

New Year...from Page 1

able to attend, and generally working on the city council's image as far as the public is concerned.

For the fourth year in a row, the Towns County Lady Indians won the Big Show in Carrollton, reigning supreme once again as State Champions of Class A Public School Cross Country.

Hannah Whitehead, a sophomore, was individual State Champion for the second year in a row, and she was joined on the winner's podium by teammate Taylor Cornett, who finished Runner-Up in this year's state meet, and Taralee Arrowood, who placed sixth in the competition.

The Towns County Indians placed third overall in state competition, after a Runner-Up victory last year, and Tyler Gimsley finished fourth in state.

In the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Annual Meeting in September, the BRMEMC membership elected Mickey Cummings of Union County, Roy Perren of Towns County and Larry Williams of Fannin County, all of whom were nominated by petition.

At that meeting, the membership all but ratified its support for continued transparency within the BRMEMC Board of Directors, as the previous year Chris Logan, Steven Phillips and Charles Jenkins also made it on the ballot by petition for the 2014 annual meeting, and were subsequently voted onto the board.

The membership also voted to impose a three-year term limit on board members moving forward.

"I think people are ready to put the past behind them," said Perren, shortly after learning the results of the election. "I think the membership is ready to move forward. I think the vote today was about transparency, I think it was about opening the meeting process. I support both measures."

In early November, the EMC board penned a letter committing itself to the principles on which the newer board members petitioned and were elected.

"Your Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors is committed to transparency, accountability and responsibility," read the letter, which went on to say that the board would be keeping the

public up to date on the goings-on of the board meetings.

Since 2014, the board has passed a conflict of interest policy prohibiting board members from having a profitable business relationship with the EMC, and board members, as well as the board attorney, no longer receive health benefits through the EMC, according to the letter.

Dr. Darren Berrong took the helm in January of 2015 as Towns County Superintendent of Schools, after being selected to take the place of former Superintendent Dr. Richard Behrens, who had taken the job on an interim basis following the departure of Melissa Williams, who went to lead Rabun County Schools at the start of the 2014-2015 school year.

Towns County Fire Chief Mitch Floyd retired, and longtime Towns County Assistant Fire Chief Harold Copeland took over in February of 2015. Chief Copeland, with more than 30 years of experience fighting fires in Towns County, hit the ground running, and for many, it has become hard to imagine a time before Chief Copeland took the job.

Chief Copeland has taken it upon himself to spearhead the new Shop With a Hero initiative for Christmas 2016, an initiative that Chief Wright spoke with him about prior to his untimely passing.

Also in 2015, the Mountain Regional Library System searched for and found a replacement for longtime MRLS Director Donna Howell, who retired at the end of December 2014 after serving 10 years as director and 15 years before that as assistant director.

Vince Stone took over the top spot as the MRLS director this year, and the Mountain Regional Library in Young Harris will be undergoing a \$1 million renovation in 2016 under his guidance.

Young Harris City Council made Mayor's Park and Cupid Falls tobacco-free zones for the benefit of public health, and Young Harris residents voted for liquor by the drink and Sunday alcohol sales.

The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds proved once again its staying power in terms of bringing folks from around the region to the county for its Georgia Mountain Fair, Fall



Festival, and series of concerts, including Ray Stephens, Three Dog Night and the Georgia Fiddlers' Convention.

Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason was inducted into the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame in recognition of her many years of hard work and service to the Country Music industry in Georgia.

Towns County Sole Commissioner Bill Kendall paved the way for recreation in the county, continuing to expand the role of the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center by promoting its use for various purposes within the community, including the Towns County High School King of the Mountain wrestling tournament, and the National Day of Prayer meeting.

Commissioner Kendall continued to champion recreation by renovating the old tennis courts next to Hiawassee Beach into a brand new pickleball facility, which has already hosted several tournaments featuring players from around the United States.

The Mountain Movers and Shakers continued its educational and political awareness goals in the county by bringing in many noted leaders from around the state to speak in its weekly meetings, including State Sen. John Wilkinson, U.S. Rep. Doug Collins, and a special meeting led by students of the county featuring keynote speaker Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle.

The group also hosted its leadership and speech training over the summer, conducting a successful speech contest that has garnered the attention of other communities.

Weather played a big role in Towns County during the 2015 year, as the beginning of the year saw more than 8 inches of snow, and the end of the year brought flash floods on Christmas Eve and Christmas day, and with it abnormally high temperatures. Fortunately, no one was hurt during extreme weather events of the year.

Enota...from Page 1

stay in touch with that. People need to remember that there's a simple way to live. Basically, the entire environment, the way it's set up, is set up for people to appreciate nature and appreciate simple living," she said.

When it came time to buy Enota Retreat, Freed found that developers wanted to make it a gated community. Freed went the other direction, making the land available for children and families.

"That's a very big deal for us, is that we leave it available, so people can have a nature experience," she said.

According to Freed, the facility takes people in who are in need. For a small deposit, Enota Retreat gives people the opportunity to have positive experiences learning skills that they can employ later in life.

"Right now there's a lot of young people who are struggling with where they belong. They're having a difficult time finding jobs. They're having a difficult time making it. They're living in their parents' basement. When people come here, a lot of times, they've really been traumatized," she said.

"One of the things that happens here every day is we provide an environment where people can get a wholesome experience so that they can really learn some overall life

experiences and skills across the board, because everything imaginable happens here," she said.

Skills taught can be as basic as showing up to work on time, and can range from being able to run a store to working on the grounds, to farming and taking care of animals.

Often, people who work at Enota Retreat go on to utilize similar skills ranging from cooking to farming to hospitality.

"They might start their own farm. They might go into some area of business. We're not really a two-year program.



Waterfall at Enota Retreat

Flooding...from Page 1

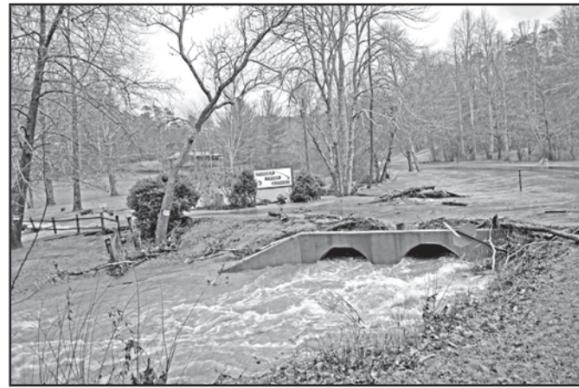
closed. The pipes held, but the asphalt above them took heavy damage and has huge chunks missing."

Culverts took on so much damage because they had become overwhelmed with the amount of water rushing through them – rain gauges at the top of Bell Mountain were overflowing at 8 inches.

As of press time Monday, there were no reports of fatalities or injuries as a result of the flash flooding on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

For his part, Chief Copeland did his best to stay ahead of the curve, calling for an evacuation of the Pasture Store Campground Christmas Eve, potentially saving the lives of a dozen residents.

As for staying safe, Chief Copeland cautions people to keep current on and to actively follow weather advisories and conditions. Get out of potentially affected areas before flooding begins, and if you come across water in the road, be it driving or on foot, turn around – swift moving water and unseen debris



Flooding at Fodder Creek Estates

can cause a vehicle or person to get swept away easily.

"We had our johnboats – the DNR had their johnboat ready out of Station 2 over in Young Harris, and a couple of our firemen, we had johnboats where we could get in and get people out if flooding overwhelmed them, or get into them later on, like the Hall Creek people, to get them groceries or medicine, or get an EMT or paramedic sent to them," said Chief Copeland.

In case of impending heavy rain and flash flood potential, Chief Copeland advises residents to either shelter in place or get out ahead of time. Should residents decide to stay in their homes during extreme weather such as flash flooding, Chief Copeland says they should just stay put, and to contact local authorities to let them know where they are located – do not try to drive through, walk through or swim through floodwaters.

Nursing Home...from Page 1

to "shop" for Christmas presents for themselves or their families.

"We were taking donations of new or gently-used small or gift-type items, or money donations so we could go out and buy stuff. So people bring stuff in, and when it was close to Christmastime, we set up one of our dining rooms. We arranged it like a little store and set out all the little gift tables. Like we've got piles of blankets, socks, and slippers," said Chelsey Phillips, activity director at Chatuge Regional Nursing Home.

"This year we were able to let them do three things each. They come and shop for themselves, or they can buy things for family members, like if they want to give a Christmas gift. And then we have a giftwrapping table, and if it's for a gift, we wrap it for them and put who it's to and all that stuff. It's their little way of doing Christmas here at the nursing home. It's fun. I love it. It's a long day but it's very fun," she said.

"They get all excited about it, because people are donating gifts," said David Vogel, also of the Activities Department. "And these gifts are mostly new gifts – most all of them are new – and they're real nice things. Socks, blankets, a lot of clothes and stuffed animals, just a lot of different things."

According to Phillips, lots of people donate money,



David Vogel and Hannah Gavarrete of Chatuge Regional Nursing Home

time and items to the shopping day.

"The Pink Ladies that work at the hospital are here some, too," said Phillips, in reference to the Chatuge Regional Hospital Auxiliary. "They'll actually come on that day and help residents through the store, and help them pick out items."

"Blankets are always a big thing. Some people like crocheting and homemade blankets, and then any kind of little fuzzy, soft blanket, that's always good. Jewelry for the ladies. A lot of candy stuff, like little gifts of candy or cookies. For the men, socks and ball caps. Anything UGA, we have a lot of UGA people here," she added.

The shopping day is not the only activity that the Chatuge Nursing Home puts on

for its residents. Staff members also hold birthday parties every month, and host seasonal and themed parties as well.

"We're always doing stuff here, like games where they win prizes. They have a game called 'Let's Make a Deal,' where they have play money or whatever and they'll try to make a deal and win a prize. We're always doing little prize things," she said.

"One of the biggest things of the year is the shopping day, and that happens every Christmas. We always have fun parties. We do birthday parties ever month, but we had a Western-style party a while back, and we learned how to do line dances for some of the residents and we loved that. That was so much fun. That was probably one of my favorites," she said.

the Hamilton Rhododendron Gardens Festival.

"It was our second annual Appalachian Wine and Jazz Festival. Our camping was good this year, lots of people camping and enjoying the lake and all the activities that we have going on at the Fairgrounds. The Hamilton Rhododendron Garden, the festival brought a lot of people in, the gardens were absolutely beautiful in the Spring, and we're making plans to have all that again next year," said Thomason.

She's confident that next year can be even better.

"Something new that we're planning is the Craft Beer Festival, called the Appalachian Brew Que, and Stew festival, and that's going to be in October of next year,

Empty Stocking...from Page 1

businesses, such as McConnell Baptist Church and Servpro, who were glad to not only get involved but also to help out children in need.

One reason for the increase might be assistance from Towns County Schools. According to Sheriff Clinton, Towns County Schools donated so many gifts, that his office had to bring a truck and fill it up to the brim in order to cart them all away.

For his part, Sheriff Clinton said he was hesitant to name specific individuals and groups in case he forgot

anybody, but wanted to say that he was just grateful for the support of the community in general.

"There's no way that this thing could happen without the support of the community. It's a real blessing to me, and it's a real blessing to these children to watch the outpouring of love from this community. It's humbling to watch, and there's no way that we could do this without the community's work. I'm honored to be able to serve in that way, but the community's excellent. It's just tremendous," he said.

Lights...from Page 1

ourselves," added his mother, Della Mae, who helps each year with the decorations.

Robert's father, James, passed away recently, so there were fewer hands putting up the lights this year. Nevertheless, both Robert and Della Mae agreed that they will continue to put up the Christmas lights each year in his absence.

"He was our 'fix-it' guy," explained Robert. "Anything that needed fixing, when we were working we'd bring it in here and he'd be the one who fixed everything. If we couldn't get it taken care of, we wouldn't put it up. But if we put it up, we check it out. If it doesn't work, it's that much time and trouble to fix it."



"If we can put the decorations up, we will," he said. "That's the way we leave it every year. If we can we will. It's a year-to-year thing. If we're able to do it next year, we'll do it."

Usually, the Buchanan family begins to put up lights around the third week of September. They like to have them turned on by Thanksgiving.

Of course, running all those Christmas lights involves a lot of electricity. The Buchanans have set up a donation box to keep things running.

"We get what we get, and we're appreciative of everything we get, which is great and helps cover it. You have it and electrical expenses and cord and string. It runs up the money. We just like Christmas. We just like the Christmas lights and we just got started with it, and it just ended up being what it is," said Robert.

The lights have definitely increased the Buchanan's popularity. People regularly stop by to admire the lights.

"A lot of people come by. A lot of older people came the other day, and they were standing out there, and they said since they can't see to drive after dark, they just came to look at it in the daytime. Makes you feel good," said Della Mae.

"You have a lot of repeat people. We have Santa out there on Friday nights if the weather permits. He's now seeing the children of kids he used to see years ago, so he's on his second generation of people he met years ago," said Robert.

The popularity of the Buchanan Lights has also increased this season thanks to the late Hiawassee Police Chief Jimmy Wright, who took a video of their lighted house and posted it on Facebook.

"It had 5,000 views then, and today I looked at it and it's had 10,700 views," said Robert. "I thank him for doing it. Jimmy was always helping us out. We grew up together. He was tickled his video he put on his Facebook got up to 5,000 views," said Robert.

The lights will remain on display through Jan. 4 of the New Year.

Fair...from Page 1

next year."

For the Fairgrounds, it was a year of music. Thomason, who was recently inducted into the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame for her work in bringing all kinds of Country Music talent to perform locally over her career, said that even though the number of concerts was up from 2014, she has plans to bring even more talent to Anderson Music Hall in 2016.

The Fairgrounds hosted several conventions, clubs, and other events that brought people to the area, stimulated the economy, and put Towns County on the map in 2015.

"We had the Christian Motorcycle Association, which brought in 2,500 people for a

