

Merry Christmas

Towns County Herald

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VFW Auxiliary gifts joy in annual tradition

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Dec. 14, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7807 Auxiliary held its annual Children's Christmas Party, providing local kids with opportunities to decorate their own cookies, design their own ornaments and choose two new toys each for Christmas.

"Every year we have a Christmas party for all the Towns County children," Event Chairperson Ann Mayo said. "They come with a parent, they do arts and crafts, they do cookie decorations, they sit on Santa's lap, and then Mrs. Claus will take the child to select their presents."

"Some of the toys are leftovers from Toys for Tots and donations from individual

sponsors. Any new toys that make their way to the VFW Thrift Store are put aside during the year in preparation for this. Every year we have a theme; this year it's candy canes. The children get so excited."

Auxiliary President Mel White said that, for the last four years, the group has had an out-of-state benefactor from the Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots program who allowed them to load a trailer with toys to bring back to Towns County.

"Our benefactor has retired, and we can no longer do that, as they don't want toys going between states," White said. "I am working with Toys for Tots here in Georgia, and they were good enough to give us some help with our shortfall this year."

"But it's not looking

good for next year. If the Marine Corps can help us out again, then we'll continue this tradition. We want to continue this. Last year we collected about 1,200 toys and gave out about 700 toys."

"One year we had a whole row of boys' and girls' bicycles and had to hold a raffle every two minutes so we could give them all away. We always have a lot of help. Everyone here is a volunteer."

"Volunteers include those from the American Legion, American Legion Riders, VFW, Sons of the American Legion, VFW Auxiliary, all headquartered here. People here are from all different disciplines. It's a post thing, so it works out well."

Visitor Chelsey Mills said she first heard about the Christmas party from her sis-

ter, so she brought her four children to the event, including her 14-year-old son, whom she described as "a little more reserved."

"I don't know how many more years I'll be able to talk him into it, but I wanted him to take a picture with Santa," said Mills, grateful for the opportunity.

Repeat guest Erika Williams also has four kids, and she heard about the event three years ago when her family moved here.

"Each year they do this, and we bring our four children to get a gift," Williams said. "Last year they gave my youngest daughter a brand-new bike, and it's still lasting her. It's a fun time, and it's also very helpful."

"There are a lot of fami-

See VFW Auxiliary, Page 6A



Santa and Mrs. Claus enjoyed spending time with children during the VFW Auxiliary's annual Christmas Party for children this month. Photo by Shelly Knight

Area events to ring in 2025 with fireworks, dining

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

For residents looking to celebrate New Year's Eve with area events, there are a few local options to ring in 2025 between Union and Towns Counties.

Perhaps the most popular choice is the annual New Year's Eve Fireworks at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds in Hiawassee – the perfect family event with free admission.

Parking will open at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 31, with the celebratory fireworks set to spark off around 8 p.m. The parking lot will serve as the



event's backdrop, where the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club, for example, will be present for a car show. While 2024's features See New Year's Eve, Page 6A

American Welding Society joins TCHS in classroom



Representatives of the American Welding Society traveled to Towns County High last week to make a presentation and financial donation to Sabrina Garrett's welding class. Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County High School welcomed members of the American Welding Society on Tuesday, Dec. 17, for a presentation about the benefits of a welding career.

Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Teacher Sabrina Garrett introduced her class to Robert Trudelle, Carl Matricardi and Rene Engeron from the Atlanta Section of the American Welding Society.

"AWS supports the

schools in the region that have a welding class," Garrett said. "Today they are donating money and welding helmets to our agriculture program."

"The money will likely be used for metal for the kids' project because metal is ex-

See Welding Donation, Page 7A

Vogel Christmas highlights real reason for season



Music organizer Mike Young held the microphone for children to sing Christmas carols to highly entertained guests of the Vogel Tree Lighting Dec. 14. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

BLAIRSVILLE – For three hours on Saturday, Dec. 14, the Christmas spirit moved

through the Conley Pavilion in Meeks Park, with the birth of Jesus – the reason for the season – taking center stage as always during the 22nd Annual Vogel State Park Christmas

Program & Tree Lighting.

With the blessing of the Union County Recreation Department, this year's community program moved to Meeks See Vogel Christmas, Page 7A

SAR honors paramedic; Bradshaw talks Splash Pad

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw welcomed a handful of guests to his last regular meeting of the year, wishing everyone a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year inside the Towns County Courthouse on Tuesday, Dec. 17.

To start, Bradshaw introduced two members of the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter of the Georgia Society Sons of the American Revolution, incoming SAR President Jared Ogden and SAR Vice President Sid Turner, for a special presentation.

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SAR Vice President Sid Turner, Paramedic Terry Foreman and incoming SAR President Jared Ogden during the EMS commendation Dec. 17. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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VFW Auxiliary ...from Page 1A

lies that can't afford Christmas. I mean, times are hard. There are bigger families in

the community than us, and it's hard. If it wasn't for the VFW and the Catalyst Church,

we probably wouldn't have hardly anything for our kids. This is a big blessing."



Children had plenty of toys to choose from during the free Christmas Party hosted for their benefit at the VFW Post Building on Sunnyside Road Dec. 14. Photo by Shelly Knight

New Year's Eve...from Page 1A

won't include many merchants, there will be a few vendors set up closer to the front of the fairgrounds and the parking lot. In particular, that includes mostly food shops with options like barbecue, hot dogs and hot chocolate.

The fireworks themselves will start after dark, giving visitors plenty of time to get ready for the dazzling show.

In the run-up to the New Year celebration, Fairgrounds Manager Hilda Thomason was happy to report that the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights would be open for one extra day, on Christmas Eve.

The Ridges Resort will also be celebrating the New Year with fireworks that will be free to spectate the evening of Dec. 31. The resort is advertising "fun, food and fireworks" as part of the big shebang, which will encompass several areas of the property on Lake Chatuge.

For one, a cash bar will be available in the lobby, and hungry guests can enjoy dinner seating at The Oaks Lakeside Kitchen from 4:30-8:30 p.m. Choose from two-, three-

or four-course menus, and enjoy live music courtesy of Mark Mentzer.

As for the free fireworks, those will light up the night sky starting at 7 p.m. on the Lakeside Lawn.

The party will continue at the Marina Station on Lake Chatuge starting at 9 p.m.. Attendance costs \$50 at the door and includes a performance from Bone Daddy's Band, unlimited Topgolf, appetizers and a champagne toast at midnight.

Brasstown Valley Resort in Young Harris is holding its annual New Year's Eve Gala, this year with a disco theme. Music and dancing always feature heavily throughout the evening and can be enjoyed by couples for a fee of \$350, including tax and tips.

Formal attire is required, and guests must be 21 years or older to attend. Open bar starts at 7:30 p.m., with the gourmet dinner buffet running from 7:30-9:30 p.m. And be sure to stick around for the traditional Balloon Drop at midnight.

The Living Water Winery & Vineyard in Blairsville is hosting a New Year's Eve

Black and White Casino Night starting at 7 p.m. Guests are invited to partake in charcuterie boards and desserts as well as live music. Of course, visitors can also enjoy the casino games and raffle prizes before a fireworks show and a midnight toast.

Anyone under 21 must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian. Tickets can be purchased online by heading to www.visitblairsvillega.com and checking out the events calendar, or going to www.eventbrite.com and searching for "Living Waters Winery NYE Black & White Casino Night." But act fast, because tickets were nearly sold out at press time.

All Saints Lutheran Church at 83 Earl Shelton Road will be holding a holy Communion on New Year's Eve to welcome 2025 spiritually.

And last but not least, while it's not strictly to welcome the onset of 2025, the annual Lighting of the Menorah is set to happen on Monday, Dec. 30, at 4:30 p.m. on the Hiwassee Square, hoping to bridge communities and share culture.

2025 'Hikeawassee' shuttle to run seven days a week

News Special
The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority is pleased to announce the 2025 #Hikeawassee program details: the shuttle will run Monday, Feb. 24, through Saturday, May 4, from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

For the upcoming year, Sunday has been added so the schedule will run seven days a week for Appalachian Trail hikers.

In addition, the weekly cookout on the square, known as "Mayor's Monday," will return 2-4 p.m. each Monday from Feb. 24-April 28.

"Anyone who lives in the area is welcome to either

drive the shuttle or participate in Mayor's Monday cookouts on the square," said 2025 Hikeawassee Chair and Towns County resident Marc Engelking. "You don't need a special driver's license to drive the shuttle, and for the cookout, just come on out and meet the hikers."

"If you can, bring a side dish, or a dessert, to add to the fun. Items like cookies, nuts, fruit, pasta and candy will be gratefully devoured as the hikers try to replace the calories they've burned hiking."

Engelking also added that there will be an informational session for volunteers on Thursday, Jan. 23, at 9 a.m.

inside Hiawassee City Hall, located downtown at 50 River Street.

"If you'd like to attend and learn more, either just show up or email your contact information and what you'd like to do to dda@hiawasseega.gov," Engelking said.

Hikeawassee has been able to expand to seven days a week and continue the free cookouts due to the strong support of volunteers and sponsors.

"Our sponsors are covering the costs of the program, such as gas and maintenance for the shuttle, and burgers and hotdogs for the cookouts," said Peggy Gardner, DDA Chair.

The shuttle sponsors for 2025 are Ingles, Trailful, Goin' Postal Hiawassee, Natures Health & Body of Georgia, and Georgia Mountain Pickleball.

"We owe a particularly large thank you to Trailful and Georgia Mountain Pickleball, both of which have been early and significant supporters," Gardner added. "In addition, Trailful has increased its financial support with an additional sponsorship of Mayor's Monday cookouts, for which we are very grateful."

In 2024, hikers self-reported spending more than \$120,000 with hotels, retailers and restaurants, and 1,800 passengers were counted, hailing from more than 30 states and six countries.

"At a time when business is at its slowest, the hikers contribute needed revenue to our town," said Acting Hiawassee Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. "I look



Local supporters and sponsors of the #Hikeawassee initiative posing with the shuttle bus that will be offering free rides to hikers seven days a week this upcoming trail season.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

forward to being at the cookouts whenever I'm not on duty."

The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority was formed by the Hiawassee City Council in 2019 for the purpose of furthering the economic development of our lake and mountain paradise while preserving Hiawassee's history and serving its citizens and visitors alike.

Vogel Christmas...from Page 1A



Santa Claus read from the Gospel of Luke to tell the story of Jesus' birth to guests gathered for the 2024 Vogel Christmas.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Park due to ongoing construction of the new Visitors Center at Vogel, which is expected to be completed sometime in Spring 2025.

The logistics of moving the event to Meeks Park presented unique challenges, but volunteers of the nonprofit Friends of Vogel State Park were determined to make the beloved local tradition happen in 2024, "because people look forward to this," said Friends President Stephanie Gray.

Vogel volunteers packed a loaner box truck full of decorations stored at the park — lights, wreaths, garlands, a Christmas tree, etc. — plus chairs, canopy tents, patio heaters and more.

Upwards of 30 volunteers traveled to Meeks that morning to prepare a beautiful, comfortable setting for the big event that had to be taken down and packed up as soon as the program concluded.

And a joyous program it was amid dry weather and cool temperatures that started out in the 50s before dropping into the 40s by the time people began making their way home, happy and full of Christmas cheer for another year running.

Hours of music filled the air with every Christmas carol one could think of, thanks to another group of dedicated volunteers who have presented the program for years: Mike and Cheri Young of Dahlonega; country music artist Justin Terry of Knoxville, Tennessee; and Jim and Lydia Cox of Cumming.

New in 2024 were performances by one of Mike Young's sisters, Maribeth Griffin of Dawsonville, who sang a particularly moving rendition of "O Holy Night" toward the end of the evening.

Program mainstay Janet Hill continued her involvement in the Christmas show, coordinating volunteers from eight area churches to host the various tents that included things such as hot chocolate and cookies by Pine Top Baptist, Christ-centric children's activities and more for guests to enjoy.

Groups like the Christian Motorcyclists Association and Gideons International manned tents as well, and Bibles were made available to all who wanted them. Larry Swanson of Blairsville Shoe Repair was also present, showcasing his welcome signs that are customizable for all seasons.

Several hundred people attended this year, getting the most out of the entertainment, snacks and other goodies being handed out in the free event. Program participants mixed humor in with the more sincere messaging about Christmas, making for both a lighthearted and solemn occasion.

Children remained a focus throughout the night, visiting with Santa, decorating ornaments, munching on cookies, and even taking the stage to perform popular Christmas carols to the delight of onlookers, with audience members joining in the singing at every opportunity.

New Union Baptist Church Pastor Justin Jarrett gathered children around him as he read Clement Clarke Moore's classic poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," aka "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Jarrett had extra fun with the kids by adlibbing silly lines into the text.

As is customary, gifts were presented to a few audience members: one for the youngest guest, a 2-year-old little girl; another for the "wisest" attendee, who turned 86 this year; and one more for the person who traveled the farthest to be there, which turned out to be a whopping 600 miles.

Prayer was a common occurrence, being offered by multiple local pastors and even Santa Claus himself — not something usually seen in Christmas celebrations — with everyone involved wanting people to know about the greatest gift of all: salvation through Jesus Christ.

Speaking of Santa, with help once more from James Harper, he read from Luke 2

in the New Testament, sharing the miraculous story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and recounting the humble beginnings of Christianity to double down on the "true reason for the season."

The event drew near its end with a darkening of the pavilion and a successful countdown to lighting the one-night-only Christmas tree next to the pavilion's warm fireplace.

First Baptist Pastor Ricky Powell added to the prayers of other pastors that evening, like Nick Sommer of Fellowship of the Hills, and Justin Terry, who has a new album out called "Long Way To Go," gave his final performance of the night with Alabama's "Christmas in Dixie."

Of course, it wouldn't be a Vogel Christmas without the traditional singing of "Silent Night" by guests and organizers, which featured the usual "candlelight" participation by attendees using little red flashlights handed out at the welcome tent.

Typically, the lighting takes place at the big tree on the ballfield in Vogel State Park, but it has actually been several years since that location has been suitable due to bad weather. So, people have had to get used to the backup area at the Lake Trahlyta pavilion, and Meeks Park in 2024.

Organizers are praying for good weather when the program returns to Vogel State Park on Saturday, Dec. 13, 2025. As a reminder for next year, guests are always encouraged to bring an unwrapped gift for a 12-and-under child to benefit the UCSO Give-A-Gift Christmas Toy Drive.

People can help contribute toward the annual Christmas program by supporting yearly initiatives at Vogel State Park, like the upcoming May 10 Mountain Mayhem Out-house Derby, June 7 National Trail Day, Sept. 13 Mountain Music Day Festival and Oct. 25 Fall Festival.

For more information, visit <https://gastateparks.org/Vogel>.

Welding Donation...from Page 1A

pensive, or welding rods or Ashop coats or gloves. We really appreciate these guys. We get much of our metal from them, and equipment and even financial donations."

Welding is a process that uses heat and pressure to fabricate products that include anything from coffee pots to skyscrapers. Welders work in construction, engineering, aerospace, manufacturing, energy explorations, pipelines and even jewelry design. The opportunities are endless.

"So, when students learn welding, they can work as a journeyman contracting for a company, they can work on pipelines, nuclear power plants," Garrett said. "They can go out on their own and open their own shop or even use the skill for artwork."

"If you know welding, you can fix a broken lawnmower, a utility trailer or even hobby equipment. Any type of broken metal or aluminum can be fixed with welding."

The welding course lasts for a semester and is offered each spring. In any give school year, Garrett sees approximately one third of high

school students in the Agriculture Program, and this high level of interest undoubtedly speaks to the heritage of the area.

"It's because of the way I was raised," Garrett said of her own career path, which has spanned more than 20 years at TCHS. "We grew up cutting pulp wood. I was always outside and always loved learning things hands-on."

"I always took shop class in middle and high school every chance I got, and I loved it. I get to give back to the community this way, helping kids start on a career path."

Chairman Robert Trudelle of the AWS Atlanta Section said that past chairman Matricardi "has always been very supportive of this high school," and they were all glad to continue that tradition this month.

"We are all volunteers, and our goal is to spread the word about welding," Trudelle said. "We want to develop the next generation of welders because many of us are at the end of our careers and are retiring."

"We try to talk to the kids about all the opportunities

and the different types of jobs that are out there for welders. A lot of them don't know what's available — underwater welding, aerospace, railroads, manufacturing and more. It's not just agriculture."

"The American Welding Society awards more than \$2 million in scholarships annually. We talk to the kids about how to apply for those scholarships."

Also that Tuesday, AWS Atlanta Section Secretary Rene Engeron donated a personal welding helmet to "someone who is going into the field."

"It's one I've had for years, and today I'm passing it on to the future," Engeron said. "If you want to do welding, I recommended finding a shop that offers internships. It's a way to get a feel for it and on-the-job training. And then there are tons of ways you can go."

Garrett and the rest of Towns County High are grateful to the American Welding Society, and they are eager to put the donations to use in the new Ag Facility once it opens, hopefully by March.

County Meeting...from Page 1A

Ogden and Turner attended to present Paramedic Terry Foreman of Towns County EMS with the group's Emergency Medical Services Award.

The award recognizes Foreman's "dedication to the preservation of life and health under emergency conditions and/or performing beyond the duties normally called for within the Emergency Medical Services profession."

"Terry has been a member of the Towns County EMS since 2020," Turner said. "He's a paramedic with the EMS with several years of experience prior to coming to Towns County."

"He has shown grace, skill and compassion in working with others, and he shows the utmost dedication and care for patients that he's responsible for. It's an honor to present him with the EMS Award from the SAR."

Foreman gratefully accepted a certificate of commendation and commemorative medal from Turner and Ogden before posing with them for a photo.

Ogden invited those in attendance to research their family histories for potential membership in the patriotic, educational and historical preservationist organization, as he feels confident that many people in this area are descended from American Revolutionaries.

Prior to moving on to new business, Bradshaw thanked Foreman as well as the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter SAR representatives for what they do for their community.

County Recreation Director Stuart Nichols joined Bradshaw for a bid opening to construct the new Splash Pad benefiting local children. Six bids were opened that evening, with multiple competitive bids coming in around the \$140,000 mark.

Bradshaw tabled the awarding of the bid so that he and Nichols could study the packages in detail to make sure the county opts for the most affordable offer that also brings the most amenities and features to the project. The award will be announced soon in a called meeting.

Planning for the Splash Pad has been ongoing for about two years, to include a successful application for a



Commissioner Bradshaw and Rec Director Nichols opening Splash Pad bids in the Dec. 17 county meeting.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

50/50 matching grant totaling \$316,000 to pay for the project, with half coming from SPLOST collections and half from federal monies.

The Splash Pad will be installed at the Towns County Beach, hopefully by spring. Concurrently, the county will build a community pavilion and public restrooms next to the Pickleball Courts, to be erected in part using inmate labor and grading by the Road Department to save money.

In other business, the commissioner read and signed a 2024 budget amendment to: account for a patrol car repair using insurance reimbursement monies; provide a one-time payment to county employees via federal grant funds; and give a \$1 hourly pay raise to employees.

"We love our employees; they do a great job," Bradshaw said regarding the federal grant allocation, which is not guaranteed each year but that his office has been able to secure the last couple of years. "They're very dedicated, very loyal ... and we appreciate it."

"Yes, there's other things we could have done with (that money), but with all the inflation that everybody is experiencing (in their home budgets), we gave \$500 to every full-time employee, \$250 to every part-time employee, and \$100 to each active volunteer fireman."

Added Bradshaw, "We're giving a \$1/hour across-the-board raise to all county employees before the end of the year, and then after

the first of the year, we're giving another \$1 an hour raise across the board to all county employees."

Importantly, the \$1/hour pay raise for 2024 will not be going to the Sheriff's Office, which received a separate pay increase earlier in the year, though deputies will be getting the 2025 pay raise allocation in January.

"Our employees have to live," Bradshaw said of the pay raises. "They have to buy groceries, they have to pay their bills, and in order to maintain our employees and attract good employees, that's what it takes. I thank God that we're in a position that we can afford to do it."

Bradshaw held a public hearing after press time on Thursday, Dec. 19, to discuss the 2025 Proposed County Budget, and he is expected to adopt the balanced budget on Monday, Dec. 30, at 10 a.m. inside the courthouse.

The 2025 General Fund Budget — the main operating fund providing for county services — is up about \$1.75 million over the originally proposed 2024 budget, largely from increases to employee salaries and benefits to remain competitive for recruitment and retention purposes.

Copies of the budget can be obtained at the Commissioner's Office, and the newspaper looks forward to providing a more detailed budget breakdown — including upgraded fire protection capabilities in 2025 — in next week's newspaper.



Country music singer Justin Terry performed "Tell Me the Story of Jesus" at the Vogel Christmas Program, with local youngsters representing Mary and Joseph with Baby Jesus.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard