselves. In the midst of all this, Trace's sister Jordan has been deeply affected as well. At just 10 years old, she struggles to understand everything that is happening. Seeing her so worried and hurt breaks our hearts even more."

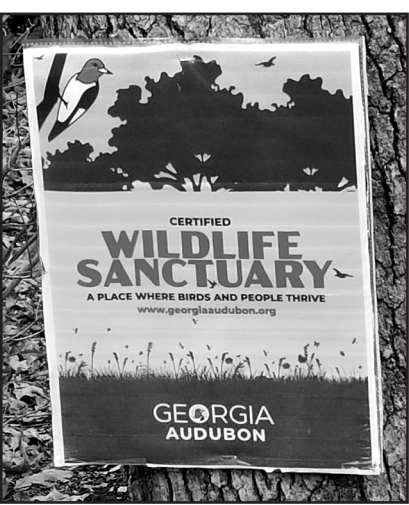
Throughout this journey, Trace has managed to find moments of normalcy and joy, according to Rachael and David. Despite the pain and fatigue, he has continued to pursue his passions and live his life to the fullest.

"His strength and determination have been nothing short of inspiring," his parents said. "We remain hopeful and steadfast in our support of Trace. We are incredibly proud of our son and are committed to standing by him every step of the way."

"Thank you to everyone who has supported us with your kindness, prayers, and words of encouragement. Your support means the world to us and helps us find the strength to keep moving forward."

# Local property receives wildlife sanctuary status from GA Birds

Georgia Audubon (now GA Birds) certified a local property as a wildlife sanctuary as part of its Birds Georgia's Wildlife Sanctuary Program which recognizes and encourages property owners to enhance their land for birds and other wildlife. Certification involves an extensive evaluation and compliance with several requirements.



The 2 acre property features bird feeders, nesting boxes, natural vegetation, water sources and a variety of habitats. These features have attracted numerous types of wildlife including 51 bird species, 21 types of mammals, and 22 species of

reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Hundreds of properties in Georgia have been certified as wildlife sanctuaries, but this may be the only one in Union County.

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# UCFD Open House...from Page 1A



**In Saturday's Open House, Suches firefighters showed off just what it takes to get prepared – and in a hurry – to respond to fires.**

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Another demonstration was planned for the Jaws of Life vehicle extraction tool, and although it didn't pan out exactly as expected due to a storm rolling in, the audience still got a close-up view of how firefighters extract car crash victims stuck in their vehicles.

With a hole through the windshield and some dents on the hood, the demonstration car wasn't in the best shape, but it wasn't as bad as what many of the firefighters had seen. Still, it would do for "demo" in all senses of the word, as the glass was shattered and the extrication tool slowly but surely pried the passenger side door open.

As the volunteers worked, Lt. Doug Pruitt explained that the goal is to remove as much metal as possible from around trapped occupants while keeping the frame of the car steady to avoid jostling any potential injuries.

Guests were invited to shelter in the station when the rain picked up. While some

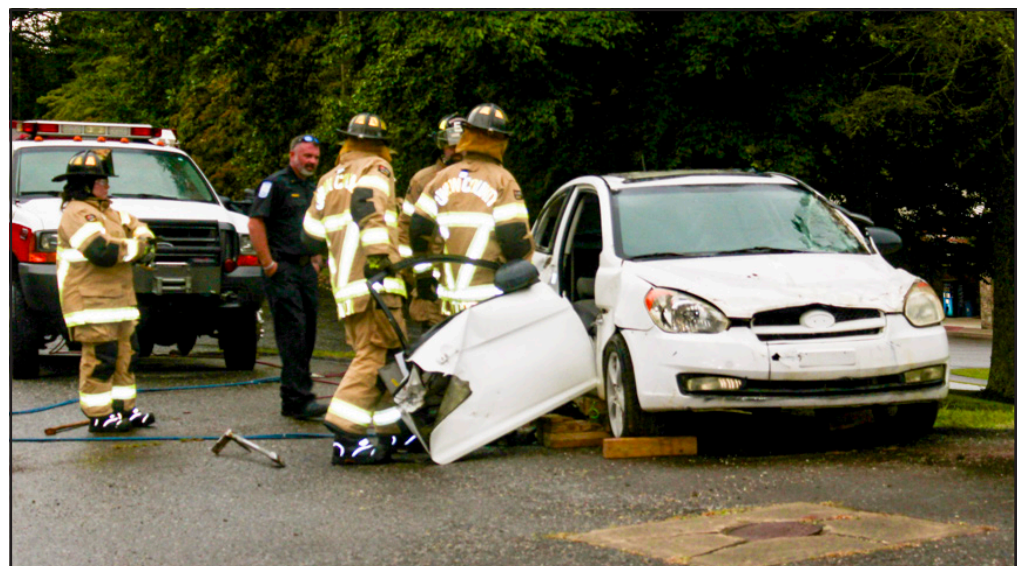
participated in a raffle for a couple of fire extinguishers and fire blankets, others went to grab a bite to eat – though most did both.

Hot dogs and hamburgers were served alongside baked beans, potato salad and chips.

A massive cake had also been prepared with a written message thanking Station 5 firefighters for their service and care.

The sentiment was entirely deserved, and although it's safe to say the community had a good time at the event,

the firefighters enjoyed the opportunity as well. Ernie Pruitt spoke for many of his fellows when he said he believes that "the most rewarding thing is being able to help the people that you love in this small community."



**The Jaws of Life are a crucial implement in the emergency responder's toolkit, demonstrated over the weekend during the education-heavy Suches Fire Station Open House.**

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

# County Meeting...from Page 1A

for the county, demonstrating that "the financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of Union County, Georgia, as of December 31, 2023."

Some highlights from the audit include significant growth in the Government-Wide Net Position of the county, which increased from \$63,608,328 in 2021 to \$80,864,732 in 2023, mirroring the rapid growth of the area in general.

The Government-Wide Net Position breaks down into three categories that, when taken together, reflect the entire equity of the county – essentially, all assets minus liabilities.

First is Net Investment in Capital Assets, i.e. land, buildings, equipment, vehicles, etc., "less the depreciation accumulated on those assets, less any debt utilized to acquire those assets."

"Which, as of 12/31/23, the county had no debt with the exception of leases that are due to a new standard that was required to be implemented last year," Pilgrim said.

Then there is Restricted Net Position, an example being SPLOST or grant funds "that maybe were received before year-end but have not yet been expended," meaning revenues that have come in but are legally "restricted by external sources" while awaiting expenditure.

The last component of the Government-Wide Net Position is Unrestricted Net Position that consists of all unrestricted funds available at the governmental level, the majority of which reside in the Fund Balance of the General Fund.

Regarding the General Fund, or "chief operating fund of the county," revenues went up by \$2 million in FY23, largely due to a \$1.2 million increase in property taxes spurred by growth in new properties and improvements/additions, per County Finance Director Laura Driskell.

Likewise, expenditures were up last year to the tune of \$4.5 million over 2022, mainly to account for payroll increases for employee retention and recruitment efforts amid competition with outside entities, the need to hire new positions and cost of living adjustments, Driskell said.

Between 2022 and 2023, the Unrestricted General Fund Balance – commonly referred to as a "reserve balance" – increased from roughly \$8.5 million to about \$9.1 million, equivalent to 36.6% of budgetary expenditures for FY23, which Pilgrim said was a "healthy" reserve amount.

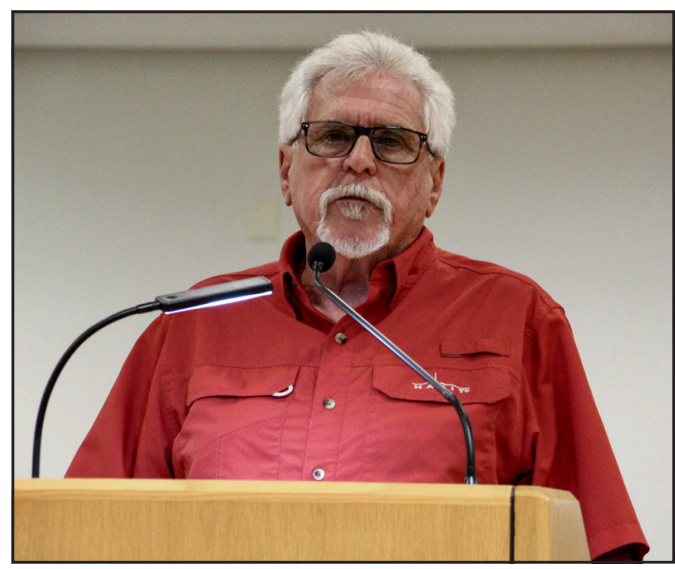
Speaking of county finances, resident Vince Peterson appeared on the meeting agenda to discuss a concern he has with the current year county budget.

He addressed the commissioner to say that, after conducting personal research using public documents, he believed the county had adopted an unbalanced budget last year for Fiscal Year 2024, contrary to state requirements.

Specifically, Peterson claimed that most of the approximately \$5.75 million in "Operating Transfers to Other Funds" listed in the proposed budget failed to balance, resulting in \$3.75 million that seemed to have been transferred from the General Fund without a final destination.

"Where is our \$3.75 million?" Peterson asked. "Something is not right with the budget as it was presented and approved in November, and I think we need to look into this."

Once Peterson took his seat, Commissioner Paris repeated his oft-spoken



**New Hope Counseling Director Troy Beaver spoke passionately about the ongoing need for local addiction recovery and treatment services when accepting his organization's Substance Abuse Grant on Thursday.**

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

comment encouraging people with any questions about county business to come to his office during the week for a sit-down with relevant personnel to dig into the details of their concerns rather than raising questions at county meetings that cannot be readily answered in the context of a county meeting.

"We never have anything hidden," Paris said. "You just heard our audit report (for FY23). We never do anything out of line, illegal – we are so proud that we always have a balanced budget, that we always have ... no debt, and that we also have about the third lowest millage rate in the entire state of Georgia out of 159 counties."

"And the only way you can do that and have what we have in Union County is work yourself to death and not hide money, not pull shenanigans with money; I just don't know where these thought processes come from. If anyone can figure that out, maybe you can let me know later on."

Following the meeting, Finance Director Driskell reiterated the complicated nature of governmental finance, asserting that all funds were balanced and money was accounted for in the FY24 budget, even if some of the "Operating Transfers to Other Funds" are not explicitly labeled in the budget documents available at <https://www.unioncountyga.gov/>.

If there actually is a balancing issue in the current year budget, which the Commissioner's Office is denying, at the very least, it should show up in the next independent audit – due to be completed by Summer 2025.

Also in the meeting, Paris accepted an agreement with CivicPlus to design and maintain a new county website. The reason for the switch is that the current website's technology platform is now considered obsolete, and the developer will no longer be troubleshooting the site.

The initial cost is \$24,273.25 with an annual expense of \$9,970. The cost for hosting with the former website company was \$1,380 each year but only included server space

without technical support.

Of the three website quotes provided, CivicPlus was the second least expensive and comes with a benefit of continuity behind the scenes, as the county works with the company via Municode and handling open record requests.

According to County Project Manager Renee Deibert, the county will be meeting with CivicPlus on Aug. 21 to discuss moving forward, "but there is no true timeline yet" as to when the new website will launch.

"The look will be new, but the basic info will be the same," Deibert said. "New features such as an interactive calendar for the public and also a way for us to assign updating of specific pages to specific people will be helpful to all concerned."

In other business, Paris finalized the abandonment of Old Lows Mill Road, a process that has been ongoing for several months. The intended abandonment of Old Ivy Log Road remains on hold as the county works with the relative of a property owner who is disputing the effort there.

Paris also awarded Substance Abuse Grants to four local organizations that aid in combatting "the alcohol and drug-abuse problems" in the county. An independent committee, the members of which remain anonymous to prevent bias in selection, awarded all four grant applications.

Recipients were Freedom Ministries for \$7,500; New Hope Counseling for \$7,500; Positive Pathways for \$5,000; and Union County Family Connection for \$10,000.

The grant was established in 2010 when the alcohol referendum passed, requiring that \$50,000 be set aside each year from alcohol licensing fees and tax receipts to go toward local recovery initiatives "that already existed in Union County prior to this."

Commissioner Paris holds his regular monthly meetings the third Thursday of every month at 6 p.m. inside the Union County Courthouse, and residents are invited and encouraged to attend.

## Union County High School Class of 1984 - 40 Year Reunion



The Union County High School Class of 1984 - 40 Year Reunion will be held on Saturday, September 14, 2024. Dinner will be served at 5 PM; Reunion at 6 PM; at the Union County Community Center, 129 Union County Rec Road, Blairsville.

There is no cost to attend but donations are accepted. Please RSVP by September 1st for dinner (plus 1) to: Courtney Waller at 706-781-7285 or [courtneynelsonwaller@gmail.com](mailto:courtneynelsonwaller@gmail.com)

# Market News...from Page 1A

shop is dedicated mostly to wreaths, but they've found good business selling their wares in-person.

Joe cuts all sorts of wood crafts, including signs and lazy Susans, and uses a press to stamp them with witty phrases. He's attracted the attention of fellow dog lovers with his bone-shaped signs and warnings to "(not) trust the dogs, they've already been fed."

Jan prefers to create arrangements of sola wood flowers, sometimes dyed to match the mason jars and cornucopias she places them in. Other times, she leaves them in their natural state of ivory to match bathrooms or kitchens. Her new "woodland slants" project has proven popular, with tiny animals like hedgehogs and owls placed among the faux foliage.

The new event area in the shed down by the Union County Canning Plant has gotten quite a bit of attention this year also. On Aug. 10, it hosted the Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation.

"The hotdog is the closest thing you can get to a human finger," Lineman Tim Cheeks said as he carefully affixed one to a shock-resistant pole and lifted it up to the mini power line. As soon as it made contact

with the current, the lunchmeat caught fire, demonstrating the potential for harm an open electrical wire has on bare flesh.

On top of providing demos to fascinated guests, EMC representatives answered questions and offered informative booklets about power restoration. Popular among kids and adults alike were the free items emblazoned with the EMC logo like pens and, interestingly, nail clips.

Bill Ringley and his wife, Marylyne, have been coming to the Farmers Market for at least 16 years for the "excellent" produce and handmade crafts, though they also enjoy Trash to Treasures sales on Fridays.

"I think (the Farmers Market is) wonderful. You know, you're under cover, it's clean ... It's really nice to be able to come to this," said Marylyne. "It's nice to support the community."

For his part, Bill remarked, "It keeps getting bigger, nicer, more people."

Selina and Ben Waterhouse, by contrast, visited the market for the first time this month after moving to the mountains from Australia in July. Already, they – and their little ones – are hooked.

"We love it. We were tasting the honey and smelling



**At the Farmers Market this month, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Lineman Tim Cheeks demonstrated the dramatic results of what can happen with direct exposure to a powerline.**

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

the delicious nuts over there. Everything looks so yummy, everything looks so beautiful, so we love it," said Selina, who plans to return as a regular customer. "We've got a really

beautiful community that loves to share their crops with each other." Located at 290 Farmers Market Way in Blairsville, the market is open 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Tuesday, and 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Saturday through October.

## Nursing Home congratulates 2024 Georgia Certified Nursing Aides



Congratulations to the 2024 Georgia Certified Nursing Aides on receiving their CNA Pins at the Union County Nursing Home. (L-R): Gracie Hughes, Kaylee Denton, Jada Rittner, Kinsley Stubbs, Christina King (not pictured: Elora Darnell). A special thank you to Misty Sneed (CNA Teacher) for all of her hard work on getting these students certified. NI(Aug21,21)3/CA