

SWAC...from Page 1

sponsored by the Hiwassee City Police Department, and has become a yearly tradition for Police Chief Jimmy Wright and his officers.

In a tremendous show of community support, chaperone volunteers came from numerous law enforcement agencies in the surrounding area, including the sheriff's offices of Towns, Fannin and Pickens counties. Representatives from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and Towns County's Division of Family and Children Services also donated their time.

Other volunteers were Jenny Stowers of the 21st Century Afterschool Program in Towns County, as well as bus drivers Scott Hamilton, who has driven every year since Shop With A Cop began, and Shonda Ledford.

Stephany Zaic, a local attorney for the juvenile court, and her husband Michael also helped children shop.

"It's amazing how many kids try to shop for their family, and we have to tell them to shop for themselves," said Stephany Zaic.

And while it's certainly all right and even common for children to shop for their families, they are encouraged to take this special occasion to concentrate on themselves.

"I love watching these kids go in there and shop and just buy what they want to buy," said Chief Wright. "They're all just so appreciative and so thankful, and it means a lot. We just want to be a help for these kids."

Amy Gibby-Rosser of Family Connection in Towns County Schools coordinates with a committee within the

school each year to make sure the appropriate children get referred to Chief Wright and Shop With A Cop. Rosser and Family Connection also take referrals from families and others within the community.

"I'm glad that we can do this for kids and just make their Christmases special, just to give them that extra happiness this season," said Rosser.

One of the longstanding goals of Shop With A Cop is to let children know that they can and should feel comfortable approaching law enforcement officials. And so far, meeting that goal seems to be a success.

"I've still got kids from our first Shop With A Cop - I saw one last Sunday night at church, and when she saw me, she came up and gave me the biggest hug," said Chief Wright. "You just don't forget them, and we hope they don't forget us. And I hope they know if they need to come and talk to one of us, they can come on and talk to us. We don't want them to be afraid of law enforcement."

Refreshments were provided by Walmart for hungry shoppers, and the children were taken back to Towns County for a delicious meal at the Georgia Mountain Restaurant.

"I just want to thank the community for their continued support of this, and I hope it continues long after I'm retired," said Chief Wright. "I hope it's a continual thing for many, many, many years. I can't thank the community enough - if it wasn't for them, we wouldn't be able to do this."

Donations are accepted year-round for Shop With A Cop.

Stockings...from Page 1A

its annual Christmas party at the Anderson Music Hall of the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

"The event was attended by approximately 150 people of all ages," according to the sheriff's office. "Along with sheriff's office staff was a large group of community volunteers and Citizen Law Enforcement Academy Alumni. Much to the delight of the children present, there was even a special guest appearance by Santa himself."

Many awards were handed out to celebrate outstanding performance within the sheriff's office, and Sheriff Clinton shared with his gratitude for the hard work of the entire TCSO staff.

"Captains James Baldwin and Terry Conner presented awards to several staff members, recognizing exceptional performance," according to the sheriff's office. "Two of these awards, the Brian Wilson Community Service Award and the Amy Burch Sunshine Award, are given in memory of these two outstanding deputies who both passed away in 2013."

The Brian Wilson Community Service Award goes to a deputy who consistently goes the extra mile to build good community relationships and be involved in the community, according to the sheriff's office, and the Amy Burch Sunshine Award goes to a deputy who is

always positive and upbeat and seeks to encourage others.

"These awards recognize deputies and also are a reminder of those who went before and set a good example to others," according to the sheriff's office.

Employees who were honored with special recognition included: 2014 Deputy of the Year, Aaron Deyton; 2014 Detention Officer of the Year, James Murray; 2014 Supervisor of the Year (Field Operations), Lt. Mark Cecci, Criminal Investigations Division, and Lt. Mark Henderson, Patrol Division; 2014 Brian Wilson Community Service Award, Sgt. Brandon Barrett, Field Operations Division, and Sgt. Ken Nicholson, Detention Center; 2014 Amy Burch Sunshine Award, Deputy Donnie Jarrard, Field Operations Division; 2014 Sheriff's Office "Team Player Award," Deputy Jay McCarter and Deputy Jeremy Parker; 2014 Outstanding Service Awards, Vicki Ellis, Administrative Assistant, and Sandy Morgan, Terminal Agency Coordinator; and 2014 Detention Rookie of the Year, Dawson Wood.

The sheriff's office offered a special thank you to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds' General Manager, Hilda Thomson, and GMF Board of Directors, for allowing them the use of the facility.

Concert...from Page 1A



kind of tend to swing that way. It's definitely still Christmas-themed, but there was one tune that the middle school did, The Invincible Warrior, that wasn't holiday related, but we still did it at the concert because we'd been working on it."

At the high school level, the students played four tunes: Armed Forces Salute, Cumberland Cross, O Come, Emmanuel and Sleight Ride.

These student musicians have been busy in the community, having played at the Towns County Veterans Day Program, marched in the Sheriff's Christmas Parade and entertained folks who attended the Young Harris Christmas Tree Lighting.

Not to mention all of the work they've put in over the semester for the football season and competitions, at which they won accolades to add to the Towns County Schools' trophy case.

"I just want to reiterate

how impressed I am in general with these kids and the amount of time they've put in toward giving back to the community with the talents they have in music," said Nolen. "Most high school groups that I've seen in the past, they definitely go to football games, they may do a parade or something, but nothing like we do in terms of a football season, a Veterans Day ceremony, parades, the Christmas tree lighting."

"They're so involved in the community, and that's how they use their time and talents - it's really impressive."

All who attended the Winter Concert seemed to enjoy the performances of the youths of Towns County, and Nolen marked it as a special occasion for himself, too.

"This definitely was a life highlight, because this is what I've studied and wanted to do with my life in terms of being a teacher and a band director," said Nolen.

Deyton...from Page 1A

Clinton and all his finest and best to show up.

"There was never a second that our problem was not your problem. All of you gave Aaron not only the professional help he so desperately needed; but, you ministered to his personal and spiritual needs as well."

"The statements from both the trauma surgeon and the anesthesiologist told us he was the most calm, tranquil person they had ever performed surgery on. They were amazed that anyone in Aaron's condition could arrive and have all their vitals be at normal levels. We know it was because you were so reassuring that he had a wonderful sense that all would be well with him. You gave him the encouragement he needed. You were truly his family away from his family."

"Our appreciation goes out to all of you who accepted our frantic calls in the early morning hours to pray for Aaron. Your prayers comforted and made us stable so that we could get through the worst crisis of our lives."

"Also, we are mindful and appreciative to all the citizens of Towns County, Union County, White County, Clay County and many different areas who prayed with us, for us and are still standing with us until Aaron fully recovers."



Towns County Sheriff Chris Clinton presents Deputy Aaron Deyton with the honor of Deputy of the Year for Towns County Sheriff's Office.

Family members who reside in Towns County and family members residing outside Towns County can emphatically declare that Towns County proved to be the finest and best on that fateful morning of Oct. 1.

We will never forget your labor of love to us as you helped us in coping with the worst disaster in our lives. You cried with us, you prayed with us,

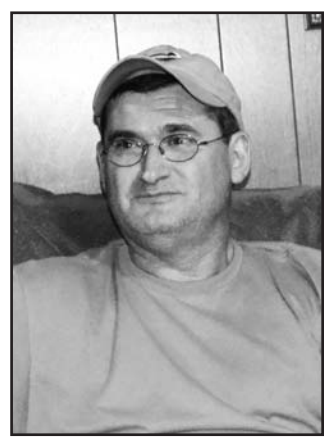
and when we even had small accomplishments you rejoiced with us. And, when the day came for him to be released from the hospital, all of you were as excited as we were. We were especially touched when our Sheriff personally came to escort him home.

"It is good to know that we have such a qualified, efficient and caring Sheriff together with a competent staff

representing not only your personal employees in a time of crisis; but, every resident can enjoy peace of mind knowing we have the best, most loyal, dedicated and competent law enforcement team there is.

"Thank you for being there at every turn in the road we have had to go through," sincerely, the family of Deputy Aaron Deyton.

Lights...from Page 1A



Robert Buchanan

Children have grown particularly fond of the frog, and have started a tradition of throwing coins into the frog's mouth, similar to a wishing well - a display Robert calls "feeding the frog."

"Like most of the kids, I tend to go to the frog," said Robert, commenting on his favorite attraction. "And the Snoopy House out there, the little wooden doghouse - that was actually my grandmother's doghouse from years ago. I like it just because it was hers."

Of course, installing and running all of these lights comes at a cost, and the Buchanans have built a candy cane themed donation box for those in attendance to contribute



what they can in the spirit of future holiday enjoyment.

"I'd like to thank everybody for putting the donations in the box," said Robert. "That's what makes it possible, because if it wasn't for those donations, there's no way I could afford to do this, with the electric bill and the costs of lights and replacing lights and extension cords and string and staples - it runs into a lot of money, quick."

A choice selection of Robert's favorite Christmas

music plays until 9 p.m., and the lights can be seen all week long from dark to about 10 p.m. The Buchanans plan to keep the lights going through Jan. 4 of the New Year, and the family wishes everyone to know that they are free to stop on by and wonder at their lights, even after Christmas.

"We love for people to come," said Della Mae.

Should any doubt the Buchanans' love of the Christmas season, just drive on by to

see the magic on display. Don't worry with GPS or maps - just wait until dark, turn down Scat-away Road from the main road going into town and keep on until you see the lights.

"We would like to thank everybody who comes by every year, and for the donations in the donation box," said Robert. "We appreciate everything. Occasionally, we'll get a little note in the donation box. Everybody's welcome. That's what it's there for."

Fence...from Page 1A

Force located Connell at the top of the mountain ridge behind the Russell home.

Since that time, the Russells have taken extraordinary precautions to counteract Connell's escape artistry. They have installed a security system that announces what door or window was opened and where in the home, and Connell has a GPS tracking device that looks and wears like a watch.

At the time of Connell's disappearance in 2012, the family had "thumb bolts" at the tops of each door, well out of reach. As an added safety measure, these have now been changed to deadbolts requiring keys both inside and out.

And now, they have yet another layer of security - a nice perimeter fence.

"It'll change our life," said Dana Russell. "We can be outside and not be worried about, where's Connell, where's Connell? And it's a panic, all the time. You just feel panicked, even in the house, if you can't find him, you panic. You've got all the doors locked, but you panic. And then you cry, and it's a horrible way to live."

The idea of installing a fence around the home is not a new one, but the expense proved to be too great for the Russells. On top of all the other security measures and costs associated with raising an autistic child, the family just couldn't afford it.

After Connell was rescued in the mountains, the Russells put on a series of fundraisers to help them make the home safer for Connell. The couple approached Home Depot to see if they could get discounted wood, as they had family friends who were



willing to install the fence for them.

But Home Depot had other plans.

John Wischmeyer, who is the store manager of the Blairsville Home Depot, led the team of 22 volunteer Home Depot associates that included five different stores.

"We were contacted by the Russells," said Wischmeyer. "We found out they had an autistic son, and that he was a bit of an escape artist. And so, every time he had a chance to wander out into the wilderness he would. In fact, when we found out that he had actually gotten over the mountain behind the home and they had to call out the search and rescue and it was a really big deal, we knew we had to do something."

One of the core values at the Home Depot is giving back, said Wischmeyer, and he and the company saw this as a perfect opportunity to give back to the Russell Family.

After about five and a half months of planning and paperwork this year, Wischmeyer contacted the Russells to let

them know the fence was a go.

"There are a lot of folks out here that helped us get this whole thing put together," said Wischmeyer.

Autism Speaks served as a primary sponsor along with the Home Depot Foundation, and Take-A-Break Portables of Hayesville, NC, donated a porta-potty for use on the worksite.

"Everything came together, and I think because it was a kid, it made everybody really want to kind of pitch in," said Wischmeyer. "So, just a phenomenal deal, and hopefully when we get done here, this child's going to pick up thousands of square feet to play in. Ultimately, it's for Connell, and hopefully it'll provide a little bit more peace of mind for his parents in terms of being able to run away and escape."

Sheriff Clinton and the Russells thank God for Connell's safe return that fateful day in March of 2012, and today, they have a different reason to give thanks.

"It's a lot of emotions," said Sheriff Clinton on returning to the Russell home to see the fence completed. "The first time I was out here, it was incredibly tense with concern. And today, I'm extremely excited, but at the same time I'm kind of like, I'll feel even better when it's completed. I understand that it'll be completed today, but it means a lot to me."

"I can't say that I completely understand how they feel, but I have a taste of that with an autistic nephew. For them, for Connell, he can come out here and be just a normal kid a little bit. It's going to change his life, but I imagine it's going to really change their lives as well."

The Russells already have plans for the newly protected area surrounding their home.

"Our backyard has just a 6-foot privacy fence," said Kim Russell. "There are no trees. We have the trampoline out there, but there's really nothing for him to do. And this is just going to enable him to be a little boy, and build him a tree house and play with the sticks, because he loves the outdoors."