

# Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

www.townscountyherald.net

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1928

75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 95 Number 17

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

## VFW 7807 honored as District's Top Post

By Daysha Pandolph  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Veterans of Foreign Wars Garrett-Owenby Post 7807 in Hiwassee has been named the VFW District 2 Top Post of the Quarter for its unwavering service to veterans and the community.

Each quarter, one of the seven VFW posts in District 2 is bestowed this honor based on its community involvement and overall success. That post takes home and proudly displays a trophy, which must be returned at the end of the quarter and passed on to the next recipient.

This time around, Post

7807 impressed the District 2 Department of Georgia President John Whalen, who also serves as president of Post 7807 Auxiliary.

"The work that my auxiliary did this past quarter was outstanding," Whalen said. "They outshined the other posts as far as the job that they did for our community, our veterans and the veterans' families."

Through providing poppies on patriotic holidays, donating toys and services to disadvantaged families with children, serving the elderly and supporting veterans in need with financial and physical relief, the VFW and af-

iliated organizations have proven their dedication to the community.

"This post is unlike most of the other VFW posts in that we have six different groups here: VFW, VFW Auxiliary, American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary, American Legion Riders and Sons of the American Legion," said Post 7807 Auxiliary Senior Vice President Mel White.

"The groups in here either donated money to us to try to coordinate all of that or they donated some of their time to put it together."

Last year, the post was proud to provide close to 300  
See VFW Post Honored, Page 7



L-R: VFW Post 7807 Auxiliary Senior Vice President Mel White, Post 7807 Senior Vice Cmdr. Russ Hazlett, Post 7807 Cmdr. Mark Newman, and VFW District 2 President/Post 7807 Auxiliary President John Whalen with the District 2 Top Post of the Quarter Award.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

## DDA discusses need for board members, PBC

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority held its regular monthly meeting on Feb. 13 at City Hall, with board members welcoming the return of Towns County Coroner and Banister-Cooper Funeral Home Owner Tamela Cooper to her post.

Cooper has resumed her term until it ends in August 2025, but the DDA Board is still looking for two new members following the recent resignations of Efen Lopez and Monica McKenna. Interviews have officially started, according to Economic Development  
See Hiwassee DDA Board, Page 7



The Hiwassee DDA still has two board member seats to fill, which served as a main topic of discussion in last week's regular monthly meeting.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Patel shines as a STAR in Lions Club dinner

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Members of the Towns County Lions Club celebrated 2024 STAR Student Dhriti Patel alongside her chosen STAR Teacher Shane Casey on Tuesday, Feb. 13.

A senior at Towns County High School, Patel earned her STAR status by achieving the highest SAT score among her peers in a single sitting of the test.

The honor was carried out at the Anderson Music Hall in the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, where guests enjoyed Valentine's Day-themed decorations and dinner before  
See STAR Student Patel, Page 7



Towns County Lions Club Member Julie Payne congratulating TCHS STAR Student Dhriti Patel last week on her academic achievement.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Early voting kicked off Monday, runs thru March 8

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

In-person early voting for the Presidential Preference Primary began Monday to select political party candidates for the office of President of the United States.

Election Day for the upcoming primary is Tuesday, March 12. There will be three weeks of early voting for this election running weekdays between Monday, Feb. 19, and Friday, March 8.

Early voting will also include two weekend voting opportunities on Saturday,

Feb. 24, and Saturday, March 2.

All in-person early voting takes place from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. inside the Towns County Civic Center, located in the same building as the Board of Elections & Registration Office at 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiwassee.

Presidential Preference Primary voters who decide to wait until Election Day to cast their ballots will need to head to their predetermined voting precincts between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on March 12.

Towns County has two voting precincts: the Hiawas-

see Precinct at the Civic Center and the Young Harris Precinct in the Lodge Hall Building at 135 Murphy Street.

For people voting absentee-by-mail, ballots may be requested at the Elections Office now through Friday, March 1. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, as an email attachment, or in person at the Elections Office.

Voters returning absentee ballots can use the official drop box inside the Elections Office during early voting hours; mail them back in plenty of time to be counted after polls close on Election Day;

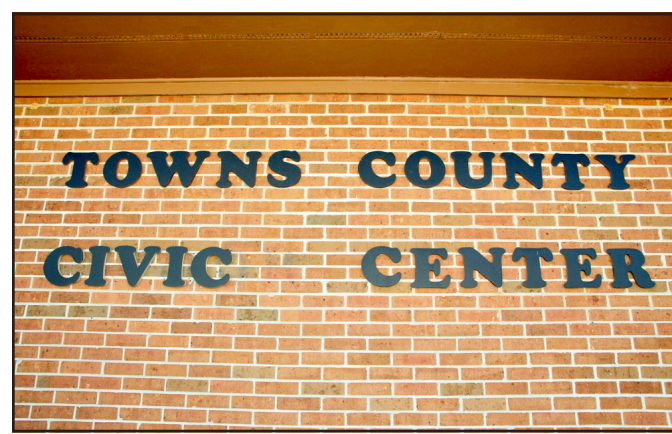
or drop them off in person at the Elections Office through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Monday, Feb. 12, was the registration deadline to vote in this election. Voter registration takes place inside the Elections Office.

The 2024 election cycle will be a busy one, with federal, state and local elections up for voting this year.

Candidates for local elections will qualify the week of March 4 for the May 21 General Primary/Nonpartisan Election, with a runoff date of June 18 if necessary.

See Early Voting, Page 7



Towns Countians looking to vote early in-person should make their way to the Towns County Civic Center in Hiwassee between now and March 8.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Follow-up investigation nets record fentanyl bust

News Special  
Towns County Herald

YOUNG HARRIS – Further investigation into a Feb. 7 raid on a Byron Road residence has resulted in a much larger amount of fentanyl being confiscated by Towns County Sheriff's Drug Investigators.

The initial investigation resulted in the seizure of 2.7 grams of fentanyl and the arrest of Gregory Thomas Breitenbach, but Drug Investigators and K-9s were not satisfied with the results of the seizure and continued their investigation into the case by interviewing Breitenbach.

After the interview, it was determined that Breitenbach had observed deputies entering the driveway and throw drugs out of the back window of the residence.

Investigators returned  
See Fentanyl Bust, Page 12



Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson and Chief Deputy Gene Moss posing with a record local fentanyl bust.  
Photo/Facebook

## Administrator Snow talks changes at health system

By Daysha Pandolph  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Chatuge Regional Hospital Administrator Ryan Snow met with the Mountain Movers and Shakers on Friday, Feb. 16, to inform the community on the hospital's mission and what changes have come to pass since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most noticeably, the hospital has fused seamlessly with Union General Hospital, Union County Nursing Home, Chatuge Nursing Home and 15 physician's offices, reaching as far as Blue Ridge and Hayesville, North Carolina, to create the Union General Health System.

With this transition, all of these facilities are now able to share medical records. As a health care system that prides itself on knowing when and where to send vulnerable patients, this is huge for UGHS.

Additionally, UGHS is proud to be partnered with three larger health care systems: Piedmont, Emory and Northeast Georgia Health. These partnerships have placed specialized services, such as cardiology centers, in-house.

While this prevents a lot of unnecessary patient transportation in the mountainous region, there are still emergencies that UGHS feels other facilities are better suited to handle, like those involving acute trauma. This usually increases a patient's medical bill but often saves their life.

In relation to medical bills, Snow shared that the cost of labor has gone up 26% alongside supply costs going up 35% since the onset of the pandemic.

"Those are large figures when you talk about the amount of supplies you need to run an organization,"



Ryan Snow  
Hospital Administrator

he said, commenting that at Chatuge Regional, the cost of gloves alone has increased by \$150,000 a year.

"Our goal is to keep cost of health care down," he said, "but it's really hard to keep costs down when your (supply and) labor costs have gone up (so much) in the last couple years. Those are real problems

See Health System, Page 12

12 Pages

Vol. 94 No. 17

Lake Levels

BASKETBALL

GA Legislative Update See page 3



Arrests - 2 Legals - 11  
Church - 8 Obits - 9  
Classifieds - 11 Sports - 10  
Opinion - 4

Blue Ridge 1,671.53  
Chatuge 1,918.42  
Nottely 1,762.94

Girls 2/20 @ Johnson 5:30  
Boys 2/21 @ Twiggs 6 PM

Support Meals on Wheels See page 3

Hiwassee Watershed Gala See page 5



The support you need for your next big dream.  
Talk to me today about your loan and line of credit options.

Tina Denton | 706-435-1104 | Hiwassee Main Office | NMLS #744611



© 2024 United Community Bank | NMLS #421841 | [ucbi.com/borrowing](http://ucbi.com/borrowing)  
This is not a commitment to lend. Normal credit criteria apply.



United  
Community

# STAR Student Patel...from Page 1



L-R: Michelle Crawford of PAGE Inc., Towns Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong, TCHS Counselor Dionne Berrong, STAR Teacher Shane Casey, STAR Student Dhrity Patel, Towns County Lion Danny Meeks and TCHS Principal Bryan Thomason. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

hearing from the STARS themselves.

For 66 years, the Lions Club has supported the PAGE Foundation as the local STAR sponsor, and the STARS – part of the Student Teacher Achievement Recognition Program – are in turn supported by the PAGE Foundation.

Throughout her life, Patel's mother has been one of her biggest supporters, and she credits her for helping her reach this point.

"I never used to be this good in school when I was in private school," Patel said. "But she was like, 'That's OK. You'll find your thing.'" Now that Patel has indeed found her niche, she says her mother's support still "means a lot" to her.

When Patel was in sixth grade, she moved to the United States from Kenya and found that Towns County was a much different experience than what she had grown used to.

Patel said that compared to "big cities," TCHS has a much more welcoming atmosphere. It's something she's always enjoyed, and it's part of the reason why she fell in love with the area.

"The reason I chose Mr. Casey specifically to be the STAR Teacher of 2024 is because taking his classes made me realize just how much I

love math," said Patel, who recalls a time when she didn't enjoy the subject nearly as much as she does now.

"Mr. Casey made it possible for me to enjoy solving these challenges every day," Patel added. "He's a determined teacher, always ready to teach, and never misses an opportunity to sprinkle a joke or two in those lessons."

Equipped with a new perspective, Patel started to see math as a way of solving puzzles and building a more logical mind.

That new passion helped her realize that her future lies in architecture. Once she graduates from Towns County High, she'll pursue her major at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

Patel hopes to find employment with an architecture firm down the road so she can get some more experience, but her goal is to one day return to Towns County and open her very own firm.

Before he came to Towns County eight years ago, Shane Casey lived in Alabama, where he taught for 25 years. While it's the fifth school system he's been a part of, Casey said he's never worked for a better institution.

Like Patel, he appreciates the accepting atmosphere and the closeness of coworkers, who are always willing

to help those in need or get to know new staff and make new students feel welcome.

Casey's selection as Patel's STAR Teacher is especially important considering the timing. This year is his final year teaching, and he said that he was "honored" for her to have picked him just before his retirement.

"Dhrity is a very outstanding student," Casey said when it was his turn at the podium. "In 38 years, I have seen some good students. I've seen some very smart students; I've taught very smart students. I would put her probably in the Top Five."

Casey taught Patel in three classes; in the first, College Algebra, she earned a class average of 99. The other two classes were dual-enrolled, with the first Pre-Calculus and the second Elementary Statistics. In both of those classes, her average was 100.

"She's a driven individual; it's like she looks for a challenge," Casey said. "I think she has a bright future, and Georgia Tech picked up a really good student."

While Casey and Patel hope that they can stay in touch, no matter what happens, Casey said that Patel has made such an impact on his own life that "she's going to be one of those you'll always remember."

# VFW Post Honored...from Page 1

Christmas packages for local homebound and nursing home seniors. Post members also provided about 40 kids with toys at their annual Christmas party, and generated \$1,800 in veterans relief funds at the Lion's Club Mile Long Yard Sale.

On top of that, the VFW and VFW Auxiliary are working together to house and support homeless female veterans. Many veterans return from combat with no place to stay, and as an organization built on helping local veterans, the post has been more than happy to provide those women with homes and services until they get back on their feet.

The post benefits other local veterans by vowing to support them in trying times. For instance, if a veteran needs assistance keeping up with their water bill, the post is happy to help.

"We do a lot of stuff," White said. "We don't look for recognition and we don't expect people to hold praise for us or anything. We just do it as part of our duty."

"Most people don't

realize that between VFW members and auxiliary combined, we're talking two million people across the U.S.," he said. "We're a nonprofit, so we're not out here making money; we're using the money we make to support our veterans."

With that many members nationwide, the organization also leaves quite a mark in Washington D.C. Thanks to the VFW, legislation has been and continues to be passed to support veterans. Most recently, a law was passed to expand health care benefits for soldiers suffering injuries from burn pits.

"A lot of stuff the veterans have gotten has been argued for and went to legislation by the VFW," said VFW Post 7807 Cmdr. Mark Newman. "A lot of people think that Congress is just giving it to them, but it is because we have so many members and we're there lobbying for the veterans."

Post 7807 plans to continue supporting veterans nationally with Auxiliary President Whalen speaking soon

at a Macon conference on the bills that are currently circulating.

"There are a lot of misnomers sometimes about different organizations," said White, who emphasized that the VFW is focused on supporting veterans and is not a "smoking and drinking club" like many people suspect.

In the coming year, the local post hopes to continue spreading community awareness and reaching out to veterans in need by participating, once again, in both the Mile Long Yard Sale and the weekly concert series on the square.

They are also pleased to unveil the new 6,000-square-foot VFW Hall right next door to the old post building on Sunnyside Road, hopefully sometime in May.

"It will be much more open (and have) a lot more light," Newman said. "We're trying to make it a welcoming place. It'll be wide open, and we'll serve dinners out of there and have our meetings there. Our cantina will also be there."

# Hiawassee DDA Board...from Page 1

Director Denise McKay.

"We'd like them to understand what it is to serve on the board, because it's not where you come to a meeting once a month and then we're done," McKay said. "It takes a little bit more to serve on this board, because we are an incredibly active board."

McKay mentioned that one board candidate had been interviewed and that there were others in line: "We have a few names that were given to us, and we just have to go and talk to them."

In other business, the board discussed the DDA's finances, with the total amount of general funds coming to \$25,897.11.

As for the fundraising account, the available balance is \$79,893.12. The last invoice on the Paris Business Center came in at \$155,000, and out of that, the DDA will be reimbursed for \$121,324.01 because McKay

requested a drawdown on a PBC grant.

McKay revealed that the estimated end time for construction on the Paris Building Center had been extended. Originally, the project was to be wrapped up in June "at the very latest," but more recent approximations place completion sometime between September and November.

The board discussed a potential logo for the Paris Business Center. Submissions by graphic design students from multiple colleges were reviewed during the meeting, and the finalist – along with their school – will be revealed at a later date. The top design stands to win \$500.

That morning also saw some special guests in attendance. Jenny Cross, Shannon Watson and Barbara Thomas were there to talk about their efforts behind [www.savelakechatuge.org](http://www.savelakechatuge.org), an ongoing cam-

paign to fight the invasive parrot-feather weed plaguing Lake Chatuge.

The group's goal has been to raise \$300,000 to properly fight the infestation using safe methods and responsible vendors, and while that number was reached on Feb. 16, there may be a need in the future for more treatments, and therefore, additional fundraising.

"We feel like we need to continue on, because once the growing season gets underway, we don't know if there'll be pockets of areas in other places in the lake that we don't know about at this time, and we really want to treat it," Cross said, anticipating that completely wiping out the parrot-feather could take two to three years.

To help raise awareness, McKay offered to share a booth at the upcoming Hiawassee Night Market with the group, whose members were receptive to the idea.

# Early Voting...from Page 1

The big General Election is slated for Tuesday, Nov. 5, with a runoff date set for Dec. 3.

April 22 is the voter registration deadline to participate in the May 21 General

Primary/Nonpartisan Election, and Oct. 7 is the deadline to register for the Nov. 5 General Election.

Residents may visit <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/s/> for voter registration status,

mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county, sample ballots for upcoming elections, provisional ballot status and more.

## Fentanyl Bust...from Page 1

to the residence and hit the jackpot, seizing a large 33-gram brick of pure fentanyl that field-tested positive, along with heroin that also field-tested positive and a Schedule IV controlled substance, Xanax.

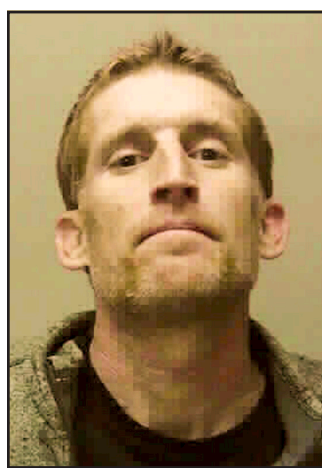
This is the largest amount of fentanyl ever seized in Towns County.

It appears Breitenbach was in the process of breaking down the brick and packaging it into small baggies preparing

for distribution into the community and surrounding areas.

Breitenbach has additionally been charged with felony trafficking fentanyl totaling 33 grams, felony trafficking heroin, felony possession of heroin, felony possession with intent to distribute a Schedule IV controlled substance, and felony possession of a Schedule IV controlled substance.

Fentanyl is 100 times



**Gregory Thomas Breitenbach**

more potent than morphine, with as little as 2 milligrams being lethal, meaning that 33 grams of fentanyl could kill the entire population of Towns County.

Sheriff Ken Henderson commends "the commitment of our drug investigators for follow-up on this case to rid our community of this dangerous drug."

The Sheriff's Office said last week that keeping the community and children safe is and will always be Sheriff Henderson's No. 1 priority.

All individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

## Concentrated patrols net two more drug arrests

News Special  
Towns County Herald

On Monday morning, Feb. 12, Towns County Sheriff's Drug Investigators, Patrol Deputies and K-9 Units were conducting concentrated patrols in known drug areas.

These patrols resulted in a traffic stop of a vehicle. Probable cause was developed, and a search of the vehicle resulted in the discovery of a quantity of methamphetamine, which field-tested positive, and a Schedule IV controlled substance.

All substances were confiscated, and two individuals were arrested.

Cristine Elise Stitchcomb, 43, of Andrews, North Carolina, has been charged with two counts of felony possession of a Schedule IV controlled substance.

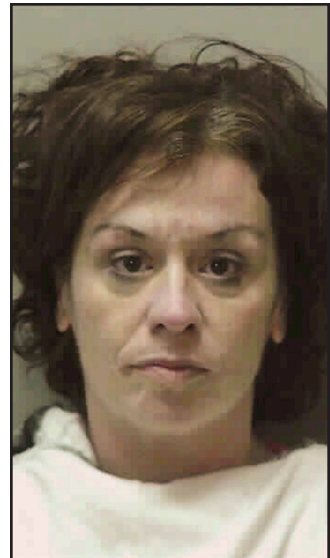
William Christopher Caseldine, 44, of Murphy, North Carolina, has been charged with felony possession of methamphetamine



**William Christopher Caseldine**

with intent to distribute, felony possession of methamphetamine, removed/falsified ID of license plate, and possession of drug-related objects.

Sheriff Ken Henderson is pleased that his deputies are working together and concentrating their resources on spe-



**Cristine Elise Stitchcomb**

cific areas to control the county's drug problems and impact criminal activity.

Concentrated patrols will continue, the Sheriff's Office said.

All individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

## Health System...from Page 1

that health care is going to continue to face."

On the other side of that, however, a recent tax program has relieved some of the hospital's expenses. Through Georgia HEART Hospital Program, taxpayers can designate a dollar for dollar match of their tax debt to a rural hospital.

"You can take those tax dollars and designate them to Chatuge or to Union and we can use that money to invest in technology," Snow said.

In the past, UGHS used this money to purchase hospital beds during the COVID-19 crisis, when patient counts were up from hospitalizations. Last year, the system received \$1 million through Georgia HEART, which was used to buy a 1.5T MRI machine for Chatuge Regional.

Other projects the Hiawassee-based hospital is currently working on include getting stroke accredited and finishing a remodel of its kitchen.

The remodel process was originally meant to last only two weeks with a focus on repairing damaged pipes, but after discovering additional problems, Snow approved a

renovation of the entire kitchen.

Over at Union General Hospital, another construction project was just recently completed: a \$20 million medical office building. The building houses an orthopedic clinic, a women's care clinic and a cardiology department.

Union General has also recently invested heavily in the surgery department, which goes hand in hand with Chatuge Regional's swing-bed program meant to accommodate long recovery processes by providing specific medical and therapeutic services that cater to each patient.

"Our goal with that space is to create as much of a home-like environment as we can," Snow said.

Achieving that environment can range from something as simple as replacing a hospital bed with a regular bed to something as complex as recreating specific aspects of the patient's home within the hospital.

The hospital will even send physical therapists out to patient's homes to have them determine what exercises are needed to prepare them for living independently.

## Misty Mountain Quilters Guild February Meeting



Close-up of a modern quilt displayed by Gail Bice at the quilting guild's January meeting

The Misty Mountain Quilters Guild will hold its membership meeting on Tuesday, February 27. Sign-in starts at 12:30 p.m. and the meeting begins at 1:00. We will meet in the Fellowship Hall of First United Methodist Church, 938 GA-515, Blairsville, GA. Everyone is welcome, especially new and potential members.

Last month, MMQG was treated to a trunk show by Gail Bice, a guild member, showing quilts that she has made in recent years. It is always fascinating to see quilters' collections of their work, revealing their evolution of ideas, colors and techniques. Gail's presentation was stunning and thought-provoking. The February meeting will feature another member, Kim

Wynne, showing her family quilts. We hope you will come share the excitement with our guild.

MMQG has more than 160 members, hailing primarily from Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Florida. Our mission is to educate, share, promote and keep alive the craft and traditions of quilting. The guild donates quilts to various community groups, including quilts of valor, nursing homes, children's facilities and shelters. We welcome new members.

If you are interested in quilts or want to learn more about quilting, come check us out! For more information, visit <https://www.misty-mountainquiltguild.org> or email [mmqginfo@gmail.com](mailto:mmqginfo@gmail.com).

## Kennesaw State University's President's and Dean's List

Kennesaw State University has named nearly 5,900 students to the President's List in recognition of their academic excellence for the Fall 2023 semester.

To achieve this honor, each undergraduate student must have completed at least nine semester hours with a term grade point average of 4.0.

Students from your area earning President's List honors for Fall 2023 are:

Anna Honeycutt of Hiawassee, majoring in Accounting; Jacob Church of Hiawassee, majoring in Mechanical Engineering; and Jessica Taylor of Hiawassee, majoring in Psychology.

Kennesaw State University congratulates the more than 8,000 Owls named to the Dean's List, which recognizes students for their academic achievement during the Fall 2023 semester.

Undergraduate students enrolled in at least nine credit hours and with a term grade point average of at least 3.5 were named to the list.

Students from your area earning Dean's List honors for Fall 2023 are:

Cristal Figueroa of Hiawassee, majoring in Construction Management; Carson Williams of Hiawassee, majoring in Mechanical Engineering; and Grant Worley of Hiawassee, majoring in Mathematics.

## Blood Assurance: Local Blood and Platelet Mobile Drives February, March and April

**February:** 2/22/24 ... Union General Hospital  
2/28/24 ... Walmart-Blairsville

**March:** 3/07/24 ... North Georgia Technical College  
3/11/24 ... Union General Hospital  
3/13/24 ... Walmart-Blairsville

**April:** 4/01/24 ... Union General Hospital  
4/18/24 ... Union County Health Department  
4/30/24 ... Walmart-Blairsville

To register please call Blood Assurance at 800-962-0628 to make an appointment