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Fixings for the evening included plenty of mouth-watering delights: pulled pork, beef brisket, chicken, macaroni and cheese, baked beans, coleslaw, fresh-baked rolls, banana pudding, peanut butter pie, cobbler, chess pie bars, plenty of whipped cream on hand and much more, all that was specially prepared for the Christmas party.

Sheriff Mason offered words of thanks to his employees, congratulating them for another successful year. He also formally welcomed all new employees to the sheriff's office, and shared light-hearted stories that had everyone laughing.

Despite the hardships the county may have faced throughout the course of the year, along with any that may appear in the coming year, Sheriff Mason assured all in attendance that sticking together as a family to keep the county and each other from harm's way was the key to prosperity.

"I am humbly grateful for all of our employees and the families that put up with the line of work that they're in," said Sheriff Mason. "I cannot thank you enough. I am humbly grateful for the job that you do."

"I tell people our mission is to serve the Lord, our families and our fellow man, and I feel like we do that to the best that we can. I appreciate everything that everyone does."

"I tell people we have the finest bunch of individuals working here that I've ever seen or heard tell of in my life, and I mean that. I'll argue with anyone that says anything different."

At the start of the evening, Sheriff Mason introduced a new addition to the UCSO family, recently-appointed group chaplain Fred Freeman, who is now the official go-to guy for any troubles or difficulties that the officers and jail staff might face.



The meal was provided by Jim's Smokin' Que, a favorite local barbecue restaurant of many.

"I'm glad to be onboard," said Freeman. "I appreciate the chance to serve in this capacity."

"I am available whenever you need me, and some of you know that and have already called on me. When I say I'm available any time of the day, I truly mean that. I'm retired, so if I lose a little sleep then it's not going to be a big deal."

"If you need me, that's exactly what I'm here for. This is a special time of year that we celebrate the birth of our Lord and savior. It's also a good time, for those of us that have the privilege, to know that there are so many blessings that come with being with God's people."

"I feel that way when I'm with y'all. I appreciate that. I have seen incredible displays of compassion while watching some of you do your job, and I'm impressed with what I see." Freeman and his wife moved to the area from Alabama a little over five years ago, and since then they have found their calling in offering spiritual support to anyone in the community who needs it.

A retired law enforcement officer himself, Freeman found that giving back to public safety personnel through prayer and counsel

only made sense. Sheriff Mason encouraged everyone to make use of Freeman's services, and he expressed his immense gratitude for the chaplain and the set of beliefs and morals he stands behind.

"Fred has really blessed me, though he hasn't been here that long," said Sheriff Mason. "He's already paid great dividends. He's a good, God-fearing man. He's available kind of like I am, 24/7. If you have a problem in your family or something bad goes wrong and you need to talk to someone, call on Fred."

"Sometimes if you only have a minute or something, give him a call, and he'll ride with you if you need him to. I'm very thankful to have him here. So, please utilize his service if you need it."

Also in the spirit of giving, Sheriff Mason gifted all the staff's children aged 14 years and younger with a present, which he enthusiastically handed out to each individual child.

At the end of the evening, all in attendance enjoyed a time of fellowship, good food and laughter to last well into the new year.

Sons of Confederate Veterans swear-in officers



(L-R): Pete White - Treasurer, Harold Levi - Adjutant, Mike Pettus - Lt. Commander, David Junghans - Commander, Ed Massengale - Chaplain, Karl Hahn - Commander 2nd Brigade

At their December 8th meeting, the David W. Payne Camp #1633, Sons of Confederate Veterans, camp officers for 2017 were sworn in by Georgia Division 2nd Brigade Commander Karl Hahn. The David W. Payne camp meets in Blairsville the second Thursday of each month at 7 PM in the community room of the United Community Bank. Meetings typically include guest speakers and discussions pertaining to the 1861-1865 War for Southern Independence. The general public is always invited.

Union General Hospital hosts Union County Nursing Home Christmas Drive



(L-R): Doug Davenport, UCNH Administrator; Pam Ouzts, UCNH Activity Director; Carla Persaud, UGH Business Office Manager; Sherry Freeman, UGH Business Office; Christi Newsome, UGH Revenue Cycle

Thank you, thank you, thank you - these words will never express our gratitude to the staff and Auxiliary of Union General Hospital, along with numerous local merchants and community members, for the overwhelming response to our Union County Nursing Home Christmas Drive.

Your generosity provided a gift for all 150 residents; there were more than 200

blankets donated, 60 men's electric razors, 63 pairs of ladies gloves, 50 caps for men, toboggans and hats for the ladies, 57 bags of sugar free candy, men's and ladies slippers, diabetic socks, chap stick, sunglasses, gloves, stuffed animals, baby dolls, DVD/VCR player, record player, karaoke machine with CDs, and the list goes on and on.

Without your help, this would not have been possible.

Aging is the one thing we all have in common, as well as the desire to not be forgotten. Thank you for remembering.

This fundraiser was planned by Union General Hospital's Christmas Parade Committee and organized by Union General Hospital's Business Office staff.

We would like to thank the following local businesses for their support: 1st Franklin Financial, Alexander's Store, Auto Zone, Builder's First Source, Car Quest, Charles Kelley Construction, Enotah Group, Foodland, G&G Bakery & Cafe, Ingles, Jerry Henderson Insurance, Made with Love Marketplace, Merchant Adjustment Services, Nani's Restaurant, Napa, Nelson's Ace Hardware, O'Reilly's, Persaud Jewelers, ProFlame, Robbie Colwell Weaver - Attorney at Law, Ronnie Lemon Associates, Sears, Select Tire, Sicily's Pizza, Tanners Towing, The Hair Shoppe, and United Community Bank.

Woody Gap School's Secret Santa

Woody Gap School's faculty and staff would like to thank their "Secret Santa" for all the toys, clothes, coats, books, and numerous other items that were donated to the students for Christmas. In addition to the Christmas items, these families also received food for the holidays.

Over 41 individuals (who wish to remain anonymous) contributed to this phenomenal event and occasion. Woody Gap School appreciates everyone who took his/her time, energy, and monetary contributions to make Christmas special for our students. Merry Christmas!

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Nearly 200 Vietnam Veterans of Union and Towns counties were honored by the Georgia Department of Veterans Service in February. Here, local leaders line up to greet area veterans.



Bob Head, surrounded by friends and family, officially opened Bob Head Street with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in March.



Representatives from Blairsville and Union County accepted the "Four for the Future Award" in April at the University of Georgia in Athens

local match, the county received reimbursement for the winter storm damages totaling \$139,197.94.

2016 has also been a year of big administrative changes, as both the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce and Union County Schools started the year in search of new leadership.

Cindy Williams, who had overseen the chamber for nearly a decade, said her final farewell to Union County in January. Williams departed for the chamber president position in the much larger county of Bartow, a decision she said was based partly in the acceptance of new challenges.

Patrick Malone served as interim president of the chamber here until it was announced in March, after a months-long search, that Blairsville's own Regina Allison would be taking the reins as the new chamber president and CEO.

Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Gary Steppe, who retired at the end of the 2015-2016 school year, announced in late 2015 that he would be stepping down.

An extensive superintendent search ensued, and earlier this year in February, the Union County Board of Education held a special called meeting to hire Dr. Fred Rayfield to assume the superintendent position following Steppe's retirement.

Rayfield, with his extensive background in agricultural education, was the single finalist out of 27 applicants, and he came up from the Decatur County School System, where he had been superintendent since 2010.

Bad weather continued around the start of 2016, as schools had to close due to snowfall at the end of January, but there was terrific news that arrived alongside the wintry weather - Charles Duncan, the editor of the *North Georgia News*, survived his Jan. 27 open-heart surgery.

In February, District 8 State Rep. Stephen Allison of Blairsville announced that he would not run for re-election after serving eight years as a legislator, ensuring that 2017 would bring a new face to the office.

Also in February, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors held its first of a series of town hall meetings. That meeting, aimed at transparency in front of the membership, took place in the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

The EMC board held another public meeting in Hiwassee in June, during which the board announced their intent to hire a new general manager either later that month or in July. They made their announcement in July that Jeremy Nelms was



When it came to weather, 2016 was all over the place. It started off with flooding and ended in drought.

to be their man in the top spot of the EMC.

Another of the major news stories to come out of the first half of 2016 was the February arrests of Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder and Blairsville-based Dr. James Heaton.

Gowder, Heaton, and four of Gowder's family members were arrested on charges stemming from a multi-jurisdictional, multi-state investigation into illegal prescription drug practices, according to the Union County Sheriff's Office at that time.

It should be noted that none of the above have been indicted in Union County in connection with their alleged crimes, as parts of their cases are still under review, according to a recent statement from Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley.

However, Gowder and Heaton were indicted on trafficking charges at the end of February, by a grand jury out of Cherokee County, North Carolina, and their cases there have experienced a series of continuances.

Union General Hospital parted ways with Mike Gowder, Dr. Heaton and Dr. David Gowder.

Lewis Kelley was hired in March to replace Mike Gowder as the CEO of Union General Hospital.

2016 has been a big year for local veterans, as in February, the state honored nearly 200 Vietnam Veterans of Union and Towns counties with Certificates of Honor, and in March, the Navy Seabee Veterans of America Island X-3 hosted its first ever Seabee Ball at the Union County Community Center, an occasion marking the 74th anniversary of the Navy Seabees.

The beginning of March marked the qualifying period for candidates hoping to be on the ballot in the November General Election, though they would first have to face the May 24 Primary Election.

In April, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and others traveled to Athens to receive honors on behalf of the county as one of the University of Georgia and *Georgia Trend* magazine's "Four for the Future" award recipients for being a forward-thinking community.

Union General Hospital and the county teamed up in April to provide funding for each county resident or family to join Omni Advantage for memberships guaranteeing free Air Methods helicopter life flights in the county and around the country.

Since May, the hospital has had a medical helicopter stationed at its facility in Blairsville.

May was another notable month for veterans, as State Sen. Steve Gooch joined local leaders and veterans for the official dedication of the bridge over Ivy Log Creek on Murphy Highway, which was named the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Bridge.

The contested races in the May 24 Primary Election resulted in wins for incumbents Union County Sheriff Mack Mason, Board of Education Member Cindy Odom (formerly Byers), Sen. Gooch, Coroner Benny Erwin, U.S. Rep. Doug Collins, U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson, along with newcomers Janna Akins for BOE Post and Cary Cox for chief magistrate. Candidate Matt Gurtler for District 8 State Representative ended up in a runoff that he later won in July.

In June, Union County received a land donation from Hidden Harbor developer Scott Rye, upon which the county plans to build Fire Station No. 13 on Murphy Highway in the next few years.

Check back next week for the second part of the 2016 year in review.