

# Towns County Herald

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## Hohmann sentenced in Penland hit-and-run case

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

For years, the friends and family of Randall "Shorty" Penland have been calling for #JusticeForShorty. Last month, they got substantially closer when Raymond Leo Hohmann III was sentenced to nine months in jail in connection with Penland's death.

Penland, of Hiawassee, was killed when a vehicle struck him and fled the scene as he was walking along US 64 near the intersection of High View Drive in Clay County, North Carolina, in the early morning hours of Nov. 16, 2018.

He was 49 years old. Five months later, the North Carolina State Highway Patrol and Clay County Sheriff's Office wrapped up an investigation that consisted of multiple interviews with individuals in Georgia and North Carolina, as well as evidence tested by the North Carolina State Crime Lab, including a

vehicle of interest and items taken from the scene of Penland's death.

Raymond Leo Hohmann III, of Hayesville, was arrested on April 26, 2019, and charged with the felony crimes of involuntary manslaughter, hit-and-run, and obstruction of justice for "washing and/or detailing a 2005 Dodge truck in an attempt to destroy evidence," per court documents.

Hohmann, now 40, bonded out of jail the day of his arrest, and the case dragged on without a conclusion until January 2023.

As the trial was underway last month in Swain County Superior Court, the defense for Hohmann approached the office of District Attorney Ashley Welch of North Carolina's District 30.

The defense was asking for a negotiated plea to lesser charges, specifically, misdemeanor death by vehicle and misdemeanor obstruction of justice, Welch's office said last

Thursday. These charges carried significantly lower incarceration terms.

Welch's office was fully prepared to prosecute the case but reached out to Penland's family with the proposed agreement crafted by the defense, as it is "the preference of the office to involve the victims in any decision making," said Quintin Ellison, a legal assistant in the District Attorney's Office.

"The prosecution did not seek a plea," Ellison said. "We left it to the family to make that decision, and they were happy with it... the family was totally on board - it was totally their decision."

When contacted by the Towns County Herald about the outcome of the case, the Penland Family declined to comment pending ongoing civil litigation involving Hohmann.

The agreement was accepted by the District Attorney's Office and entered



Randall "Shorty" Penland

into court on Jan. 17, where it was signed by Superior Court Judge Peter Knight to include two pleas of "No Contest" to the misdemeanor charges, per court documents.

"This plea was for Hohmann's involvement in the death of Randall David Penland 'Shorty' and subsequent cover-up crime by trying to destroy physical evidence," Clay County Sheriff Mark Buchanan said in a media release.

According to Buchanan, a plea of "No Contest" means that "a person does not dispute the charges against them and has the same effect as a guilty plea in terms of sentencing."

"A person who pleads 'No Contest' is not admitting 'legal responsibility,' which limits its use in civil actions," Buchanan said. "Hohmann is currently a defendant in a lawsuit regarding Shorty's death."

Sheriff Buchanan reiterated the involvement of Penland's family in settling on a negotiated deal, saying they were "apprised of all aspects of this case and independently made the decision to accept this plea."

Hohmann was sentenced to nine months in the custody of the Clay County Detention Center, which, based on the charges, "was the maximum amount of imprisonment he could have received," Buchanan said.

"The Clay County Sheriff's Office extends our deepest



Raymond Leo Hohmann III

sympathy to Shorty's family who have suffered greatly over the past four years while awaiting justice and closure from (his) tragic death," Buchanan concluded.

According to records obtained from the Clay County Clerk of Court's Office in North Carolina, Hohmann had five prior convictions in the leadup to his plea agreement which played a factor in his misdemeanor sentencing.

## Tax Commish, Coroner inform Movers & Shakers

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

In the immortal words of Founding Father Benjamin Franklin, there are only two inevitabilities in life: death and taxes. So it stands to reason that they'd eventually come together at a Mountain Movers and Shakers meeting.

On Friday, Feb. 3, at the usual Sundance Grill hangout, the shakers welcomed the first of two speakers that the morning, Towns County Tax Commissioner Michael Anderson, who is also known for his position as assistant coach for Towns County Indians Basketball.

Anderson was elected



Michael Anderson  
Tax Commissioner

to his first term in November 2020, and speaking to the specific business conducted by his office that morning, he provided some statistics, starting with



Tamela Cooper  
Coroner

the number of vehicle titles issued locally last year: 3,162.

"Smaller campers (and) trailers under 2,000 pounds,

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## Mayor Ordiales announces 'debt-free' Hiawassee

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Hiawassee City Council and Mayor Liz Ordiales held their first meeting of 2023, a work session, on Monday, Jan. 30, featuring a brief look back at 2022 with an eye toward mapping out the road ahead.

First off was the introduction of new Hiawassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker, who came on board at the beginning of the month. Parker is a Towns County High graduate and boasts 16 years of experience with the Towns County Fire and Rescue Team in the form of EMT service.

He has three years of

Detention Center experience along with approximately nine years in law enforcement. This is also not the first time Parker has led a police department; he has about four years in leadership and administrative duties as Dillard Police Chief.

"I think he's a great addition to our team," said Ordiales before Parker was met with applause.

Ordiales then highlighted some 2022 good news for Hiawassee, ranging from the securing of an additional \$71,000 a year in LOST proceeds to the approval of a \$690,000 grant to construct the upcoming boardwalk connecting Mayors Park and Lloyd's Landing.

She also revealed that the city was about to be debt-



Liz Ordiales  
Hiawassee Mayor

free "for the first time ever." "On Feb. 1, we will pull out the last payment, the last two loans that we have

See *Debt-Free*, Page 6A

## Hiawassee welcomes new Police Chief Jeremy Parker

By Jeremy Foster  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Hiawassee City Hall is pleased to welcome Police Chief Jeremy Parker, who has taken over as "Top Cop" of the Police Department following former Chief Paul Smith's resignation in December.

"We are very proud and fortunate to have Jeremy Parker apply for our Chief of Police position," Mayor Liz Ordiales said. "Jeremy is a lifelong local Towns County resident and a graduate of Towns County High School.

"He has over 16 years' ex-

perience with the Towns County Fire Rescue and is Dive Team certified. He also has 16 years' experience in the EMT field.

"His law enforcement experience spans over three years in the detention center and nine years in law enforcement, with over 1,400 hours of training.

"His leadership experience comes from being the chief of police in Dillard for three years and interim police chief for one year. He has much to offer our department, and I look forward to working with him."

Chief Parker has been on the job a little more than a

month now, and he said last week that "it's been a bit of a challenge with the transition, but we're working through that and always moving forward."

"The reception has been very good," the new chief said. "I grew up in this town, so I see at least four to five people a day that tell me they are glad to see me doing what I enjoy doing by protecting the citizens of my community."

Of course, Parker is excited for the opportunity to serve and protect the residents, businesses and visitors of Hiawassee, and he touched on some of his background and the origins of his passion for public

service.

"I started with the Fire Department under the Explorer Program when I was around 14 or 15, so that's really where it all began for me," Parker said. "It all just kind of grew organically from there into a strong passion also for law enforcement and highway safety."

"Through my roles as a volunteer lieutenant at Fire Station No. 1 and firefighter EMT for Towns County EMS, I've seen a lot of traffic crashes and tragedies.

"So, the goal for myself and my officers is to make sure people that are traveling the

See *Police Chief Parker*, Page 6A



Jeremy Parker is Hiawassee PD's new chief, pictured here in the Jan. 30 City Council work session.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Methamphetamine trafficker receives 10 years behind bars

News Special  
Towns County Herald

ASHEVILLE, N.C. - Brandon Todd O'Dell, 34, of Hiawassee, Georgia, was sentenced Feb. 2 to 120 months in federal prison followed by five years of supervised release for trafficking methamphetamine.

The announcement came by way of Dena J. King, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina.

According to documents filed with the court and the sentencing hearing last Thursday, O'Dell conspired with other individuals to traffic methamphetamine in and around Jackson County and elsewhere in North

Carolina. Court records show that on March 9, 2021, Jackson County Sheriff's Office deputies were conducting a welfare check on a female who was a passenger in O'Dell's vehicle. At the time, the vehicle was parked at the parking lot of a Dollar General Store in Sylva, North Carolina.

Over the course of the service call, law enforcement received conflicting accounts from O'Dell, the female passenger, and another male passenger regarding their travel, the reason for their stop, and their ultimate destination.

Subsequently, court records show that law enforcement conducted a search of O'Dell's



Brandon Todd O'Dell

vehicle, from which they recovered methamphetamine, digital scales, small plastic bags, and

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## New SRO vehicle features Towns County Indians Pride

News Special  
Towns County Herald

The Towns County Sheriff's Office recently received a new Dodge truck that will serve as the dedicated School Resource Officer's vehicle and decided to do something a little different with it.

Although the new truck has all the markings of the other patrol units in the fleet, the new SRO truck, which will be driven by SRO Cpl. Donnie Jarrard, has the Towns County Indian decal proudly displayed on each side of the truck.

Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson stated that this was all made possible by work-



TCSO Cpl. Donnie Jarrard is extremely proud of his new SRO truck, pictured here with student Maeli Johnstone and teacher Sheena Kendall at Towns County Schools.

Photo/Facebook

ing together with Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and Towns County School Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong.

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5:30 PM

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# Death & Taxes...from Page 1A

Georgia does not title, and we get into that sometimes because North Carolina and other states do," Anderson said. "So, a lot of times, citizens come in wanting a title in Georgia, and we will not title anything under 2,000 pounds if it's just a utility vehicle."

He then set the record straight on the appropriate time to renew a car tag. Some folks erroneously believe they must wait until the end of their birthday month to renew, but the "limit" is actually midnight of their birthday.

All in all, the vehicle side of the tax office carried out 25,704 transactions last year. Meanwhile, property tax collections for 2020 are at 98.82%, with 2021 collected at 97.58% and 2022 at 87.45%.

"Every job, if you love it, has some areas that you don't love to do at all, and the collections side ... where you have to 'prod' payment is one (for me)," Anderson said, speaking of tax sales for delinquent bills. "We actually had two last year, because I came in and, to be truthful, we were a little behind on that aspect."

"We did have five pieces of property that were sold in February on a tax sale of '22. And then in November, we had nine more. And fortunately, it's all been working out."

"The Lord has blessed it in ways to where it's actually people that didn't mind - let's put it that way ... No one's home has been sold or anything like that."

The handling of unpaid property taxes can quickly become a sore subject, and there are plenty of reasons why debts might not be handled. One thing Anderson suggests is to keep meticulous property records - especially those residents who have no other family in the mountains.

"I would encourage (you) to let your heirs know what you own," Anderson said. "It's really a sad situation when there's some children or grandchildren somewhere that don't know anything about a parcel of land that mom or dad or grandparents had, and there's no way to find anything."

And after seven years, a family loses all rights on unpaid, unclaimed land, he said. For his part, Anderson promised to "do everything (he) could" to prevent a land

sale. As a final announcement, Anderson informed shakers that the Tax Office now has a Facebook page, which will be used to share information like office closings for bad weather and send-out dates for upcoming charges, like the mobile home bills set to come out this spring.

Next, Towns County Coroner and Downtown Development Authority Board Member Tamela Cooper appeared to discuss the circumstances in which the Coroner's Office may be called, on what grounds an autopsy is performed, and the grave task of going over local death statistics.

In 2021, the Coroner's Office performed 67 calls; 2022 saw 84; and, concerning, the start of 2023 has already heralded 13. If the trend continues at the current rate, that could total to an alarming 140 calls by the end of the year.

"2022 was pretty tragic in our county," she said. "We had some overdoses, sadly; we had gone a few years without seeing much of that, and we had some serious overdoses."

"Then we had some serious car accidents that cost lives, and that was tragic and hard," added Cooper, breaking down those numbers and what they meant - or, in a sense, providing a human aspect to the statistics.

And because of that, Cooper wants to remind the general public that, although emergency responders like EMTs and firefighters may deal with tragedy daily, they aren't immune to the consequences of untimely death.

"Our first responders are still carrying a lot of those burdens around," Cooper said, asking for gentleness and understanding when it comes to interacting with those who are usually first on the scene of a death.

Cooper quickly opened the floor to questions, addressing multiple topics raised by curious shakers.

"If we are dispatched by 911, (where) they call and say they request a coroner, we have to go," she said. "Regardless of if I say, 'Well, tell me what it is. What's going on?' They're like, 'Oh, well, they're on hospice, but the family called 911.'"

"I still have to go, one

of us do (from the office), and the reason is that ... hospice can no longer just pronounce (a death) and it goes under the rug," explained Cooper, saying that the primary reason for a family calling the coroner is pure panic.

Having what's ruled an "accidental death" complicates things, whether for better or worse. In any case of accidental death, that is, an unnatural death due to fall or other accidental means, a coroner must sign the death certificate.

But Cooper informed the audience that a coroner's presence and involvement in a death doesn't necessarily imply foul play, as coroners may respond to every kind of death, natural or not.

Fielding a question about autopsies, Cooper said they are more or less decided by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Even if a coroner can't determine the cause of death, the GBI may decline an autopsy.

The kind of cases that are more likely to be accepted by the GBI are overdoses or other drug and alcohol-induced deaths, or crime-related deaths where another person is facing charges, although families can request a private autopsy on a loved one in the price range of \$6,000 to \$8,000.

"Where they're not taken is if I say anything about COVID," Cooper said of the GBI. "Nope. We don't want to see them. Don't bring them down here, we don't want it."

Nine of the 84 Towns County coroner calls from last year ended in autopsies, and most of those dealt with drug activity.

Regardless of how someone leaves this world, what sticks with families during those difficult times is how their loved one's passing is handled, and Cooper, who owns and operates Banister-Cooper Funeral Home, said she is humbled each time she is thanked for her service and respect.

"I feel like I was called to this profession," she said. "I do the very best we can do, but I do not take for granted not one family, not one person, not one interaction. I absolutely love what I do."

The Mountain Movers and Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. inside the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee.

# Police Chief Parker...from Page 1A

highways, whether for business or local residents, are safe getting to where they are going and back home, and just make sure the citizens of Hiawassee feel like they're safe."

One way they plan on doing this is by implementing "proactive law enforcement initiatives" through the Governor's Office of Highway Safety.

"(We'll be) working with them on some of their initiatives, programs, and campaigns and make sure we are coordinating our efforts with their goals," Parker said, noting the distinct challenges of a growing population and a state/federal highway running directly through town.

"The demographics of our highways, through DOT

planning and things like that, are typically planned roadways based on the population," he continued. "And during the start of COVID until now, we have seen a surge in the population, and the infrastructure has not been able to keep up, which has caused congestion."

"So, we want to make sure that people are following the proper laws that are set in place to make the highways safer."

Parker identified multiple issues that "we could and have had," like speeding, distracted driving, improper lane use, seatbelt violations and impaired driving, among others, and he looks forward to ensuring that people have confidence in the

department's ability to protect the town.

"We want to provide everyone with a professional law enforcement agency that, when they call 911, they know they are getting a quality service from us and we are providing that service to the best of our abilities with our staff to make sure they and their businesses are taken care of," Parker said.

And in case people are wondering, the Hiawassee Police Department does not have a ticket quota "now or ever," Mayor Ordiales said, with Chief Parker adding there will be no quotas and that such a request "has not been imposed on me by the mayor or anyone else from the city."

# Sentenced...from Page 1A

other items commonly used for the repackaging and redistribution of methamphetamine.

Over the course of the investigation, law enforcement determined that O'Dell is a lieutenant in the Aryan Brotherhood in Georgia, and that he made multiple trips from Georgia to North Carolina to transport substantial quantities of methamphetamine.

On Oct. 7, 2022, O'Dell pleaded guilty to conspiracy to

distribute and to possess with intent to distribute methamphetamine. He remains in federal custody and will be transferred to the custody of the federal Bureau of Prisons upon designation of a federal facility.

In making the announcement, U.S. Attorney King thanked the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Jackson County Sheriff's Office for their investigation of the case,

which was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Tom Kent of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Charlotte.

The DEA encourages parents, along with their children, to educate themselves about the dangers of legal and illegal drugs by visiting DEA's interactive websites at www.JustThinkTwice.com, www.GetSmartAboutDrugs.com, www.CampusDrugPrevention.gov, and www.dea.gov.

# Debt-Free...from Page 1A

- \$457,000 - and we will be debt-free," she said, voicing her pride in the city while joking. "For all those people out there on Facebook who say I'm doing a terrible job? You're welcome, that's just for you."

That said, there will be loans taken out "in July-ish" for expansion of the water treatment plant, but until then, Hiawassee will have no debt.

She displayed blueprints for the expansion plans, which involve installing an additional water filter in a new building. The project will cost approximately \$2.7 million, but the loan provides 1.9% interest for 20 years thanks to the city's status as a PlanFirst Community.

In other news, the AT Hiker Initiative is set to benefit the city's outdoor sports and tourism industries in 2023.

Anyone who scans the QR code at the bottom of a special #hikewassee flyer will gain access to a map of Hiawassee, complete with tourism hotspots like stores, the post office, clinics and restaurants.

Included with the map is a list of services that hikers can utilize like ATM machines or laundry services along with pharmacies. One of the most important of these is the Hiawassee Hiker Shuttle, which runs from March 1 to April 30.

The regular city meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 7, which occurred after press time, was expected to see a vote on the new Personnel Policy revision. The

biggest change comes in the form of how the city handles holiday pay.

Previously, employees who chose to work on holidays were paid time and a half. With the change, employees will still receive holiday pay but will make straight pay for working on holidays. Mostly, this applies to police and water department personnel.

Other topics set for consideration in the regular meeting were the easement release of Hiawassee Park, the renaming of Nations Drive as a city street, the annual watershed monitoring contract with EMI, and the resolution of the Embrace Civility Program.

The Embrace Civility Program is a Georgia Municipal Association project in which a municipality resolves to "publicly declare its commitment to civil discourse and to express its concern for the common good and well-being of all of its residents."

Hiawassee recently received a sizeable TAP Transportation Grant from the state worth \$325,000 with a 20% match of \$65,000, which will allow the city to open the first phase of an initiative to "re-design the entire city's sidewalks." To be specific, it will open an engineer study.

Upon study completion, the city can look forward to quality-of-life changes to its sidewalks that include widening and proper drainage along with additional sidewalks

installed for safety. Big Sky Drive is already being eyed as a possibility for harboring a new sidewalk for safety.

For now, however, the study remains to be done, and hopes are high that it will be completed by summer.

In his first police report to the council, Chief Jeremy Parker addressed the recent instances of graffiti located around the city, most prominently on Dairy Queen, Eastgate Church and a police vehicle.

Investigations have confirmed that the crimes were carried out somewhere between the night of Saturday, Jan. 14, to early morning on Sunday, Jan. 15. Parker said the suspect was likely moving on foot due to the locations of the vandalized buildings and objects.

"We're having to go through hours of video to determine where this person was moving around," Parker said. "There's not a whole lot of cameras that were in that area, but the ones that are in that area are very good cameras."

"So, it's just a matter of time of narrowing down that timeframe, finding that person's movements, and then tying them back to where they were going. The investigation is still ongoing."

Last but not least, Economic Development Director Denise McKay offered an update on the Downtown Development Authority's plans. The "goat pen" lot and building behind it, located on the northwest corner of River and Main streets, have been sold and are slated to be redeveloped.

"They're going to redevelop it in two phases," McKay said. "Part of that does sit in the Rural Zone Area, and in order to use the tax credits that are available, it's better for the investor to do two separate buildings instead of one."

The eventual goal is to establish housing and retail uses, but first, the investor wishes to make the land more attractive and inviting for potential tenants.

City Council work sessions are held on the Monday of the week before regular city meetings, which occur the first Tuesday of every month inside City Hall located at 50 River Street. The public is welcome to attend and encouraged to get involved.

# AARP® AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation

AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Thursdays from 10 AM - 2 PM beginning February 9 through April 13. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-

515, Blairsville, GA. This service is by appointment only. Please call (770) 403-7959 for reservations.

Other AARP Tax Aide locations are:

Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10 AM - 2 PM, February 6 - April 14 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge.

Ellijay on Mondays from 10 AM - 2 PM, February 6 - April 10 at the Gilmer County Library, 268 Calvin Jackson Drive, Ellijay.

Blue Ridge and Ellijay are also by appointment only. Please call (770) 312-2258 for reservations at these locations.

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