

Hampton...from Page 1A



Reace Hampton was joined by his family, coaches and friends to celebrate a Feb. 3 signing ceremony in the School Media Center. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

captain for two of his four years as an Indian football player. During his senior season, he led the team with 60 tackles, seven fumbles, two forced recoveries and one interception.

The linebacker was also a part of the Indians Leadership Council and was selected as Georgia High School Association All-Region 8-A Honorable Mention for his spectacular play on the

gridiron. Following the signing ceremony, players, coaches and staff gathered to eat cake and share stories from over the years.

Reinhardt University is a private school in Waleska, Georgia, just outside Canton. The Eagles are a member of the Appalachian Athletic Conference that competes in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics

Division II. The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics is a college athletic association for small colleges and universities. Hampton will be joining an Eagles program that has seen a lot of success over the years, with several nine-plus win seasons and trips to the NAIA playoffs.



Hampton's buddies were happy to congratulate their friend last week on his hard work paying off, which came with the added benefit of getting to eat cake and drink punch outside of class. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Valentines...from Page 1A

the cards, though it will be perhaps a few more days before the cards go to their intended recipients.

"The kids could make whatever they wanted, but we knew that the cards had to sit," Lee said. "We couldn't just have the kids do them and then turn them over. They have to sit for a while to de-germ, and then we can give them in time for Valentine's Day."

Elementary School Assistant Principal Latisha Usher said the activity was a good way for students to connect with the senior community, to which many are no doubt related, and hopefully help foster a foundation for students to be more caring and

considerate of others. "We have a lot of kids here that have grandparents in the nursing home," Usher said. "They realize that they are not getting to see them, and they know that those people are probably missing their loved ones. We think that this is a very kind thing to do."

"We have Kindness Day here, and this is a way for our students to do something kind for people they may know. It is great for building community, and we want our students to know about our community. It's just a good thing for us to do."

The cards will be delivered to Brasstown Manor closer to the holiday, with each card being unique and

personalized by the student who made it.

Brasstown Manor Administrative Assistant Hannah Allen believes the cards will hearten the residents upon receipt, especially after all they've gone through for the past year or so with COVID-19.

"It just brings such joy to them," Allen said. "It has been a dark and difficult year for them, like it has for everybody. Just a little bit of thought and love that goes into these cards will bring their spirits up."

"They have been doing well during COVID, but they have missed their families and are being able to get out more. We are hoping that they can get back to that soon, and this is making them feel better."

Matheson...from Page 1A

aggravated stalking and criminal attempt to commit murder.

Judge Rogers also notified him of his rights and denied him bond, and the case has been referred to the Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court for an ultimate determination on bond conditions.

The maximum penalty for the above charges is 60 years in prison if sentenced consecutively, and it is possible the District Attorney's Office will bring additional charges when presenting the case before the Towns County Grand Jury.

Next steps for Matheson include the appointment of an attorney from the Public Defender's Office and a preliminary hearing to determine probable cause to go to trial, though such a hearing would become unnecessary if first the Grand Jury convenes next month as anticipated and indicts Matheson on charges stemming from the shooting.

For now, Matheson remains detained in the Towns County Jail without bond. He has been charged only and is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

At the time of the shooting, his estranged wife, Crystal Matheson, had been issued a Domestic Violence Protection Order against her husband. This is not Matheson's first family violence arrest, according to Hiawassee Chief Smith, who arrested Matheson in 2017 after he reportedly assaulted his own mother where they both worked.

He was also arrested twice last year for domestic violence-related crimes in Clay County, including on July 13, 2020, for assault by strangulation and again on Oct. 9, 2020, for violation of a Domestic Violence Order, Clay County Sheriff Bobby Deese said.

Crystal continues to

recover in the hospital after suffering eight gunshot wounds from the 9 mm handgun used against her on Jan. 26. She has been engaging with the public and asking for continued prayers on Facebook.

A GoFundMe has been set up for Crystal at <https://www.gofundme.com/f/recovery-for-crystal-matheson>.

"She is trying to recover in the hospital right now," GoFundMe organizer Luke Goodman said. "She currently has everyday bills, utilities, and a mortgage to pay for, on top of the hospital bills that she will soon have."

"We would also like to get her an attorney that specializes in domestic violence abuse. She has been through enough as it is before all of this happened!"

"We would like to ask everyone to help us reach our fundraiser goal for her. And also, please pray for her and a full recovery! She is a God-fearing, God-loving Christian and a wonderful person!"

School Board...from Page 1A

at home who tested positive. We currently have 25 students online out of 227 enrolled."

High School Principal Roy Perren bragged on his students and the accomplishments of organizations in the high school that have overperformed during the difficult year.

"We will be adding quite a few students to the Beta Club, 26 students after their first semester grades," Perren said. "This is CTAE Month and FBLA Week, and we have got great sponsors and students."

"We have one of the premier FBLA programs not only in the state but in the nation. They recently competed in a virtual region competition,

and we had 25 competitors. Out of 25, 22 placed in the Top Ten and 20 are advancing to the state competition."

According to Perren, the High School has the largest FBLA program in the region, and the team competes against 5A and 6A schools.

"In addition to that, at the regional conference, they won the Region Sweepstakes for the most winners in the region, so we will get to display a trophy here for a year," Perren said. "We have never won that before, so it is a great milestone at our school."

After the first semester, Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong has kept an eye on test

scores and tried to ensure that online students are doing what it takes to stay on the level with in-person student achievement.

"We only have first semester scores and not second-semester scores, so those change at the end of the year," Berrong said. "But I feel really good about the scores that we got in."

"I was actually very surprised at how well the online kids performed. They did not perform as well as the kids on campus, but it was not as big of a gap as I was expecting."

The School Board, Board Office and individual school staffs are hoping to continue the trend of providing students with the best education possible while also keeping COVID numbers down.

Vaccinations...from Page 1A



People must wait at least 15 minutes for side effect observation after getting their COVID shot. This takes place on Court B in the Towns County Rec Center. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

as well. Union General Health System Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said emergency room visits for COVID have dropped to about 20% of total visits, down from a high of 50-60% during the surge early last month.

The previous high for regional COVID inpatients between Union General and Chatuge Regional was nearly 50 in mid-January, and as of Feb. 7, that number was down to 15 for the two hospitals.

Barnett said the Health System was working on making Chatuge a "clean" facility again, with all COVID inpatients being treated in Union County.

In terms of lives lost, the Health System experienced a record number of deaths in January, though Barnett remains optimistic a week into February, noting that the death rate has apparently slowed since last month.

As vaccine supplies increase and more people get the shot in the months ahead, the area, state and nation will hopefully begin to see a compounding of present improvements, as the U.S. starts to experience what could be a natural decline in the annual winter respiratory virus season.

The highly contagious COVID-19 seems to be outcompeting influenza for hosts as the dominant respiratory virus at present, resulting in an incredibly light flu season nationwide that may also be impacted by similar mitigations in place against COVID.

In Georgia, as COVID has been raging this winter, there have been zero laboratory-confirmed influenza outbreaks reported for the 2020-21 flu season, compared with 49 at this same point in the 2019-20 season, according to the Department of Public Health.

That's not to say flu isn't spreading, just that it is spreading much less than in previous seasons; there have been, for example, some local influenza hospitalizations, but statewide, only two people had died as of Jan. 23 in the current flu season compared with 37 to this point in the last.

Generally speaking, the local hospitals screen for flu and strep as part of the routine work-up for patients presenting with influenza-like symptoms and swab for COVID when COVID-19 symptoms are present, with a few patients having tested positive for both flu and COVID.

Public health professionals recommend people keep up COVID best practices for the time being, including social distancing, limiting gatherings and wearing masks in public - even after getting the vaccine.

Local Vaccinations Continue

On the local vaccination front, both the Health Department and Synergy Health of Hiawassee are continuing their efforts to get the vaccine to as many people as possible, which presently means by appointment only.

Citing parking and building space constraints for on-premises mass vaccination, District 2 Public Health announced last week that its 13 county health departments would begin administering all COVID-19 vaccines at offsite facilities.

"For now, offsite facilities will provide a better environment for us to safely administer vaccine," District 2 Public Information Officer Dave Palmer said. "These facilities will also enable us to increase the number of people we can vaccinate when our vaccine supply improves."

Added Palmer, "We will continue essential services at

the Health Department. These include school immunizations, women's health services, screenings for certain diseases, and communicable disease treatment."

In Towns County, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, the Recreation Department and the Emergency Management Agency have teamed up to offer the Recreation and Conference Center at Foster Park for use in Health Department vaccination efforts.

Until further notice, all local Health Department vaccine appointment holders will be getting their first and second shots at Foster Park, which is also where Synergy Health and Dr. Samuel L. Church have hosted two mass vaccination clinics, with many more to come in the days ahead.

After the Jan. 27 test-drive clinic saw 100 people successfully vaccinated at a rate of 1,000 per day at Foster Park, the all-volunteer COVID-19 Vaccine Team of Synergy Health reconvened to help Dr. Church and his staff administer 500 more vaccines on Friday, Feb. 5.

As a mass vaccine provider, Dr. Church has requested 4,000 doses to deliver to his patients and to the public at large, though like everywhere else, his vaccine order is coming in only a little at a time and sporadically.

Because Dr. Church and his staff don't get much notification prior to receiving new doses, Synergy Health's COVID-19 vaccine clinics are designed for quick mobilization using community volunteers who spring into action as shipments arrive.

And this effort wouldn't be possible without the partnership with the county, which supplies the facility and other infrastructure to make sure the clinics run as smoothly as possible.

Towns County EMA Director Marty Roberts said everyone at the county, from the commissioner on down, has been looking for ways to assist vaccination efforts since Day 1, so that maybe people's lives "could get back to some normalcy."

The Rec Center offers the perfect space to allow large numbers of people to move in an orderly fashion through the front of the building, into the Conference Room for vaccination, and onto Court B for observation before leaving out a side door of the building.

"We told the state and Dr. Church early in the game that, however we needed to make the facilities available, we were ready to do that," Roberts said. "Commissioner Bradshaw and I talked last year that, once we got to the point of being able to do a lot of vaccines, we felt like this was the best place to do it."

Local workouts, walking, and fitness classes are all still available at the Rec Center, with Recreation Department staff committing to regular sanitation of the facility.

"If we have a mass vaccination of 1,000 or 1,500 people at one time, which is what we really want to do,

then we would probably close the gym area because it would take the whole facility to do it," Roberts said. "But for right now, (everything is open)."

Serving in support roles for vaccination efforts are Towns County Emergency Medical Services, the Fire Department and E-911.

Vaccine Signups & Availability

Both the Health Department and Synergy Health will be vaccinating people this week, and those wishing to get waitlisted for an appointment with the latter can visit ngvac.com.

And even though Public Health is not actively taking new appointments for vaccination due to limited availability of the vaccine, people trying for an appointment with the Health Department should still check the phdistrict2.org sign-up portal or call 770-531-5692.

"As we get vaccine in our counties, we are opening appointments in the Call Center and our online registration tool," District 2 PIO Palmer said. "Because we aren't sure what we will receive, we don't announce that we are opening appointments."

"We have also had people cancel appointments and those are added back to the calendar. For now, we ask everyone to check the online tool or call the Call Center to see if appointments are available."

"As vaccine becomes more steadily available in quantity, we plan to open appointments at a specific time on a certain day of the week, for the following week."

Residents who don't have computers can call the Towns County's Public Safety line at 706-896-5792 for help signing up on one of the online sign-up portals.

"We're extremely busy, so if we don't answer, leave a message," EMA Director Roberts said.

Union General Health System is not currently offering vaccines to the public, but once it finishes administering second doses in-house, Chief Nursing Officer Barnett said the hospitals would be happy to help with vaccinating eligible residents if their access to vaccine supplies continues.

Ingles Pharmacies are also waitlisting people for vaccination at <https://www.ingles-markets.com/pharmacy/pg1/pharmacy-sub/vaccinations>.

For a regularly updated list of locations receiving vaccine shipments in each county, visit dph.georgia.gov and click on the link for the "Vaccine Orders List." People can also find vaccine providers at <https://dph.georgia.gov/locations/covid-vaccination-site>.

Appointments for free Public Health COVID-19 testing can be made at <https://mako.exchange/splash/GAMakotesting/>. This free testing is taking place in Hall County at 2500 Allen Creek Drive in Gainesville.

FBLA...from Page 1A

Zion Calhoun, Introduction to Business Communications; Nick Pyrlík, Introduction to Financial Math; True Youngblood, Public Speaking; Vanessa Floyd, Business Ethics; Ashlyn Awtrye, Public Service Announcement; and Ivie Davenport, Spreadsheet Applications.

Towns County High School also received the largest membership award for the northeast region of Georgia. Additionally, the Towns County FBLA was awarded the Region Super Sweepstakes for the

largest number of winners in the region.

Competitions were completed online due to COVID-19. Towns County High is especially proud of its students' efforts, as these students continued to work hard during challenging times, finding a way to practice together virtually and submit performances online.

These young people have represented our school and community well. Congratulations to all!