

Merry Christmas



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Vogel Christmas highlights reason for season

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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For three hours on Saturday, Dec. 14, the Christmas spirit moved through the Conley Pavilion in Meeks Park, with the birth of Jesus – the reason for the season – taking center stage as always during the 22nd Annual Vogel State Park Christmas Program & Tree Lighting.

With the blessing of the Union County Recreation Department, this year's community program moved to Meeks Park due to ongoing construction of the new Visitors Center at Vogel, which is expected to be completed sometime in Spring 2025.

The logistics of moving the event to Meeks Park presented unique challenges, but volunteers of the nonprofit

Friends of Vogel State Park were determined to make the beloved local tradition happen in 2024, "because people look forward to this," said Friends President Stephanie Gray.

Vogel volunteers packed a loaner box truck full of decorations stored at the park – lights, wreaths, garlands, a Christmas tree, etc. – plus chairs, canopy tents, patio heaters and more.

Upwards of 30 volunteers traveled to Meeks that morning to prepare a beautiful, comfortable setting for the big event that had to be taken down and packed up as soon as the program concluded.

And a joyous program it was amid dry weather and cool temperatures that started out in the 50s before dropping into the 40s by the time people began making their way home, happy

and full of Christmas cheer for another year running.

Hours of music filled the air with every Christmas carol one could think of, thanks to another group of dedicated volunteers who have presented the program for years: Mike and Cheri Young of Dahlonega; country music artist Justin Terry of Knoxville, Tennessee; and Jim and Lydia Cox of Cumming.

New in 2024 were performances by one of Mike Young's sisters, Maribeth Griffin of Dawsonville, who sang a particularly moving rendition of "O Holy Night" toward the end of the evening.

Program mainstay Janet Hill continued her involvement in the Christmas show, coordinating volunteers from eight area churches to

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Santa Claus read from the Gospel of Luke to tell the story of Jesus' birth to guests gathered for the 2024 Vogel Christmas. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Elected Officials swear oaths of office on Dec. 19



(L-R) Coroner Jeff Fortenberry, Surveyor Jason Henson, Commissioner Harold Collins, Sheriff Shawn Dyer, Superior Court Clerk Judy Odom, School Board Member Julia Barnett, School Board Member Janna Akins, Tax Commissioner Lee Knight and Judge Brackett.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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For the last time in his career, retiring Union County

Probate Judge Dwain Brackett had the privilege of swearing in newly elected and re-elected county officials, in Courtroom B of the Union County

Courthouse on Thursday, Dec. 19.

The standing-room-only event was filled with promise

See *Elected Officials*, Page 2A

Classic Christmas honors origins of beloved holiday

By Shelly Knight
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For the last three years, retired House of Prayer Pastor Jerry Helton and his wife Barbara have worked with the Union County Recreation Department, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Future Farmers of America to put on the "Classic Christmas" and a live Nativity.

This year's event fell on Saturday, Dec. 14, at the Farmers Market, which teemed with residents coming out to celebrate Christmas the old-fashioned way by focusing on the "reason for the season," that is, Jesus Christ.

Between the beautiful lighting display and the cooperative weather, children

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Students from the Union County Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Future Farmers of America put on the Live Nativity at this year's Classic Christmas. Photo by Shelly Knight

American Legion hosts Wreaths Across America



Union County High School FFA members made the ceremonial service wreaths used in the Wreaths Across America program on Dec. 14.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The mission of Wreaths Across America is simple yet

sacred: "Remember the fallen. Honor those who serve. Teach the next generation the value of freedom."

And that's exactly

what American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121 of Blairsville accomplished on National Wreaths Across America Day

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'Shop With a Cop' puts presents under kids' trees

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

One hundred fifty-two merry and bright kids from 80 families got to go Christmas shopping for themselves and loved ones at Walmart on Saturday, Dec. 14, courtesy of Shop With a Cop for Christmas by the Blairsville Police Department.

With a history spanning 25 years, over 3,000 children have been taken shopping since Blairsville PD started the program, which serves as both a public outreach campaign – particularly to younger community members – and a charitable giving opportunity for well-deserving families.

Every year, volunteers come from all over the area to guide the children's shopping experiences, including representatives from other law



Police Chief Bear Baxter and Sheriff-elect Shawn Dyer with their better halves – Lisa and Shana, respectively – at the 2024 Shop With a Cop this month. Photo/Facebook

enforcement agencies, like the Union County Sheriff's Office. particularly fruitful this year, with high participation rates. Volunteerism was

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Area celebrations to ring in 2025 with fireworks, dining

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For residents looking to celebrate New Year's Eve with area events, there are a few local options to ring in 2025 between Union and Towns Counties.

Perhaps the most popular choice is the annual New Year's Eve Fireworks at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds in Hiawassee – the perfect family event with free admission.

Parking will open at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 31, with the celebratory fireworks set to spark off around 8 p.m. The parking lot will serve as the event's backdrop, where the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club, for example, will be present for a car show.

While 2024's features won't include many merchants, there will be a few vendors set up closer to the front of the fairgrounds and the parking

lot. In particular, that includes mostly food shops with options like barbecue, hot dogs and hot chocolate.

The fireworks themselves will start after dark, giving visitors plenty of time to get ready for the dazzling show.

In the run-up to the New Year celebration, Fairgrounds Manager Hilda Thomason was happy to report that the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights would be open for one extra day, on Christmas Eve.

The Ridges Resort will also be celebrating the New Year with fireworks that will be free to spectate the evening of Dec. 31. The resort is advertising "fun, food and fireworks" as part of the big shebang, which will encompass several areas of the property on Lake Chatuge.

For one, a cash bar will be available in the lobby, and hungry guests can enjoy dinner seating at The Oaks Lakeside Kitchen from 4:30-8:30 p.m. Choose from two-, three- or four-course menus, and enjoy live music courtesy of Mark Mentzer.

As for the free fireworks, those will light up the night sky starting at 7 p.m. on the Lakeside Lawn.

The party will continue at the Marina Station on Lake Chatuge starting at 9 p.m.. Attendance costs \$50 at the door and includes a performance from Bone Daddy's Band, unlimited Topgolf, appetizers and a champagne toast at midnight.

Brasstown Valley Resort



in Young Harris is holding its annual New Year's Eve Gala, this year with a disco theme. Music and dancing always feature heavily throughout the evening and can be enjoyed by couples for a fee of \$350, including tax and tips.

Formal attire is required, and guests must be 21 years or older to attend. Open bar starts at 7:30 p.m., with the gourmet dinner buffet running from 7:30-9:30 p.m. And be sure to stick around for the traditional Balloon Drop at midnight.

The Living Water Winery & Vineyard in Blairsville is hosting a New Year's Eve Black and White Casino Night starting at 7 p.m. Guests are invited to partake in charcuterie boards and desserts as well as live music. Of course, visitors can also enjoy the casino games and raffle prizes before a fireworks show and a midnight toast.

Anyone under 21 must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian. Tickets can be purchased online by heading to www.visitblairsvilllega.com and checking out the events calendar, or going to www.eventbrite.com and searching for "Living Waters Winery NYE Black & White Casino Night." But act fast, because tickets were nearly sold out at press time.

All Saints Lutheran Church at 83 Earl Shelton Road will be holding a holy Communion on New Year's Eve to welcome 2025 spiritually.

And last but not least, while it's not strictly to welcome the onset of 2025, the annual Lighting of the Menorah is set to happen on Monday, Dec. 30, at 4:30 p.m. on the Hiawassee Square, hoping to bridge communities and share culture.

Elected Officials...from Page 1A

and possibility for the county's future as, one by one, the mix of elected officials – some new, most returning – took their oaths of office supported by family and friends.

Husbands, wives, children and even colleagues held the Bible for their respective loved ones as they raised their right hands and pledged their sacred duties to faithfully carry out the responsibilities of their offices while upholding the U.S. and Georgia Constitutions.

New Probate Judge Kristin Stanley went first, with Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge Joy Parks administering her oaths.

Judge Brackett took things from there, swearing in returning Superior Court Clerk Judy Odom; new Sheriff Shawn Dyer; new Sole Commissioner Harold Collins; returning Tax Commissioner Lee Knight; returning Coroner Jeff Fortenberry; returning County Surveyor Jason Henson; returning School



Superior Court Chief Judge Joy Parks swearing in new Probate Judge Kristin Stanley, who enjoyed support from her family during the process. More than 100 people attended the swearing in of nine officials Dec. 19. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Board Member Janna Akins; and returning School Board Member Julia Barnett.

Applause greeted each individual upon his or her successful completion of the official act appointing him or her as a leader in the county, and afterward, families snapped pictures with their elected

officials to celebrate the joyous occasion – just in time for the Christmas holiday.

Magistrate Judge Cary Cox, who could not attend, swore in separately after press time.

Each duly elected official will serve the next four years starting Jan. 1, 2025.

Shop With a Cop...from Page 1A



It takes a village to raise a child, as they say, and the Union County village is full of caring volunteers who make Shop With a Cop happen for children each year, like folks working with Family Connection and area law enforcement and groups. Photo/Facebook

among local civic organizations, churches and individuals.

After hosting their own "Shop With a Cruiser" Christmas program this month, Blairsville Cruisers Car Club members returned to help even more children, and everyone from mentors to attorneys came out to volunteer as well, with the checkout line reaching across the store.

Farmers Market Manager Dustin "The Rog" Rogers chaperoned a girl who got a couple sets of LEGOs and a therapeutic heating pad for her mother to sleep on, among other goodies.

"(Shop With a Cop) makes me feel awesome," the girl said. "It's not the money that counts, it's the thought for what you get that counts, like if you get stuff for your family."

Popular items among the children included candy and stuffed animals, but that was only for gifts the little ones chose for themselves. Almost all of them selected gifts for family and friends, too.

"I've got a wonderful

young lady this year ... She wants to help her friends out more than herself," said retired officer Mike Hall about his ward for the morning. "I told her (to) get things that you normally wouldn't buy."

As it turned out, the girl knew how to handle herself. It took a bit of coaxing, but she eventually made her way to the toy aisle. While she had a cart full of gifts for friends, she was quick to grab some makeup and a stuffed Keroppi, as she loves "Hello Kitty" and plushies.

Parents waited after the register to pick up kids and partake in holiday-themed snacks like decorated sugar cookies, and everyone had a grand time that Saturday.

"It was a big success as usual," said Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter, noting that "this is what we live for."

The money used to pay for the shopping spree comes from the annual Rubber Duck Derby fundraiser alongside year-round donations from generous souls.

"We manage it," Baxter said of the program while emphasizing others for playing the most important role of all. "This community should take credit for it, and they should be very proud that they're making a difference (for) our local kids. Good people being good people is what makes this thing happen."



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Wreaths Across America...from Page 1A

the morning of Saturday, Dec. 14, starting at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

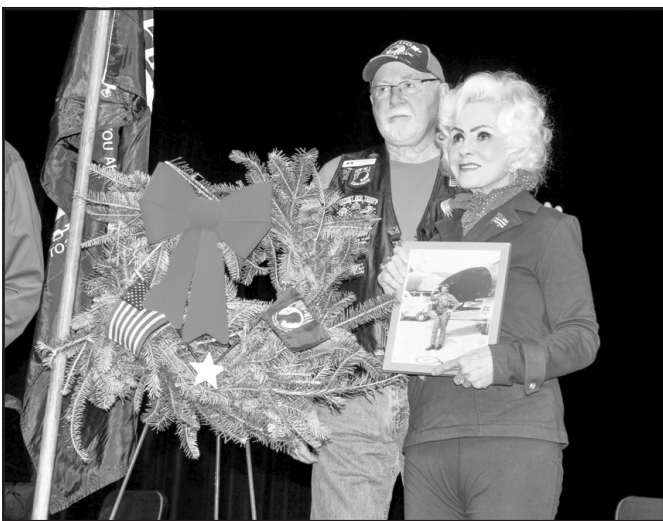
Wreaths Across America has become a national initiative undertaken largely by caring patriots at the local level – patriots like the members of American Legion Post 121.

What started over 30 years ago as a resolve to remember the less-visited graves of Arlington National Cemetery has grown into a national movement of placing balsam wreaths at the final resting places of veterans across the country.

The movement has made its way to Union County, which practices its own version of the ceremony every year, with Post 121 leading the way for others to show respect for the fallen.

One can look at the local Wreaths Across America tradition as an event in two parts. First comes the gathering at the Fine Arts Center, which fulfills the educational aspect of the mission as much as remembrance, allowing attendees to hear a bit of history surrounding the occasion.

The colors are posted for each branch of the United States Armed Forces along with one signifying prisoners of war and those killed in action. Special memorial wreaths put together by students in the local Future Farmers of America program are placed at each flag.



Donna Wilson's former husband, Air Force Maj. Gordon Scott who was killed serving in Vietnam, received recognition in the Wreaths Across America ceremony at the Fine Arts Center this month.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Carrying those wreaths are veterans paired up with local youths, be they from the Cub Scouts, Civil Air Patrol, Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps, or FFA, who work together to honor and remember a servicemember.

Of particular note was Donna Wilson, a new participant in the ceremony. Wilson joined Veteran Dave Patterson of Sons of the American Legion, who carried the wreath, and the two walked alongside their young escort, Junior ROTC Staff Sgt. Rebecca Pickelsimer.

Wilson's husband, Air Force Maj. Gordon Scott,

was shot down over Vietnam in November 1966. Wilson carried a framed photo of Scott, who was initially listed as missing in action before his status was updated to killed in action.

To close out the ceremony on campus, a member of the Union County High School Band performed Taps. Afterward, the second part of the day's event took place, in which dozens of guests gathered at Union Memory Gardens to lay the wreaths.

Many of the wreaths were placed that morning, but some churches choose to

place wreaths at their own graveyards on separate days or times not long after the ceremony. Regardless, there is a specific manner to go about placing a wreath at a veteran's grave.

All the wreaths come with a red bow, which must be upright at the 12 o'clock position when the wreath itself is placed at the bottom of the headstone. The attendee then steps back and can either place a hand over their heart or salute.

The veteran's name is then read aloud, along with their title and any wars in which they served, if known. In closing, they are thanked for their service. Typically, spouses of veterans also receive wreaths and are acknowledged for their supportive roles.

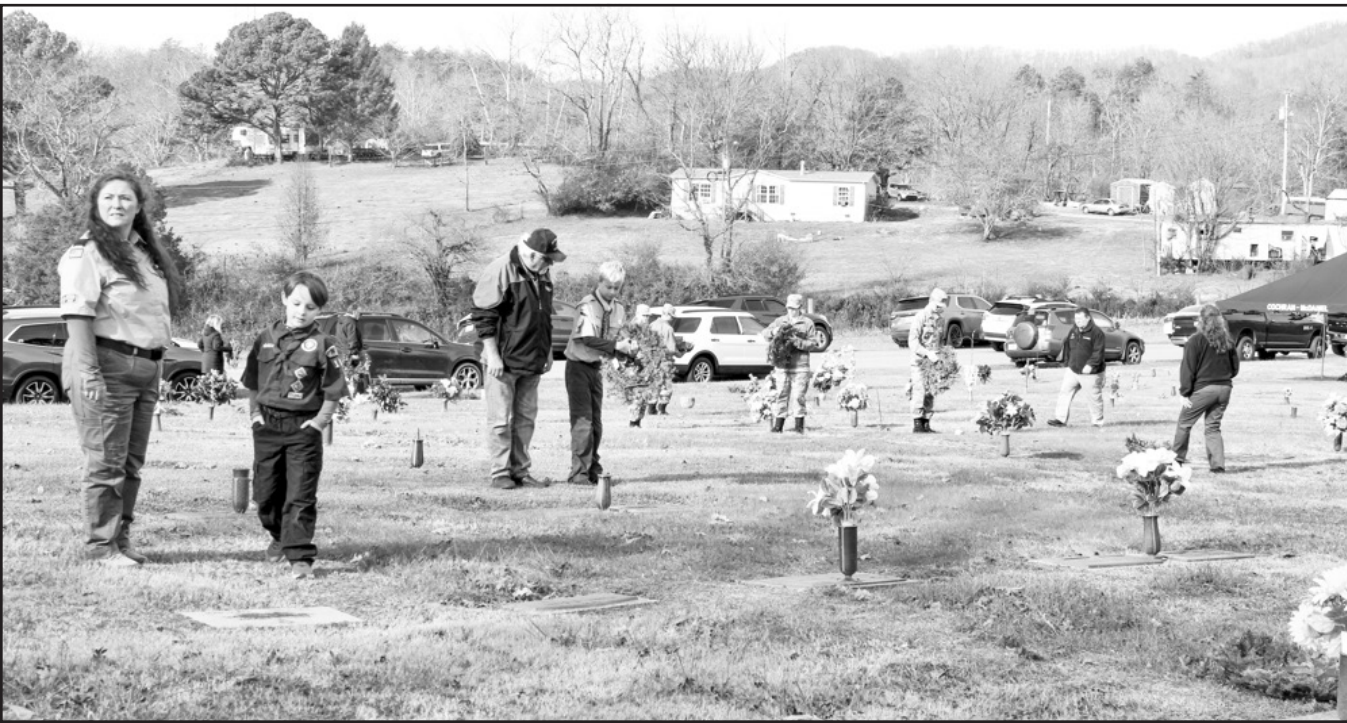
American Legion Post 121 also placed wreaths at Holly Hills Cemetery, and this year's ceremony enjoyed participation by several local churches: Antioch Baptist Church, Coosa Methodist Church and St. Francis of Assisi Church.

Last year, more than 3 million wreaths were laid over veterans' graves throughout the nation, with 259,000 at Arlington and 96,736 in Georgia. This year, 717 were placed in Union County, and any excess were donated to the Georgia National Cemetery in Canton.

"They have over 30,000 veterans' graves in that cemetery, and they all have

these wreaths in Union County and across the country."

For more information and to donate to the cause, visit <https://wreathscrossamerica.org/>.



Union Memory Gardens Cemetery welcomed wreath-laying volunteers for 2024 National Wreaths Across America Day.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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Vogel Christmas...from Page 1A



Music organizer Mike Young held the microphone for children to sing Christmas carols to highly entertained guests of the Vogel Tree Lighting Dec. 14.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

most the various tents that included things such as hot chocolate and cookies by Pine Top Baptist, Christ-centric children's activities and more for guests to enjoy.

Groups like the Christian Motorcyclists Association and Gideons International manned

tents as well, and Bibles were made available to all who wanted them. Larry Swanson of Blairsville Shoe Repair was also present, showcasing his welcome signs that are customizable for all seasons.

Several hundred people attended this year, getting the

most out of the entertainment, snacks and other goodies being handed out in the free event. Program participants mixed humor in with the more sincere messaging about Christmas, making for both a lighthearted and solemn occasion.

Children remained a

focus throughout the night, visiting with Santa, decorating ornaments, munching on cookies, and even taking the stage to perform popular Christmas carols to the delight of onlookers, with audience members joining in the singing at every opportunity.

New Union Baptist Church Pastor Justin Jarrett gathered children around him as he read Clement Clarke Moore's classic poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," aka "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Jarrett had extra fun with the kids by adlibbing silly lines into the text.

As is customary, gifts were presented to a few audience members: one for the youngest guest, a 2-year-old little girl; another for the "wisest" attendee, who turned 86 this year; and one more for the person who traveled the farthest to be there, which turned out to be a whopping 600 miles.

Prayer was a common occurrence, being offered by multiple local pastors and even Santa Claus himself – not something usually seen in Christmas celebrations – with everyone involved wanting people to know about the greatest gift of all: salvation through Jesus Christ.

Speaking of Santa, with help once more from James Harper, he read from Luke 2 in the New Testament, sharing the miraculous story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and recounting the humble beginnings of Christianity to double down on the "true reason for the season."

The event drew near its end with a darkening of



The Conley Pavilion inside Meeks Park was beautifully decorated by the Friends of Vogel State Park for the relocated Christmas Program & Tree Lighting this month.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

the pavilion and a successful countdown to lighting the one-night-only Christmas tree next to the pavilion's warm fireplace.

First Baptist Pastor Ricky Powell added to the prayers of other pastors that evening, like Nick Sommer of Fellowship of the Hills, and Justin Terry, who has a new album out called "Long Way To Go," gave his final performance of the night with Alabama's "Christmas in Dixie."

Of course, it wouldn't be a Vogel Christmas without the traditional singing of "Silent Night" by guests and organizers, which featured the usual "candlelight" participation by attendees using little red flashlights handed out at the welcome tent.

Typically, the lighting takes place at the big tree on the ballfield in Vogel State Park, but it has actually been several years since that

location has been suitable due to bad weather. So, people have had to get used to the backup area at the Lake Trahlyta pavilion, and Meeks Park in 2024.

Organizers are praying for good weather when the program returns to Vogel State Park on Saturday, Dec. 13, 2025. As a reminder for next year, guests are always encouraged to bring an unwrapped gift for a 12-and-under child to benefit the UCSO Give-A-Gift Christmas Toy Drive.

People can help contribute toward the annual Christmas program by supporting yearly initiatives at Vogel State Park, like the upcoming May 10 Mountain Mayhem Outhouse Derby, June 7 National Trail Day, Sept. 13 Mountain Music Day Festival and Oct. 25 Fall Festival.

For more information, visit <https://gastateparks.org/Vogel>.



Country music singer Justin Terry performed "Tell Me the Story of Jesus" at the Vogel Christmas Program, with local youngsters representing Mary and Joseph with Baby Jesus.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Classic Christmas...from Page 1A

of all ages got to enjoy the Baby Jesus and Santa Claus on the same night.

Union County Middle School Chorus kids entertained guests with all the traditional Christmas Carols, and FFA students provided petting pens with a cow and a donkey so children could get up close and personal with animals featured in both the Bible and local agricultural heritage.

High School students made up the live Nativity scene, complete with the shepherds and the three wise men.

“Remember the first Christmas gift ever given was Jesus Christ,” Mr. Helton said.

The Recreation Department had Santa and Mrs. Claus make a much-loved appearance as volunteers handed out hot apple cider and cups of cocoa to round out the tradition.

“It’s really a good community thing with all the schools and all the volunteers,” Mr. Helton said. “I love the way the town supports this. I love the way everyone comes out to enjoy it. I can still share the Gospel this way.

“Our purpose is to keep Christmas about Christ. Every child that comes through the display gets a gift bag with fruit and candies and the Nativity Story. It also contains a special message from God, letting them know that they are loved.



Santa and Mrs. Claus got help from Elf Brad McAfee to the delight of children at the 2024 Classic Christmas event.

Photo by Shelly Knight

“Local churches, sponsors and individuals support the effort financially as we share the Christmas story. Last year we handed out over 300 gift bags.”

Proud parent Jason Cook said he was in attendance to support his daughter singing in the chorus and to give his son hot cider, popcorn “and some Christmas spirit.”

Volunteer Milissa Wright explained that she and other volunteers with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes were there “to represent Christ in

Christmas.”

“And we have the athletes for the Nativity scene here,” she said. “We get to encourage the athletes, uplift them and encourage them in Christ.”

For his part, Santa – that is, Farmers Market Manager Dustin “The Rog” Rogers – said he appreciated that the Rec Department “lets us put this on each year.”

Sitting in his sleigh made by the department, Santa affirmed that the event is always “all about the kids.”



The Union County Middle School Chorus regaled Christmas revelers with carols that made everyone feel merry and bright at the Farmers Market on Saturday, Dec. 14.

Photo by Shelly Knight