

Burglary...continued from Page 1A

"We've developed several good leads in these cases, and several arrests have been made in different areas of the state," said Lt. Daren Osborn of the UCSO Criminal Investigation Division. "White County, Twiggs County and Fayette County are the three counties that have made arrests on the lookouts for this group."

Lt. Osborn and UCSO Sgt. Lamar Dyer have been working the case locally and as part of the task force, sharing information and investigative techniques with the other agencies.

Union County's first run-in with these burglars occurred on Aug. 31, when the group broke into the Marathon Station at the Georgia/North Carolina state line and got away with the store's safe. It was then that Lt. Osborn and Sgt. Dyer first learned of an epidemic of burglaries in the North Georgia region.

Lt. Osborn had posted a notice on Facebook asking for any information in connection with the Aug. 31 burglary, and an official with the Athens-Clarke County Police Department saw the post and reached out. Investigators believe that the burglaries may have started just over a year ago in Athens.

At the time of the Union County burglary back in August, the sheriff's office warned businesses to keep no cash in their stores overnight, especially isolated convenience stores and Dollar General Stores, which are favorite targets of this group.

Burglaries committed by this group follow a particular pattern: the burglaries happen early morning between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m., the stores are broken into, surveillance equipment is disabled or stolen, and money

safes are taken, along with cigarettes and Red Bull.

Another pattern of this group is that it seemingly always returns at later dates to commit further burglaries, which is exactly what happened when Union County's Food Heaven Convenience Store, located on GA 515 near the Towns County line, was burgled on Oct. 30.

Many neighboring counties have suffered burglaries at the hands of this group, such as Towns County, where investigators believe the group burgled two stores on Sept. 11 and one on Oct. 30.

Atlanta PD has recovered several stolen safes from residences in the metro area while serving warrants for drug arrests, and they have since become part of the task force.

The task force, which also includes the FBI, believes that the actual number of burglaries could be greater than 150, though as of Dec. 2 only 96 burglaries were known to have been committed.

Investigators believe that those responsible for the burglaries are a hybrid group called "All Bout Money," a group consisting of members from two notorious gangs out of Atlanta.

Along with stealing safes and cash, the burglars take cigarettes and Red Bull, which investigators think the group may be reselling on the streets of Atlanta.

The modus operandi of this group could mean a return visit to Union County sometime in the future, though they have been changing up their movements lately thanks to the continued efforts of law enforcement.

"Since we've started making arrests up here and have basically put the heat on

them, they've started moving south and east of Atlanta," said Lt. Osborn. "But don't let your guard down, for sure, because that doesn't mean they won't come back. We're not letting our guard down."

The Union County Sheriff's Office stresses the importance of area businesses keeping no cash in their stores overnight, and suggests that perhaps secondary surveillance equipment be utilized by business owners.

Of course, it's just a matter of time before these burglaries come to an end, when all individuals involved have been arrested and brought to justice.

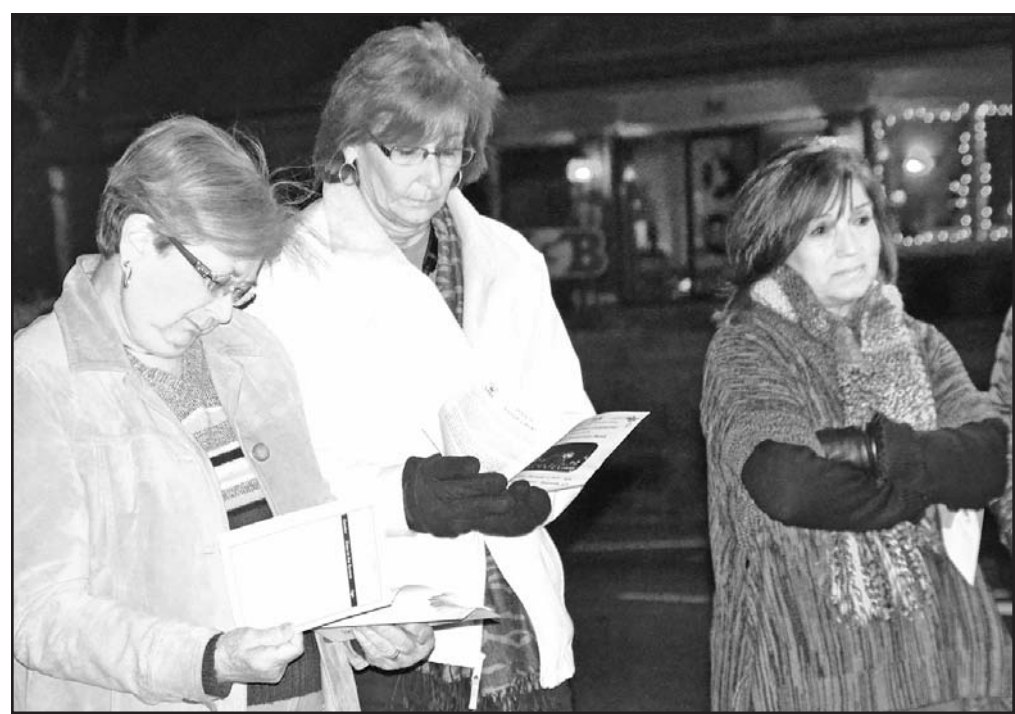
"It's in the works," said Lt. Osborn. "The case is being built. This is not an overnight thing. It takes a while to do an investigation of this size, with so many counties involved, so many people involved. And with the task force, that's one reason it was formed, was to get everybody to come together on one playing field, so to speak, and get everything together."

Thanks to their involvement in the larger investigation, Lt. Osborn and Sgt. Dyer have been able to impart what they know to those who need it most - UCSO deputies.

"We had a training course for all of our deputies on this," said Lt. Osborn. "We gave them everything that we've learned through the task force - suspects, vehicles, the whole nine yards. We laid it all out there to them, what to look for, basically for officer safety."

As always, the Union County Sheriff's Office continues to work hard to keep the residents of Union County, and now other areas of Northeast Georgia, safe.

CASA...continued from Page 1A



Those present for Friday's CASA luminaries learned about the dozens of children still in foster care in Union County.

nonprofit organization that spans across the Enotah Judicial Circuit - Union, Towns, White and Lumpkin counties - and helps more than 200 abused and neglected children in the foster system each year. Oftentimes these children are separated from their siblings and experience a great deal of confusion as they are processed through the system of social workers, foster homes and courts.

The purpose of a CASA volunteer is not only to give these abused and neglected children a voice within the legal system, but also a point of stability and certainty on a regular basis during a time when nothing is certain.

"This is our second year hosting the luminary event," said Dr. Gary Greene, Enotah CASA Volunteer Supervisor for Union and Towns County. "In Union County alone, right now, we have around 111 kids that we are serving. This is extremely important for all of those children that we're taking care of."

"In the last year, CASA volunteers devoted over 4,800 hours and drove more than 55,000 miles advocating for the best interest for each of these children. In Union County last year, we only had six dedicated volunteers doing all of that work, so we need more people who are interested in becoming a part of this."

The luminaries around the square were bought in honor of, memory of or just in thanks of individuals important to those donating, and the proceeds from the luminaries will be put toward assisting the CASA volunteers in helping children in need.

During the ceremony, Father Richard Wise, of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Blairsville, led the invocation, and both Patrick Malone and Enotah CASA Board Director and Budget Blinds owner Rick Seifken read from a list of those



Gary Greene, Enotah CASA Volunteer Supervisor for Union and Towns counties

whose names were added to luminaries in honor or memory of them.

Before the event came to a close, Malone and Seifken made all in attendance aware of the ages and number of days that 71 children in Union County have spent in the judicial system, moving from foster family to foster family, awaiting to find a permanent place to call home.

Of the 71 children, one 5-year-old girl has spent 1,342 days in the foster care system, which equates to more than half of her young life.

"I'm struck by the sheer number of abused and neglected children here in Union County," said Malone. "I'm saddened to know that there has been an increase of our community's children suffering neglect and abuse since last year."

"My wife is a CASA, so I know first hand the dedication and commitment a CASA brings to a child, and the importance for a child to have a CASA to advocate on their behalf."

At the end of the ceremony, Greene offered to speak with anyone in the crowd

about how they could get involved with Enotah CASA to help work toward the best interests of children placed in the foster care system in the area. For those wishing to either donate or become a CASA volunteer, visit www.enotahcasa.org.

The presenting sponsor for the evening was United Community Bank.

Other sponsors included: Budget Blinds; Blairsville Bikes and Hikes; Cabin Coffee; Chick-fil-A; Cook's Country Kitchen; Copperhead Lodge; The Cove at Lake Nottely; Crushed and Corked; Essence of Rose; Mike's Seafood; North Georgia Family Medicine; Sunflower Antique & Interiors;

Tri-State Business Women's Association; Total Recovery Paint & Body Shop; Union County; Union General Hospital; University of North Georgia; Arne's Auto Service; and United Community Bank Advisory Services.

Because of the burn ban that was still in place last week, Enotah CASA used LED lights instead of real candles inside each luminary bag.

Annual parade brings holiday cheer to Blairsville

By Lily Avery
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Blairsville kicked off the Christmas season last weekend with the Annual Christmas Parade, which filled the square with dozens of Union County residents who couldn't wait to take part in the yearly extravaganza.

Two of the many onlookers, Dan and Lynn Waits, come to see the parade every year. They said this time of year reminds them why they love living in Union County.

"The way it feels this time of year and how everyone gets together, we love that," said Mr. Waits. "People don't do that throughout the rest of the year."

"It's nice to be able to be here with everybody in town, it's a good thing. We get to see everybody that we haven't seen in a while, and it's nice because it's just us, the people who live here. Winter is our favorite time."

"We're thankful for the tourists who come and spend their money and support the area, but we're also thankful that it's just us this time of year, for the people who've made this place their home."

The parade itself began just shy of 4 p.m., with the Blairsville Police Department leading the way as the floats, cars, marchers and more made their way around the Blairsville Square.

Members of the Union County High School Marching Band serenaded the crowd with tunes of holiday cheer, while Santa, Mrs. Claus and Union County's very own "elf" - Darren Harper of the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority - waved and tossed candy to excited children.

Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris each rode shotgun during the parade, waving to constituents and directly contributing to the handfuls of candy flying through the air throughout the procession.

The Woody Gap School's Band of Steel added a tropical twist to the parade, performing Reggae holiday classics for patrons to enjoy, and the Blairsville School of Dance dazzled onlookers by busting a move and striking a pose.

Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Cruisers, churches and all those excited to participate in celebrating the season joined in on the parade, waving to friends, family and neighbors, and



Santa and Friends waved and tossed candy to the youngsters of Union County on Saturday, Dec. 3.



Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley



Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris

enjoying the simple pleasure of a close-knit community coming together for the holiday season.

No parade would be complete without the Union

County Fire Department bringing up the rear with bright red fire engines, smiles and waves to wrap up the Annual Christmas Parade.