

## Hero...from Page 1A

passed two years ago, the Hiawassee Police Department has been hard at work to make sure that his legacy is kept alive through this tradition of giving.

“Chief Wright started this program in 2006 as a way to give back to the community and help some children out whose families didn’t have the means to provide a huge Christmas,” said Smith.

Police officers, fire fighters, veterans, EMS workers, paramedics and all public safety workers who wish to participate gather together each year to bring not just Christmas presents to children in need in Towns County, but an experience of love and compassion to carry with them for the rest of their lives.

“My first year, I didn’t really know what to expect with this program, but I reported to the school,” said Smith. “I climbed up on the school bus and in the back of the bus I see all of these middle school students quietly talking among themselves. You could tell they’re all nervous.

“In the front of the bus were all the cops, trying to fit into these uncomfortable seats. We were riding the bus over to Walmart and we unloaded in the parking lot and, at that time, each child is paired with a police officer.

“We tell the kids you have \$200 to spend on yourself today. That’s a lot of money for a kid. So these kids, as you can imagine, are very excited about having all of this money to spend.

“We try to keep the kids within that range, but we have some extra money in case they go over by \$10 or so. Well, that day, I started looking at the people checking out and some of them were going over by \$20, \$30 and \$40.

“And I see the officers pulling out their own credit cards to cover the overages. They knew what the limit was and they chose to let the kids



Bill “Scotty” Scott with Chief Smith. Photo/Lily Avery

go over because they wanted to not only donate their time, but their money to these kids.”

This year, the students will make the journey from Towns County Schools over to Walmart in Blairsville on Tuesday, Dec. 19, where they will be given the opportunity to shop for presents. Afterwards, with gifts in tow, the students will then be treated to a lunch back in Hiawassee, with all those who volunteered and took time out of their day to spend with the kids.

“My first year there I was paired with a sixth-grade boy,” said Smith. “He was wearing clothes that didn’t quite fit him. We start shopping and my main job is to keep track of the money and make sure he doesn’t go over. He’s filling the cart with toys and we’re looking around and he asks me if he can buy something for his mom.

“We encourage them to spend it on themselves but I told him if he wanted to buy his mom something, to go for it. Then he wanted to get something for his dad, so he gets his dad some cologne.

“Then he says, ‘My brother and sister, they won’t get anything this year, can I get something for them?’ So, I explain to him that he doesn’t have any money left, so we go

back to the toy section and he puts his toys back.

“He traded his remote control car for a dollhouse for his sister and he trades his other toys for something for his brother. And he ended up just buying himself one thing. Everything else went to his family.

“It was such a moving experience. This kid had more money than he’d ever seen and he spent it all on his family.”

To Chief Smith, who has been involved with Shop with a Hero since he was hired back in 2010, this yearly experience is one of the most important events of the year, if not the most important. And those at the Movers and Shakers clearly felt the same because, at the end of the meeting, Chief Smith was gifted roughly \$944 from the organization to go toward the program to help more children in need of Christmas during this season of giving.

Those who are still interested in donating money to help give a child a Christmas can do so by contacting Amy Gibby Rosser of Towns County Family Connection at [argibby@townscountyschools.org](mailto:argibby@townscountyschools.org) or by mailing donations to 1400 US Hwy 76 E, Hiawassee, GA 30546.

## Christmas...from Page 1A



‘Tis the season at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds in Hiawassee. Photo/Lily Avery

“The first year, we did \$150,000 worth of lights and displays,” said Thomason. “This year we added another \$50,000. It’s a lot of lights and a lot of new displays. We’re really excited for it and we’re so grateful for everyone who has helped make this possible, all the sponsors and everyone who has supported Mountain Country Christmas in Lights.”

Just like last year, patrons will be free to roam the Fairgrounds, meandering through the historic Pioneer Village and craft booths, and following the row of peppermint cane lights on the self-guided tour of the light show.

Guests can expect Christmas music singing in the air, with only the sweet crooning of live holiday carolers to break the “Jingle Bell Rock” and “White Christmas” renditions. And down at Exhibit Hall, guests will be treated to holiday classics on antique organs, performed by the one and only Towns County Historian Jerry Taylor, all while sipping on delicious hot chocolate and cider.

“We have a lot of new additions this year, new displays and new lights,” said Thomason.

“We also have a lot more of the craft booths filled this year. As of right now, we have 68 booths and we only have 15 booths that are empty. We have civic organizations, businesses, churches and individuals, all coming out for the light show. They’re selling food. They’re selling crafts. Some of the businesses are just decorating their booths for the advertisement.

“We also have the Eudora Animal Farms petting zoo. There will be around 18 different animals and it’s a 20 x 40 tent. They’ll be offering camel rides and pony rides. They’re going to be here starting the first weekend

of December, up until Christmas. People can buy feed and feed the animals, so it’ll be really nice.”

And no holiday festivity would be complete without the jolly elf himself, Santa Claus, who will be available for pictures and plenty of Christmas gift request.

For those wishing to come see the show who are unable to walk around the Fairgrounds, golf carts are available for a driving tour of the grounds. To have access to such carts, simply wait by the front gate when entering the light show.

“Mountain Country

Christmas in Lights” will be open every Thursday through Sunday, 6 p.m. until 9 p.m., from Thanksgiving evening until Dec. 30. Tickets for the show are \$5 per person and all children under 12 years of age get in for free.

Thomason and the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds would like to extend a warm welcome to all to come out and enjoy a festive evening of lights and holiday spirit at the Fairgrounds.

“We want everyone to come on down and enjoy the beautiful lights at the Fairgrounds,” said Thomason. “And remember, Jesus is the reason for the season.”