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Elementary school celebrates end of year with drive-thru graduation

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Elementary School teachers and staff held a special drive-thru graduation event for young students May 12-14.

It was a welcome end to a school year that has very likely been confusing for students, who missed seeing their friends and teachers after the state canceled in-person instruction mid-March over COVID-19. Each day of the three-day graduation saw students in different grade levels driving through the elementary school parking lot with their parents to speak with teachers, who "graduated" them to their next grade level.

Every grade level has four teachers, with 74 students in kindergarten, 66 kids in

first grade, and 67 in second grade. All students remained in their vehicles during the procession.

"When we tore out of here on March 12, the teachers did an excellent job," Elementary School Principal Dr. Sandra Page said. "We got Chromebooks out to all of the kids; they did online instruction."

"It was only kindergarten that probably did actual paperwork. The amazing thing about this experience is what the adults learned. They learned new technology and learned their practices for the classroom, which is amazing to me."

This is Page's last year as principal for the school, as she's retiring. Her career in education spans 33 years, with 17 of those years being served

in administrative positions, and she was the first female principal at Towns County Elementary.

It's not quite how she envisioned ending her career, but with the unexpected closing of schools, she felt it necessary to bring students back for proper goodbyes with educators.

"Having this was important, because we all needed closure, and not just for the students," Page said. "The teachers have been so worried about these kids."

"We have had a whole brigade of folks that were here for these kids, including the lunchroom staff, bus drivers, the paraprofessionals, custodians, admin in the front office that were working every day to prepare these meals for the students and delivering them."

See *TCES Graduation, Page 6A*



Towns County Elementary hosted a special drive-thru graduation for young students last week, with another round of "graduates" scheduled to receive goody bags this week.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

TCHS to honor 2020 graduating seniors with town parade May 22



By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

This Friday, May 22, the Towns County High School will be hosting a parade through downtown Hiawassee to honor the Class of 2020 graduates, and everyone in the community is invited to watch from the sidewalks while social distancing.

The event will take place on the same day graduation

was supposed to occur, as the actual ceremony had to be rescheduled to July due to COVID-19 ending in-person instruction in the spring starting in mid-March.

According to High School Principal Roy Perren, the school will use this event to celebrate the graduates and the end of the school year as seniors await a traditional graduation.

"We are asking the seniors to gather (in their cars) at the old Rec Center, which is the Historical Society now, between 5:30 and 5:45 p.m.," Perren said. "We are going to pull out at 6 p.m. and drive slowly through town and end here at the school."

"We will be maintaining social distancing the entire time; they won't be getting out of their cars. We invited them to wear their caps and gowns and

to have somebody drive them if they wanted to wave at the people on the side of the road.

"They can also decorate their cars if they want. There won't be a band or floats or anything like that, just the seniors proceeding through town. We just thought it would be meaningful to them to have this, and they seem to have responded to it really well."

"I'm sure we won't have 100 percent, but I think we will have a good number of seniors there."

Teachers have been working closely with students in the last couple months to help as many kids as possible stay on track with their studies throughout the pandemic, which has been tough on everyone.

"Overall, everything is going really well," Perren said. "Our teachers have worked See *TCHS Parade, Page 8A*

JC Berrong remembered for service, kindness in community

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Hiawassee native James "J.C." Berrong, 78, passed away May 11 after suffering a fatal fall from a ladder while cleaning the gutters at his home.

Berrong was a friend to many and a tireless contributor to his community. He organized and directed the Towns County Clean Sweep Initiative for five years and belonged to many volunteer groups, including the Historical Society, 2020 SPOLOST Committee, Civic Association, Brasstown Woodturners Guild, three Masonic organizations, Habitat for Humanity and more.

He was a veteran, having served as a staff sergeant in the U.S. Army, and Berrong was an active member of his church,

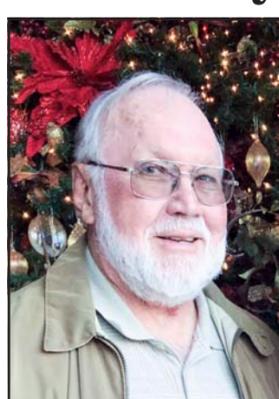
serving in the Sunday school at McConnell Memorial Baptist.

At the time of his death, he was highly involved in the planning of the upcoming 60th reunion of his Towns County High Class of 1960, along with former classmate and lifelong friend and cousin Diris Farmer.

"We were very close," Farmer said of her old friend. "He was at our house a lot, was part of my family. He was involved so much, as people know, with organizations in the county."

"J.C. was just a dedicated person. He presented a rough exterior, but he was a big teddy bear. He gave so much love."

The Towns County native always looked forward to his class reunions, and annual organizers believe the 2020 reunion planned for October may be the last due to the



J.C. Berrong

numbers of surviving members with disabilities and other health issues.

"It's hard to believe that 60 years have suddenly flown by since we spent time together at TCHS," Berrong wrote in

See *Berrong, Page 6A*

Early voting started Monday, runs weekdays through June 5

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The three weeks of early in-person voting for the June 9 General Primary, Presidential Preference Primary and Nonpartisan General Elections began Monday, and people are still being encouraged to wear masks to vote.

Of course, voters don't have to wear a mask to cast a ballot, but officials across the state are advising people to don facial coverings to prevent coronavirus transmission in what has been a whirlwind of an election season.

To recap, in 2020, the state has conducted a last-minute rollout of brand-new voting equipment, canceled the March 24 Presidential



The Towns County Board of Elections & Registration was ready for voters even before the first day of early in-person voting, which started May 18.

Preference Primary due to coronavirus, and postponed the May 19 General Primary to June 9 for the same reason.

Moreover, the Secretary of State's office initiated

a statewide absentee ballot drive to get as many people as possible to vote by mail to further slow the spread of COVID-19.

See *Early Voting, Page 6A*

First Annual Rodeo coming to Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Saddle up, folks, because the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is bringing the first ever Hiawassee Pro Rodeo to town on Friday, June 26, and Saturday, June 27.

The event was initially set to take place Memorial Day Weekend, but it was rescheduled due to COVID-19.

"This will be the first time we have ever done a rodeo here at the fairgrounds, and it will be down on the ballfield," Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said. "It will be two nights, with the gates opening at 6 p.m. and the rodeo beginning at 8 p.m. It is \$15 for adults and \$10 for children."

Seeing as how it is the first



rodeo in the area to return since

the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the affair is shaping up to be a major event that will bring in plenty of contestants and rodeo fans looking for a night out of the house to enjoy some outdoor fun at the

fairgrounds.

"It is a sanctioned rodeo, and we will have vendors down there with food," Thomason said.

Of course, safety will be front and center for Thomason See *Rodeo, Page 6A*

Reopening continues amid testing, contact tracing ramp-up

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Gov. Brian Kemp delivered another COVID-19 update from the Gold Dome last week, reiterating that virus testing is now available to all Georgians, with or without symptoms or referrals.

"Anyone can call their local health department to get scheduled for testing," Kemp said in his May 12 presser at the Georgia State Capitol. "The percentage of positive cases for COVID-19 continues to drop even as we ramp up testing, which is very encouraging."

Currently, the Towns County Health Department is serving as one of the 105 state-run specimen collection sites. To schedule testing there, residents can call the Towns County Health Department at 706-896-2265 or the Union County Health Department at



Gov. Brian Kemp

706-745-6292.

He also outlined plans to improve statewide contact tracing using a voluntary monitoring tool called the "Healthy Georgia Collaborative."

"Health data remains completely confidential," Kemp said. "This monitoring tool does not collect any data other than what is entered by

the contact. This is how the process works:

"Residents who test positive for COVID-19 will be contacted by trained public health staff, who will work with that individual to recall anyone that they might've had close contact with while infectious."

"Those contacts will then be interviewed by (the Department of Public Health) to help us map and isolate the spread of COVID-19 in communities across the state. If you are contacted by DPH staff, we strongly encourage you to participate in the contact tracing program."

"We need your help to defeat this virus. Together, we can continue to take measured steps forward."

The governor signed another executive order on May 12 clarifying existing guidelines for certain businesses and

See *Reopening, Page 8A*

MUSA takes heat as some parents ask for soccer refunds

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced a statewide suspension of spring youth soccer, some parents were shocked to learn they would not be receiving a refund of registration fees from the local Mountain United Soccer Association, despite their children not participating in any games.

The timeline began in March, when the novel coronavirus forced the Mountain United Soccer Association, or MUSA, to postpone the spring season based on directives from state soccer officials, eventually resulting in a complete cancellation by the end of April with no refunds.

According to the official MUSA website at mountainsoccer.org, "MUSA was formed in 1988 as a 501(c)

(3) to provide an opportunity for all kids ages 4-19 to learn soccer skills, develop sportsmanship and character."

MUSA enjoys youth participation in many communities, including Union, Towns and Fannin counties in Georgia, and Cherokee and Clay counties in North Carolina. Numbers include about 170 kids for the spring season and 200 for the fall season.

Registration fees range from \$75 for the 6-and-under division to \$120 per player for 14 and 16-and-under, and the MUSA website declares that the nonprofit organization adheres to a no-refund policy.

League registration forms also feature a "no refund" waiver that parents must check, acknowledging they are aware of and accept the league's policy before signing up.

Still, a number of parents have expressed their



discontent on social media over the enforcement of this policy during the pandemic.

While the no-refund waiver may cover MUSA legally, there's an argument to be made that the league should make an exception due to the unforeseen "act of God" nature of the pandemic, which is causing economic hardships for families everywhere.

With unemployment rates climbing to Great Depression-like levels and many families struggling to put food on the table, some parents see the act of not returning the registration

See *MUSA Soccer, Page 9A*

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MEMORIAL DAY 2020