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kids do know the true meaning of Christmas – it is better to give than receive.”

Union County Sheriff's Sgt. Adam Deyton said he was once again blessed to be a part of the annual holiday ritual.

“It's very humbling,” Sgt. Deyton said. “It's a humbling experience and I'm glad we get to be a part of it each year. I'm glad that the kids that really need to be a part of this experience are here. I hate to see anyone do without during the holidays. It's a humbling experience to be a part of this with these wonderful kids.”

Wayne Tanner with the Blairsville Cruisers said the growth of Shop With A Cop continues to prove that Blairsville and Union County residents are among the most generous nationwide.

“I'd put this community up against any community in the country,” Tanner said. “When this program first started, they only had about 8-10 kids going shopping. Today, it's 10 times that. Shop With A Cop is one of the greatest programs ever invented.”

“Shop With A Cop is the reason the Blairsville Cruisers stay so strong; it's the reason we exist; Shop With A Cop is the reason we started our Club,” he said. “This program is where we put our money. We invest in the young people of this community. Trust me, it will pay dividends in the future.”

And Shop With A Cop spawned another holiday tradition, Shop With A Cruiser.

Shop With A Cruiser targets children with special needs. The first year, 20 special needs children got the Christmas they had only dreamed about. Last year 30 children experienced the same joy.

“We just find out what kids are in need and we pay the bill,” Tanner said.

Throughout the year, the Blairsville Cruisers hold



Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll and Santa's No. 1 Elf, Cindy Neely. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

events to generate the necessary funds to support the program each December, in addition to Shop With A Cop. They also rely upon sponsors, who play an integral part in making it happen.

“We hold events and auction off cars. Anything we can do to raise money,” Tanner said. “We also have sponsors. Walmart donates every year and O'Reilly Auto Parts donate every year.”

This charitable event has grown each year since 2007, and now the Cruisers hold events the first weekend of every month from April to October to support the programs.

Assistant Blairsville Police Chief Michael Baxter said Shop With A Cop is all about community pitching in and making the event come to life.

“It's a big deal to us, once a year, every year, we get to make a difference,” Baxter said. “It's something that we look forward to. The community has blessed us with this opportunity. We know times are hard, the economy is still down, but the local businesses, churches and residents have backed us up. We

appreciate that, you just don't know how much we appreciate that.”

Union County Sheriff's Chief Deputy John George said the community's response to Shop With A Cop was phenomenal.

“Shop With A Cop is such a successful mission,” Chief Deputy George said. “I wouldn't miss this event for the world. It's an honor to be a part of such a valuable cause.”

Shop With A Cop isn't just about providing Christmas gifts for the children. The food mission of New Hope Church provides the children's families with Christmas food.

“New Hope does this every year,” Chief Carroll said. “They bring the food for the families. I can't say enough about what they mean to Shop With A Cop. They add another dimension to our cause.”

Harmony Grove Baptist Church is another valuable partner, along with the Blairsville Cruisers and Xtreme Christian Outdoors Sports, Carroll said.

“I can't say enough about all the people who play

a part in making this event so successful,” Chief Carroll said. “Cindy Neely makes this program run smooth. She pulls it all together and makes it happen. Like I said, we are truly blessed.”

Chief Carroll said if anyone in the community knows of a child doing without this Christmas season, stop in at City Hall and let Cindy Neely know about it.

“We've still got some money to spend,” Chief Carroll said. “We want to make sure as many kids get a good Christmas as we can.”

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it no matter what the weather is. This has been the prettiest day we've had for it.”

A few years, the event even featured snow, but the skies were clear and the air was just the right amount of chilly, that everyone seemed comfortable.

Winter coats and plenty of gloves were in attendance, and three bonfires kept those gathered around them warm.

Hot cider and hot chocolate also did the trick, as marshmallows melted in cups and people lined up to make their selection.

Lines were formed for cookies of every kind, and Santa appeared to the delight of children gathering to take pictures and make Christmas requests.

“It's just a community thing that we want to do for the community,” said Hill. “We think we're as good as Macy's lighting of the tree.”

Music played a large role in the program, and the talent on display cheered the ear and warmed the heart.

Justin Terry from Knoxville, Alan Kendall, Jim Cox, Lydia Cox, Cheri Young, Mike Young and Eric Purser performed a variety of carols to entertain the audience.

“This is my second one and I love it,” said Kendall, of Hiwassee. “We need more of these kind of events.”

Children played and laughed as parents looked on fondly, and just before 6 p.m., the time that everyone had been awaiting arrived.

There was a reading of



the birth of Jesus, and then the lighting of the 35-foot live

Blue Spruce Christmas tree, large and miraculous in its colorful splendor.

After a singing of *O Holy Night*, children were called forth to sing carols themselves. Some sang loud, others were bashful, and the entire spectacle had plenty of Christmas spirit for all.

Upon entering the field, guests were given little white candles.

It was during the closing of the program that the candles were called to be lit. Those on stage sang *Silent Night* with the crowd, and the candles danced slowly back and forth as people remembered the reason for the season - Jesus Christ.

“This is always the second Saturday in December, so you can go ahead and put that on your calendar for next year,” said Hill in closing following a short prayer. “We hope you'll come. We gave out 500 candles, so we know there's more than 500 people here tonight. And so, we are just thankful for you coming out to celebrate with us.”

Many guests brought new, unwrapped gifts to benefit the Union County Sheriff's Office toy drive.