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Sheriff, former inmate offer conflicting accounts of treatment

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

On Friday, April 24, a man named Ricky Keebler Martin posted to Facebook about life-threatening medical difficulties he said he experienced inside the Towns County Jail.

According to Martin, he's the Towns County Detention Center inmate who required hospitalization for COVID-19 last week.

The day following his Facebook post, Martin reached out to the Herald from the intensive care unit of Union General Hospital to allege mistreatment at the jail, including the regular withholding of medical treatment, saying he wanted to be "the voice for others on this."

On Monday, April 27, Towns County Sheriff Chris Clinton responded to a request for comment, offering a different take on the situation. Clinton provided a

screenshot of a March 31 message sent by Martin using the jail's internal communication system, in which Martin appears to be praising all jail staff, including leadership and medical personnel, "for stepping up and helping me lately."

"Means a lot to have people who not only see my medical for what it is but to show they care for my wellbeing," Martin wrote. "You guys rock."

The picture painted by this message, sent nearly three weeks before he became ill enough from COVID-19 to be hospitalized, contrasts sharply with comments Martin provided to the Herald over the weekend, though he attempted to clarify his March 31 message Monday.

When Martin initially contacted the Herald Saturday, he said he'd "suffered for over two months waiting for a doctor and was never allowed" to see one during his time at the jail.

Martin has stage III

COPD, which he said he told jailers during booking. He has alleged further that he rarely received the medications he needed to breathe once incarcerated, and that, fortunately, a kindly few jailers helped him with jailers, usually outside the chain of command, for which he is thankful.

"This is the first time I've been able to breathe in two and a half months," Martin said Sunday, adding that his breathing started getting worse in the jail after being exposed to black mold there.

The tipping point came on Sunday, April 19, when Martin said he became unresponsive for an hour and half after nearly drowning "in my own fluid day and night," at which point he had to be rushed from the jail to the emergency room at Union General.

His COVID-19 test came back on April 21, and it's unclear at this time how he contracted the virus, as he had been in the jail since late

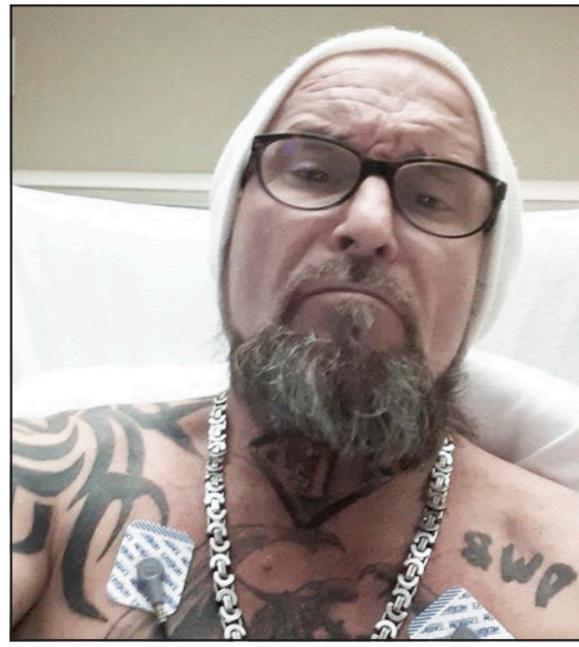
January. He was still receiving treatment in the hospital's ICU at press time, and he believed his discharge was soon in coming.

Martin was released from police custody last week while in the hospital, though he said getting a bond was a struggle. He'd been incarcerated on drug charges for months before finally receiving bond conditions in early April, but he couldn't afford the bond amount.

Finally, after testing positive for COVID-19, he received what's known as an "own recognizance" bond, though he's unsure where he'll go when he leaves the hospital because his bond conditions prevent him from leaving Georgia to safely stay with family he knows in North Carolina.

Wherever he goes, Martin said his mission will be to "make sure no man or woman will ever suffer again in Towns County Jail."

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Ricky Keebler Martin, pictured here in Union General Hospital while receiving treatment for COVID-19, says he did not receive appropriate medical attention during his nearly three-month stint at Towns County Jail. Photo/Facebook

Caleb Ledford showcases blade-making skills on national TV

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Young Harris bladesmith and 2019 Towns County graduate Caleb Ledford just missed taking home the \$10,000 champion's purse during the April 22 episode of History's weekly series, "Forged in Fire."

The TV show, now in its seventh season, challenges the nation's top blade makers in a four-person sword and knife-making competition that spans three rounds, eliminating one contestant per round until the final bladesmith standing takes home 10 grand.

Last week, the Towns County Herald went to chat with Ledford about the selection process, the overall experience, the choices he made on the show, keeping the



Towns County's own Caleb Ledford appeared on the History Channel's "Forged in Fire" TV show April 22.

results a secret and the sudden fame that followed.

Already a longtime fan of the show, Ledford recog-

nized nearly 14 months ago that he possessed the metalworking know-how to challenge for the

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Coronavirus testing site now up and running in Young Harris



Health care professionals at the Towns County Health Department are testing Union and Towns residents with COVID-19 symptoms every Tuesday and Friday. Call the local health department or a physician for a referral. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS – With COVID-19 numbers steadily rising, residents can take comfort in the fact that the state's brand-new local collection site for coronavirus

testing is up and running, effective April 24.

The mobile collection site is being hosted at the Towns County Health Department, located at 1104 Jack Dayton Circle, and is serving residents of Towns and Union counties.

According to Dave

Palmer of District 2 Public Health, the Towns County Health Department parking lot will house the "drive-up" site, with samples collected by employees of both the Towns and Union health departments.

See *Virus Testing*, Page 8A

Gov. Kemp allows closed businesses to voluntarily reopen

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Last week, Gov. Brian Kemp announced his decision to re-open most of the businesses he'd ordered closed to limit the spread of COVID-19.

This announcement surprised many, as he was loosening restrictions prior to the expiration of his own extended shelter-in-place order, which is set to end after April 30.

Kemp said he based his decision on several factors, including enhanced testing, "favorable" COVID-19 case data showing a flattened curve, backing by state health care professionals and consultation with President Donald Trump's "Opening Up American Again" guidelines.



Gov. Brian Kemp

"Gyms, fitness centers, bowling alleys, body art studios, barbers, cosmetologists, hair designers, nail care artists, estheticians, their respective schools, and massage therapists" were allowed to reopen Friday, April 24, under

strict operational constraints.

"The next point is an important one," Kemp said. "The entities that I am reopening are not reopening for 'business as usual.' Each of these entities will be subject to specific restrictions, including adherence to Minimum Basic Operations, social distancing and regular sanitation.

"Minimum Basic Operations includes, but is not limited to, screening workers for fever and respiratory illness, enhancing workplace sanitation, wearing masks and gloves if appropriate, separating workspaces by at least 6 feet, teleworking where at all possible, and implementing staggered shifts."

Many formerly closed area businesses opened Friday

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National Guard cleans Union, Towns health system facilities

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Local health officials have taken extra precautions in recent weeks, with both Union and Towns counties seeing a significant spike in the number of localized COVID-19 cases.

Union County jumped from 15 to 32 positive cases between Monday, April 20, and Sunday, April 26, with the nursing home experiencing its first confirmed case when an employee tested positive for the virus.

Meanwhile, Towns County increased from 13 cases to 20 confirmed cases over the same span and saw a nursing home resident testing positive for the disease.



Georgia National Guard troops gearing up to clean the Union County Nursing Home while residents play bingo outside on Thursday, April 23. Photo by Todd Forrest

Coinciding with last week's uptick in cases, infection control teams from the Georgia National Guard paid prescheduled visits to the Union

County Nursing Home, Union General Hospital and Chatuge Regional Hospital to cleanse and sanitize each facility. The

See *National Guard*, Page 2A

COVID-19 activity on the rise in Towns County

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County learned about its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on April 1 in an announcement by Union General Health System. Since then, there's been a jump in local cases, as well as positive tests by a nursing home resident, hospital employee and a jail inmate.

And it was suspected over the weekend that Towns County had experienced its first COVID-related death in a woman with underlying health conditions, though authorities were unable to confirm by press time.

Furthermore, at least four Detention Center officers were tested for the virus last week and quarantined at home pending results, with one of the jailers' tests coming back negative by press time. That jailer returned to work Monday.

An inmate, who identified himself as Ricky Keebler Martin on Facebook, tested positive for COVID-19 after being taken from the jail for medical treatment on April 19. Martin has been released from police custody and continues to recover at Union General Hospital.

Towns County's Detention Center had 27 inmates as of Sunday, with 16 employees available to work



The Georgia Department of Community Health reported on April 24 that a resident of Chatuge Regional Nursing Home had tested positive for COVID-19. Photo by Todd Forrest

in the jail.

The Sheriff's Office shared on Facebook Saturday a timeline of recent events dating back to March 13, featuring altered jail procedures like no visitations, extensive cleaning measures and COVID-19 information pertaining to cases, possible exposures and other mitigation efforts.

Jails have proven to be problematic places for transmission nationwide due to their close-quarters nature, with a recent report by Reuters showing asymptomatic cases in 96 percent of 3,277 inmates testing positive for COVID-19 in four state prison systems –

Arkansas, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia.

In other news, the county now has a dedicated coronavirus collection site at the Towns County Health Department, allowing more people to get tested with relatively quick turnaround times of 24-48 hours for results, though early reports indicate there could already be a backlog in testing.

As for the nursing home, the Georgia Department of Community Health reported on April 24 that a resident of Chatuge Regional Nursing Home had tested positive for COVID-19, and there were

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Public Health COVID-19 HOTLINE

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We Are Closed On Wednesdays, But Available By Email

Hamilton Gardens Plant Sale

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