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Happy Thanksgiving



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Fairgrounds readying for festive 'Christmas in Lights'

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Christmas spirit is already in the air in North Georgia, as the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds prepares this week to open for the annual "Mountain Country Christmas in Lights" festive holiday walkthrough display beginning Thanksgiving Night.

All told, the display will run every Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 6-9 p.m. between Nov. 25 and Dec. 18, and then every night from Dec. 19 to Dec. 23.

A full slate of vendor booths for the Outdoor Craft Market will be available throughout the month of lights

to allow for plentiful Christmas shopping opportunities, including extended Saturday hours from 4-9 p.m.

Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason gave an exciting preview detailing what to expect from the Christmas-themed holiday offering in 2021, including special Christmas music and visits with the Jolly Old Elf himself.

"We have added an additional 1,000 new lights this year as compared to last year," she said. "Also, we have constructed a new house for there to be a live Santa Claus booth."

"Kids and parents will have the option for additional safety (due to any potential concerns over COVID-19) to where they can go and sit in

Santa's lap or just talk to him through the window.

"We all know people are excited to be getting back out again. As seen before, people feel more receptive of having events outdoors due to the pandemic.

"And we are glad that we will have all of our booths full this year, with several new food vendors and interests from arts and crafts, soapmaking, woodworking, jewelry making, knitting, leather working, wreath making (and more).

"All of the businesses that will be represented can decorate their booth also to get in the Christmas spirit."

Thomason said she would like to thank Towns County High School for com-

ing out and helping to set up the Exhibit Hall "for decorations and activities we will be showing in there."

"We are going to be showcasing a special Christmas Village, along with Towns County Historical Society staple Jerry Taylor playing the (antique reed organs)," Thomason said. "We are not certain as of yet, but we are hoping that some of the churches here will be coming out to sing some during the Christmas light show."

"This will be a great opportunity to help witness to people who may not have found a home church yet or are seeking that right destination, and to bring the community together as a whole."
See GMF Christmas, Page 6A



A Christmas lights Santa Claus waves to visitors of the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Macedonia to consolidate with Hiawassee Precinct Objections due before Dec. 15 meeting

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Due to concerns over the ability to staff polling places in upcoming countywide elections, the Towns County Board of Elections and Registration plans to meet Dec. 15 to consolidate the Macedonia and Hiawassee precincts into a single precinct at the Hiawassee location.

"The location of the Hiawassee Precinct polling place shall not be altered and will remain at the Towns County Civic Center located at 67 Lakeview Circle, Suite B; Hi-

wassee, Georgia," per the Elections Board.

This decision comes on the heels of a Nov. 10 Elections Board regular meeting in which members "approved the commencement of the consolidation of the Hiawassee and Macedonia Precincts into one precinct (Hiawassee)."

Objections to the consolidation must be filed – either in person or by mail – with Elections Superintendent Dr. Janet Oliva prior to Dec. 15. The mailing address for the Board of Elections is 67 Lakeview Circle, Suite A, Hiawassee, Georgia 30546.

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Dr. Janet Oliva
Board of Elections

VFW inviting Santa for children's event December 11

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Thanksgiving is this week, but already, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. And this year, members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Garrett-Owenby Post #7807 and Auxiliary are hosting an inaugural Christmas party for children of the county on Saturday, Dec. 11, from 1-4 p.m.

To be held at the VFW Post at 1329 Sunnyside Road, the event is designed to provide toys for local children ages 12 and under, although families and people of all ages are encouraged to attend.

Local VFW Auxiliary President John J. Whalen did not actively serve in the military.
See VFW Santa Visit, Page 6A



Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7807 Auxiliary President John J. Whalen poses outside of the Garrett-Owenby Post Building in Hiawassee last week. Photo by Jeremy Foster

TCSO, Rabun deputies arrest 'fugitive from justice'

News Special
Towns County Herald

The Towns County Sheriff's Office and Rabun County Sheriff's Office teamed up last week to arrest a fugitive from justice on Mathis Road near Hiawassee.

Dalton R. McKay, 24, of Rabun County, was arrested on a probation violation and two counts of distribution of methamphetamine.

McKay had eluded Rabun County Sheriff's deputies the night before his ar-

rest, and information led to a location inside Towns County where McKay was located and taken into custody for transportation to the Rabun County Detention Center.

He has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson commended the deputies for the handling of the arrest and the serious situation, thus bringing the incident to a safe conclusion.



Dalton R. McKay

Wilkinson talks vocational options in North Georgia

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Plenty of folks in Friday's Mountain Movers and Shakers meeting recognized the "recovering politician" who later became the president of Georgia's first technical college, former District 50 State Sen. John Wilkinson.

Prior to being elected state senator, Wilkinson was a program manager at the Georgia Department of Education, where he oversaw the state's agricultural education programs, and he also worked as the executive secretary for the Georgia Future Farmers of America Association.

As a Georgia senator, he served as the Chairman of the Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee and as Vice-Chairman of the Education and Youth Committee, and he has received several awards over the years for his attention to educational and vocational issues in Georgia.

After leaving state poli-



NGTC President John Wilkinson was happy to stop by the Movers and Shakers breakfast meeting Friday for an educational discussion. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

tics last year, Wilkinson came aboard as North Georgia Technical College President in February 2021, and in the Nov. 19 Movers and Shakers meeting, Wilkinson talked about the history and outstanding achievements of the institution he now leads.

He also addressed the importance and validity of students who decide to go into a more hands-on field after graduating high school.
First detailing the history of the college, Wilkinson shared
See Wilkinson, Page 6A

Veterans discuss importance of community involvement



L-R: Veterans Chuck Honaker, Brandy Creel and Ash Todd with Mountain Movers and Shakers emcee William "Scotty" Scott on Nov. 12 in Hiawassee. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

While it didn't quite happen on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, the Mountain Movers and Shakers honored the sacrifices and resilience of America's warriors first thing in the morning on Friday, Nov. 12.

Welcomed in the meeting were two of the group's very own members, married veterans Brandy Creel and Ashford

Todd of Towns County, as well as veteran Chuck Honaker, who is the commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7394 in Blairsville.

That Friday's weekly breakfast meet-up at Sundance Grill in Hiawassee was dedicated to solving issues with local veterans and offering potential ways to help integrate them further into the community.

All three veterans spoke in the meeting, and Creel read the poignant poem by Andrea Brett entitled "I Am A Veter-

an," about recognizing veterans in mundane parts of life.

Fittingly, Honaker talked about a veteran's role in his or her community and how a community and its veterans could serve each other.

"The community should be honoring and celebrating veterans, not the veterans honoring and celebrating themselves," Honaker said. "If you're having to throw your own Veterans Day celebration, look into getting into an orga-

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GMF Christmas...from Page 1A

New this year will be the addition of five extra days for the monthlong affair, Dec. 19-23, "because we felt that we were missing some prime nights last year."

"We will have golf carts available for handicapped patrons, and one notable thing is, on Dec. 9, we will have Towns County citizens get in free," Thomason said.

The Fairgrounds will also be hosting a special night on Wednesday, Dec. 8, for drive-thru attendance only by residents of local nursing homes,

retirement homes and shut-ins.

Another exciting feature in 2021 is the return of Cowtown USA.

"Everyone loved the experience of the animal farm that we brought (in recent years), and this year, we are actually bringing more animals for everyone to pet and play with," Thomason said. "There is an educational side to it as well, as there will be cow-milking demonstrations, for one."

"This event has continued to grow every year. Last year we had close to 20,000

people attend, and we expect this year to without a doubt be our biggest one to date.

"There is something for everyone to do, from s'mores-making to pony rides, from hot dogs to Christmas lights and anything you can imagine, all bringing our families and community together."

Parking is free, and tickets are \$6 per person, with children under 12 getting in free. No pets allowed. For more information, visit <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/localevnts/christmas>.

Veterans...from Page 1A

nization, especially one that is built with corporate sponsorship."

There was also something to be said of concerns about aiding the families of veterans, particularly in cases where a veteran may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Honaker made mention of the non-profit VALOR Clinic, which recently set up a facility in Union County.

VALOR's Veterans Unstoppable Program ensures that veterans find proper support, including benefits and housing, and offers similar assistance to families by "meeting them where they are" with flexible options.

And though it's important to support veterans returning to society, the importance of veterans themselves making the effort to get more involved was highlighted.

"Get out in your community and donate some time," Creel suggested before drawing attention to how much difference a veteran could make by taking part in charitable endeavors such as food pantries or doing something as simple as placing flags on graves.

One hope is that, with a greater sense of community, veterans might feel supported and make more connections, thereby building a safety net for themselves and their families, and further elaborated upon was the idea that a veteran could find satisfaction in

continuing to serve their country even after being discharged from the military.

Sgt. Brandy Creel grew up a self-labeled "military brat" and moved often with her family. Despite the scant representation of women in the armed forces in the 1970s, Creel decided to follow in her father's footsteps and serve her country by joining the Air Force – because he forbade her from joining the Navy.

Her career went on to span over 20 years, and despite beginning with a specialization in missiles, she found her niche in administrative duties. During the Gulf War in Operation Desert Storm, Creel experienced active combat.

She attributes her long road to recovery with PTSD partially to her "luck" of having parents to talk to about the experience, and she recognizes that many don't have that opportunity.

Creel champions the cause of veterans struggling with disability and firmly believes they can find peace in continuing to serve their country by getting involved with communities at home.

Ash Todd served in the Marine Corps beginning in 1961 and earned the rank of Corporal E-4 before his discharge in 1965.

Specifically, he served aboard the well-known USS Shadwell with the Mongoose Taskforce during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Touching on his

experiences in the Crisis, Todd recalled how little troops were told before the 1962 mission.

"We deployed and had no idea where we were – no idea, because we were out in the ocean, and it was warm and we all thought probably we were over in the Indian Ocean," Todd said. "And that's where we were at for 42 days."

"Had no idea we were in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Had no idea that that Sunday morning at 6 o'clock, the crew ship pulled its missiles back. For Operation Mongoose, the plan was to invade at noon."

Honaker, a resident and native of Union County, was also a child of a military family. His father and fellow veteran Charles W. "Bill" Honaker wrote the book "The Dead Were Mine," detailing the process of caring for America's war dead in Vietnam.

The elder Honaker was in Senior Grave Registration until his retirement in 1983, and his son, retired U.S. Army veteran Chuck, fought in and was wounded during the Iraq War.

Honaker is a shining example of veteran involvement in the community, as he has hosted several events for veterans and spoken at many of them.

The meeting at Sundance Grill was no exception, and Honaker offered himself as a guide to his fellow veterans when he told them to "get involved in a veterans' group and stay involved with them."

Wilkinson...from Page 1A

that North Georgia Tech was the first trade school in Georgia. At over 75 years old, the Clarkesville location was the first of the college's campuses.

According to Wilkinson, North Georgia Tech's ongoing success is due in part to a local political legend.

"One of the governors who was really an advocate for the Technical College System was Gov. Zell Miller (of Young Harris)," Wilkinson said. "He said he wanted to have a technical college system within 30 minutes of every young person in the state."

Indeed, the Blairsville campus lies about 30 minutes from Hiwassee and an hour from the original Clarkesville campus. And with the Currahee campus, Northeast Georgia offers plentiful options for trade schools.

Also mentioned was the fact that Atlanta's JAMES Magazine listed North Georgia Tech in third place for their 2021 rankings of technical colleges.

"I was real proud of that rank," Wilkinson said, taking a moment to give credit to the college's dedicated instructors, like 2021's NGTC Employee of the Year and Hiwassee resident Tammy Keyes.

After the employees came recognition for the student body. Out of a total of 2,600 students, 25% of them are dual enrolled, balancing high school with earning early college credits.

"There have been some students that graduated from high school and had two years of college credits," Wilkinson said.

The "great thing" about



William "Scotty" Scott is one of the key organizers behind the Mountain Movers and Shakers.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

dual enrollment, Wilkinson continued, is that those opportunities are state funded, meaning high school students who dual enroll don't have to pay college tuition fees.

While it is true that North Georgia Tech's tuition is considerably lower than other colleges, Wilkinson recognizes that some students may still struggle with the financial burden of pursuing a higher education.

"We don't want any student who wants to attend North Georgia Tech to be unable to attend because they don't have the funds to," he said, moving on to the subject of monetary aid.

Students whose scholarships don't cover the entire cost of tuition may find their opportunity through the North Georgia Technical College Foundation, Wilkinson said.

With members including alumni and local businesses, the foundation works with students requiring financial aid to attend North Georgia Tech. Wilkinson lauded the variety of programs

available to major in, including nursing, criminal justice, welding and, recently, agriculture.

To finish up the talk, Wilkinson answered questions involving the Student Government Organization and the percentage of "non-traditional students" who may be older or returning to school to pursue a new career.

Interestingly, Wilkinson made note of another option for parties who are interested in classes but aren't looking for degrees.

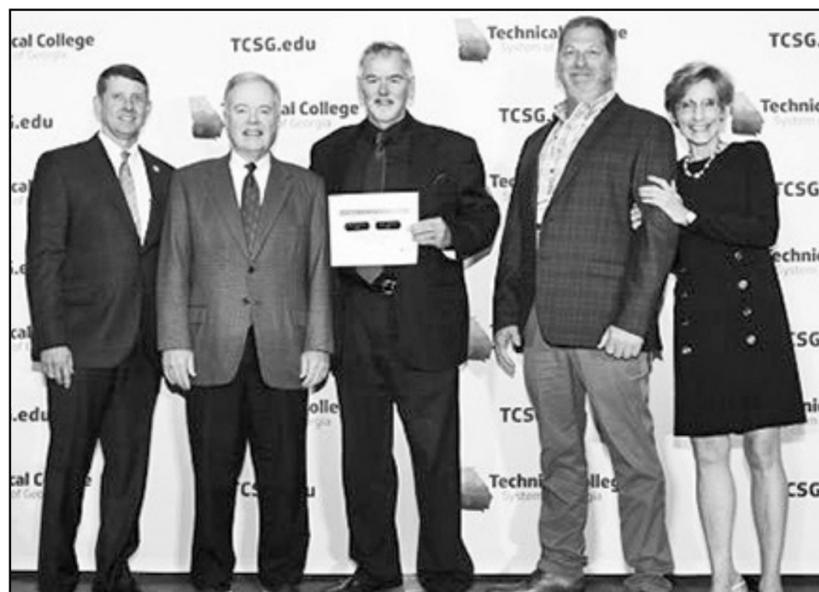
"Not everyone comes for a degree," Wilkinson said. "We do have an adult education program, and we do have adult literacy teachers that teach adults how to read."

The Mountain Movers and Shakers' 8 a.m. breakfast meeting at Sundance Grill will be taking this Friday off in observance of the Thanksgiving holiday, and members of the nonpartisan civic group wish everyone a "safe, blessed, healthy and happy Thanksgiving."

North Georgia Technical College Board of Directors earns TCDA Board Certification



NGTC 2021-22 Board of Directors: (top row, left to right) Cliff Bradshaw; Dr. Jim Wade; Ron Barden; Scott Cochran; Matt Cathey; (bottom row, left to right) vice chair Gilbert Barrett; NGTC President John Wilkinson; and chair Mitchel Barrett.



Board of Directors Award 2021 (left to right): TCSG Commissioner Greg Dozier; NGTC President John Wilkinson; NGTC board of directors members Dr. Jim Wade and Gilbert Barrett; and TCDA Executive Director Adie Shimandle.

The North Georgia Technical College (NGTC) Board of Directors recently earned the Technical College Directors' Association (TCDA) board certification for the entire board for the tenth consecutive year during the annual Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) Leadership Conference in Savannah.

To earn the designated certification, all board members must complete professional development workshops consisting of new board orientation/governance; relationship building with elected officials; community advocacy; legislative budgeting process and financial management of technical colleges and an elective workshop. Members must

also attend 80% of local board meetings, tour the local technical college, and attend a TCSG State Board meeting or the TCSG Leadership Conference.

Members of the NGTC Board of Directors for 2021-22 who earned this distinction include Cliff Bradshaw of Hiwassee, chair Mitchel Barrett of Cleveland, vice chair Gilbert Barrett of Demorest, Ron Barden of Rabun Gap, Julia Barnett of Blairsville, Jane Brackett of Blue Ridge, Rope Roberts of Clarkesville, Dr. Jim Wade of Toccoa, and newly inducted Matt Cathey of Mount Airy and Scott Cochran of Lavonia.

NGTC board of directors member Cliff Bradshaw represents Towns County. "I

am honored to serve on the Board of Directors for North Georgia Technical College," said Bradshaw. "The college works very hard to offer as many classes as possible at affordable prices. I love to hear all of the success stories from our students!"

"I am very proud of each of our board members for achieving this great accomplishment and for representing NGTC well," said John Wilkinson, president of NGTC. "We are thankful for their continued support of our college and our students."

For more information regarding North Georgia Technical College programs or admission, visit northgatech.edu or call 706-754-7700.

VFW Santa Visit...from Page 1A

tary but serves in the auxiliary under eligibility of several family members.

Whalen's father served in World War II aboard the highly decorated USS O'Bannon; his brother was in the Navy during Vietnam; and his son is currently a major in the U.S. Army.

"I do this to help continue the traditions and honor of my military family, and also our community in its entirety," Whalen said, speaking on his volunteering for the auxiliary. "And this year I am happy to be able to bring this event on for our public."

In years past, the VFW and Auxiliary have committed to various types of community-oriented Christmas giving, including toy donations to the schools, churches, other local groups and the Sheriff's Office.

"And this year we chose to go a different route and do this on our own and see what kind of impact we can make on our community," Whalen said.

Currently, the auxiliary has "tens of thousands of dollars of toys" in storage donated by people who wish to remain

anonymous, "which is a very noble act to do," Whalen said.

"It took two trips to Florida and back by our members Mel and Susanna White to bring everything here," Whalen said. "We have everything from bikes, sporting goods, and everything in between from A-Z, all set up by age groups, and we just wanted something more hands-on with people for a good cause."

The fun will not stop at free toys, as the auxiliary has planned a slew of activities for everyone to enjoy, including visits by Santa and Mrs. Claus. Kids will be able to sit on Santa's lap and make requests, and Mrs. Claus will direct children by age group to pick out toys of their choosing.

A live DJ will be handling the music, and children will get to take part in delicious cookie decorating amid other games and activities, with food and snacks galore.

"Many people have gathered to help put this on," Whalen said, "with a special thanks to our VFW Committee who voted and gave us our approval to go forward, our partners in the VFW, The American

Legion, and The American Legion Auxiliary.

"Anne Mayo is our chairperson for this particular event and has really helped to coordinate the most on how things will go down for this Christmas party."

People wanting to help can best contribute by spreading the word about the event.

"Tell everyone you know to come out and celebrate," Whalen said. "We have plenty of donations this year, but if you wanted to do that then great, as it could be more leftover to add to our next event."

"(Or people can) donate to our building fund, which will be our new facility opening next door that will be so much more state-of-the-art to provide more safety and a broader array of events to host, such as weddings and conferences and whatever our public wants to use it for."

"But our main priority is just bringing together in our community and making sure that everyone is taken care of."

For more information, people may call the VFW office at 706-896-8387.

Consolidation...from Page 1A

According to Oliva, during the past year or so since the arrival of COVID-19, the Board of Elections has suffered from a shortage of poll workers, especially experienced workers who can serve as poll managers.

She first publicly broached the potential need for consolidation in Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw's Sept. 21 regular meeting, in which both she and Bradshaw appealed to the populace for poll worker volunteers to staff the county's three precincts: Hiwassee, Macedonia and Young Harris.

According to state election laws and the Georgia Secretary of State, the rules of the Elections Board require each precinct to be staffed at all times with three poll managers "who are typically more experienced than clerks," that is, poll workers, Oliva said.

"Unfortunately, the Towns County Board of Elections has experienced a significant loss in experienced managers this year through death, retirements and resignations," Oliva said, including some as a result of safety concerns over COVID.

"Further, the Secretary of State's Office is no longer providing each county elections office with an elections equipment technician trained by Dominion Voting Systems for elections. Therefore, all elections responsibilities, including troubleshooting any equipment problems or issues at each precinct, and managing Election Day tallying and reporting, must be completed by one of two office staff who have been certified by the state as elections officials."

As such, Oliva said that,

currently, the Elections Office only has enough experienced and trained managers to staff two polling places.

"The two elections officials assigned to the Towns County Board of Elections and Registration are more able to manage the workload demands of two polling places rather than three," she said. "Therefore, our office would advocate combining two of the three precincts to ensure the needs of the voters are met with the utmost quality services available from our staff."

In looking at which precincts to consolidate, the Elections Board analyzed distances between the three polling places.

Conveniently, the Hiwassee Precinct is located in the same building as the Elections Board Office, and by extension the officials working there, so it made the most sense to consolidate one of the remaining two precincts with that location.

"The most reasonable consolidation plan when considering the location of the three precincts in Towns County would involve the combination of the Hiwassee and Macedonia precincts, as they are located about 2.5 miles apart," Oliva said. "Of the possible options, this action would pose the least inconvenience to voters, as the Young Harris Precinct is located approximately 8.5 miles from the Hiwassee Precinct."

So, rather than continuing to manage three precincts with the currently available elections staff and poll managers, Oliva said that serving the two municipalities in Towns County, namely Hiwassee and Young Harris, "is the logical strategy for ensuring the best

interests of the county voters are served."

On top of increased quality services to Towns County residents, Oliva said consolidation would result in "significant cost savings to the county," as costs for operating one precinct involve poll worker/manager compensation; staff time/compensation for elections equipment testing, setup, delivery/return, and management; extra state reporting and form completion, etc.

Additionally, elections equipment is bulky and, in the past, has required the services of a delivery company to both deliver and return the equipment for each precinct.

"This is not only time consuming but expensive," Oliva said, "as elections officials must escort the elections equipment during transport and maintain custody of it at all times. Reducing the number of precincts requiring delivery would provide cost savings to the county."

Consolidation would not be unprecedented, as the county combined the Tate City Precinct with Macedonia in 2019.

However, Oliva said the current Elections Board would consider re-opening Macedonia one day if the Hiwassee Precinct were to become unmanageable or if the population grew sufficiently enough to warrant such action.

"To further reduce any hardship to voters during elections, three weeks of Advanced (Early) Voting that include two Saturdays are available to voters who choose to vote early rather than on Election Day," Oliva said. "An absentee ballot can be requested for any voter who is unable to vote at the polls for any reason – no excuse is required in Georgia."