

# Towns County Herald

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## Young Harris celebrates 49th Anniversary Christmas Tree Lighting

By Jarrett Whitener  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby and the Enotah Garden Club excitedly welcomed guests to a longstanding community tradition on Friday, Dec. 6 – the 49th Anniversary Christmas Tree Lighting at Mayor's Park.

"I'm so happy to have everybody here tonight, I love to see the smiling faces," Gibby said. "We have been doing this for 49 years, and I was at the very first one."

"My parents will probably tell you that I got to play those little plastic recorders that you start out on. I'm sure it sounded horrible, but our

parents probably thought it was great.

"We want to say thank you to the staff of the city for the lights in the park. The Garden Club hosts this and makes this happen every single year. They decorated the inside of (City Hall), and it is absolutely beautiful. They make sure that there are some goodies in there, and we want to thank them."

Before the tree lighting, the Towns County High School Band played a few Christmas songs and kindergarten students sang well-practiced Christmas carols.

When the groups finished the Christmas music, the crowd turned to the park and count down the lighting.

Cheers erupted from those gathered as the tree lit up and Santa made an appearance on stage to take the children inside so they could tell him what they wanted for Christmas.

Inside the hall, the Enotah Garden Club had cookies and juice for people to snack on while the kids sat on the floor and patiently awaited their turn with Santa.

The long-running traditional event is something the Garden Club and city love to host each year, with everyone looking forward to the community being involved and participation growing over time.

"It is just a joy for us to have the community come out and celebrate this with us

– that's what this is all about," said Betts Walther, co-president of the Enotah Garden Club. "It's a great turnout this year, and the community is so involved with making this possible."

"I've been in the club for 15 years and I look forward to it every year. We all work together with the City Hall to make this such a wonderful thing for people to enjoy, because it's Christmas."

The Garden Club had over 1,000 cookies ready for people to enjoy, making more than enough for everyone to get a handful or two.

"Everybody in the Garden Club brings at least three dozen cookies that have to be homemade," said Vickie



Santa and Mrs. Claus enjoyed some quality time with children at the 2019 Young Harris Christmas Tree Lighting on Friday, Dec. 6. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

## Former Library Director Stone: 'I was always proud to be your director'

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Vince Stone was taken aback when he learned that the 12-member Mountain Regional Library System Board of Trustees had voted unanimously to terminate his employment as library director on Oct. 15.

After all, the Regional Board had given the director "full high marks" during his last job evaluation in June, Stone said, with board members offering him many compliments at the time and letting him know he was doing a good job in a position that he loved.

That's why, from Stone's perspective, his sudden loss of employment came as a complete surprise, which has only been compounded by ongoing difficulties he has experienced since suffering a massive stroke on July 22.

The stroke put Stone in the hospital for three weeks and resulted in a paralyzed arm and an inability to speak. He subsequently qualified for a job-protected leave period under the Family and Medical Leave Act, which expired the day before his termination.

In the intervening months



Vince Stone

since his stroke, Stone says he has started talking again and is showing progress in physical rehabilitation. But following his release from employment, he has struggled with the public messaging surrounding his termination.

The former library director recently reached out to the North Georgia News and Towns County Herald to tell his side of the story, as he feels the library's Regional Board has supplied inadequate reasons to the public about his termination.

Stone and his family believe he lost his job for no other reason than his continuing health problems. Furthermore, Stone says he was not invited to the meeting in which he was

fired, and that he was thereafter removed from his job without a single board member speaking with him.

As reported in the Oct. 23 editions of the newspapers, at the time of his termination, the board said Stone had been away from his job for several months for unspecified personal reasons, with Interim Regional Director Claudia Gibson having served as temporary director since Aug. 1.

Legally, the board is limited in what information it can make publicly available regarding internal personnel deliberations and matters, so board members did not disclose the medical reason for Stone's three-month absence.

Board members did, however, express that the library system would be moving in a different direction than the trajectory Stone had set in motion when he came aboard to helm the libraries of Union, Towns and Fannin counties in March 2015.

"The trustees, the library staff and our communities have expressed the desire for MRLS to emphasize traditional library services that are responsive to each community's needs,"

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## Hamilton Gardens volunteers decorate state information center tree

By Jarrett Whitener  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Members of the Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge Board of Directors traveled to Lavinia recently to decorate a tree in the lobby of the Georgia Visitor Information Center there.

Only 11 such centers exist in the state, and the Towns County residents who participated in the decoration were excited to receive the opportunity to promote Hamilton Gardens at one of them. The Lavinia center is located near Georgia's border with South Carolina on I-85 South.

"Every year, the tourism group from Northeast Georgia participates in decorating that tree," said Grace Howard, executive director of Hamilton Gardens. "Last year, (Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce President Candace Lee) called me and asked us to decorate the tree this year."

"It's just something that local businesses have the opportunity to do. So, we



Hamilton Gardens Executive Board members traveled to Lavinia recently to decorate the tree inside the Georgia Visitor Information Center there.

theme and decorated it, and the theme was the gardens and representative of our area. What our Decorating Committee decided to do was make it natural and elegant to represent the gardens."

The decorators used a pink theme to match the Hamilton Gardens logo, adding pink bows atop the tree with flowing ribbon, which they further complemented with

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## Shooting on Chicken Pit Road sends Young Harris woman to hospital

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

YOUNG HARRIS – Deputies with the Towns County Sheriff's Office responded to a shooting on Chicken Pit Road near the Georgia/North Carolina state line early Tuesday, Dec. 3.

Towns County E-911 dispatched deputies to the scene at 5:36 a.m. after a man called in to report that his neighbor had been shot, according to Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Terry Conner.

A woman identified by the Sheriff's Office as Dawn Thurman Wright of Young Harris was transported to an area hospital with injuries that were not considered life threatening, and she remained hospitalized in stable condition at least through that Tuesday, Conner said.



Wright reported that the shooting involved three male subjects at her residence, according to Conner, and that she'd fled to a neighboring home to seek help after being shot.

The weapon believed to have been used in the crime has been recovered, the Sheriff's

office said in a statement last week.

Authorities have no suspects at this time, and Conner said local investigators have requested the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's assistance in the ongoing case.

"The Sheriff's Office asks any residents in the area of Chicken Pit Road that observes any suspicious male subjects or activity to call Towns County 911 to report it," the Sheriff's Office statement said.

Anyone with information surrounding the incident is being asked to call the Sheriff's Office at 706-896-4444 or the Towns County E-911 Center.

## School board to consolidate meeting schedule beginning in January

By Chad Stack  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Starting in January 2020, the Towns County Board of Education will begin regular work sessions and holding meetings on the same day of each month on school campus.

This is markedly different from the timing of the monthly meetings as they have historically been held, as each work session has always taken place the first Monday at the board office, with each regular meeting occurring the second Monday at Anne Oliver Mitchell Auditorium.

School board members discussed the change in their Dec. 2 work session, and they were expected to adopt the change in their Dec. 9 regular meeting, which occurred after press time.

Pending final approval, School Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said work sessions moving forward will be followed immediately by

## Currently, the meeting schedule runs as two board meetings on different days, and Berrong said there's not really been a distinction between the two because they are having to approve the same items on the agenda during each session.



Dr. Darren Berrong

regular board meetings the first Monday each month.

The plan will be to hold an hour-long work session starting at 6 p.m. in the high school Media Center each first Monday, after which the board will move to the auditorium for a 7 p.m. regular formal meeting the same evening.

As always, the public will be welcome to attend both meetings.

Under the new schedule, board members will discuss agenda items during the work session meeting, with official voting action to happen in the regular meeting following the work session.

With the start of 2020 just weeks away, the school board also discussed the nominees for board chairperson and vice chairperson during the Dec. 2 work session.

"Every January, we replace or reelect," Berrong said. "We will be approving that (Dec. 9) for January."

Board members nominated current Vice Chairperson Dr. Kilee Smith to serve as board chair starting in January, and Board Member

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## Americans reflect on price of freedom during Pearl Harbor anniversary

By Mark Smith  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service carried out a sneak attack against the United States at Naval Station Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Every year since, Dec. 7 has been set aside to honor and remember the 2,335 U.S. military personnel and 68 civilians who were killed, as well as the 1,178 injured on that infamous day.

This year, the 78th anniversary of the attack fell on a Saturday when the area was in full Christmas mode with

planned weekend festivities, and many patriotic residents incorporated Pearl Harbor remembrance for the thousands of Americans killed and injured that day in 1941.

Retired U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer Clarence E. "Bud" Johnson, 97, of Hiwassee, joined the Navy in 1939 at age 17. Johnson wasn't at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, but the Iwo Jima Veteran remembers it well.

"I had two and a half years in the Atlantic Fleet," Johnson said. "I was on my second destroyer when Pearl Harbor (happened). Like everybody else, we couldn't

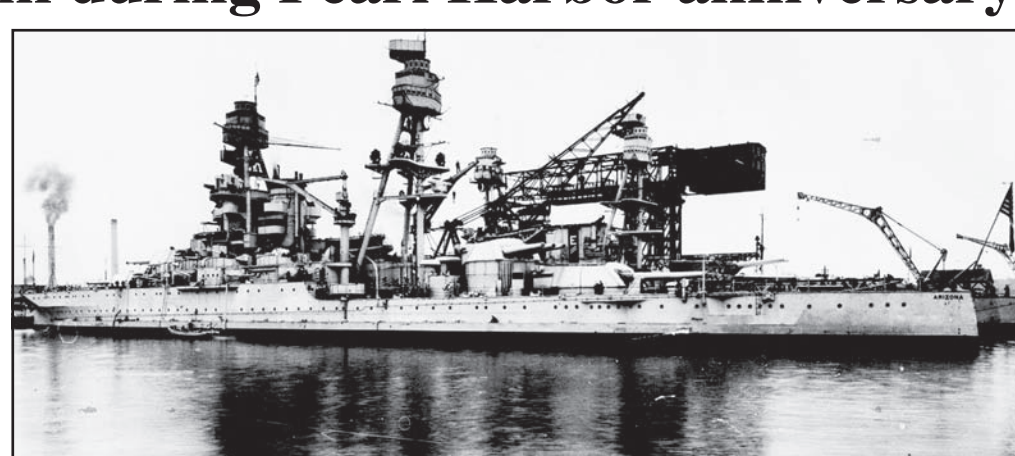
believe it either. But this was no drill.

"I didn't get out to the Pacific until 1944. We spent a month operating in and out of Pearl, and I saw the results of it."

Added Johnson, "Freedom is not free. It's hell, I guarantee it. I spent 54 months in World War II in combat zones."

"Tradition to me is important. History is important. The heroes are those people who never made it back, never had an opportunity to raise a family and enjoy life like we do. They're the heroes."

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This image of the USS Arizona was photographed on Jan. 18, 1941, while the Arizona was being upgraded at Puget Sound navy yard. To date, this is the last close-up view of the ship prior to its loss at Pearl Harbor. Photo/Pearl Harbor National Memorial

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