

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## I.T. Harkins celebrates 100th birthday with family, friends on March 15

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Happy Birthday to you, I.T. Harkins – and many more. Harkins officially turned 100 years old on Friday, March 15.

The Union County Historical Society hosted a celebration for Harkins at the new Mock House Annex building, where the ringing of the bells at the Historic Union Courthouse in his honor could be heard on Friday.

Joining Harkins for his centennial celebration were about 30 family members, friends and community well-wishers.

Harkins' birthday is an easy date to remember, because it is the equivalent day on the Roman calendar when Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C., better known as the

Ides of March. Born on March 15, 1919, near Suches, I.T. was one of six siblings – five boys and a girl – all of whom served in the U.S. Armed Forces. The Harkins Boys served during World War II, and Stella May, born 17 years after the last of the boys, also served her country honorably.

All six survived their enlistments to return to civilian life, though today, only I.T., his brother Clyde and sister Stella May are still living.

Harkins retired from the Army at Fort Hood, Texas, with the rank of Sergeant Major after a 31-year career.

"I was drafted in November '45," said Harkins. "I had some fear, I remember, whether I'd come out alive. Five of us boys in the service at one time, they all had experiences except me."

"I was in Vietnam. I

was in Korea twice. I never had anyone to shoot at me, and I never pulled the trigger shooting at anyone else, in 31 years. The Lord was taking care of me."

He eventually moved back to the Suches area and built a house on property he bought where the old Baxter Post Office had been located, circa 1900 to 1948, on Cavender Gap Road.

"The Post Office was attached to the old house," said Robert Harkins, adding that they separated the house from the post office and moved both structures about 150 feet away by rolling them on logs and pulling them with a Caterpillar bulldozer.

I.T. then built a new house on the old site, this time with a basement, said I.T.'s oldest son Tom. He thought long and hard about it, prayed about it, and decided to go for



I.T. Harkins, center, celebrating his 100th birthday with sons Robert and Tom, plus plenty of family and friends on Friday, March 15, at the Mock House Annex. Photo by Mark Smith

it. And to this day, there are no cracks in the basement walls or floor.

That house, tragically, caught fire and was destroyed

in 2016, only to be rebuilt the next year as it stands today.

Robert said his dad adopted the name Ira Thomas one day when he went to register

with the Civilian Conservation Corps in Blairsville. They wouldn't let him register without knowing what the

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## Cockerham building to honor the past with historic design elements



This is a digital concept of what Steve Cockerham's mixed-use development will look like in Downtown Blairsville when completed next year.

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Steve Cockerham is hopeful that, by this time next year, his beautifully designed mixed-use commercial

development in Downtown Blairsville will be open for business on the corner of Bob Head Street and Pat Haralson Memorial Drive.

The three-story building will feature four two-bedroom condos up top, as well as middle

and lower floors with space for up to 10 retail establishments at 1,000-plus square feet per business.

Most striking about the development, however, are the number of design cues taken

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## Kevin and Cindy Bierschenk receive warm welcome at chamber reception

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Upward of 200 area residents, business owners, hospital employees and local government officials came together to welcome new Union General Hospital CEO Kevin Bierschenk and his wife Cindy at the Union County Community Center on Thursday, March 14.

"As you all know, the hospital is one of the cornerstones and one of the major stakeholders of Union County," said Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe, acting as master of ceremonies for the reception.

Rowe introduced Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Jim Conley in the gathering.

"I just want to welcome the Bierschens to Union County," said Paris. "They're not settled in yet exactly – they've just



New Union General Hospital CEO Kevin Bierschenk at a reception held in his honor on Thursday, March 14, at the Union County Community Center. Photo by Mark Smith

excited – but we are all extremely excited to have them. And wow, look at this support. This is just awesome. Thank you all for being here and the way you have supported and continue to support the hospital and the

Bierschens. Thank you."

Added William Conley, "Kevin, Cindy – welcome to the City of Blairsville and Union County. It's good to have you

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## UCSO to burglars: 'Stay out of Union County or go to prison'

By Shawn Jarrard  
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The Union County Sheriff's Office wants would-be burglars to know that crime doesn't pay, in either the short or the long run.

"We will eventually catch you if you break in," said UCSO Lt. Daren Osborn. "Together with the District Attorney's Office, we work long and hard to make sure these cases are ready for trial. Don't come to Union County and steal, because we'll send you away to prison."

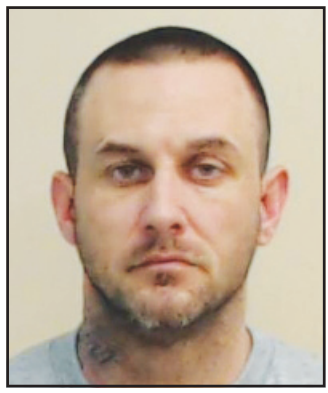
As a prime example of Osborn's meaning, earlier this month, a Union County jury found Rodney Lou Davis Jr., 36, of Brasstown, North Carolina, guilty of six counts of burglary



Rodney Lou Davis Jr.

in the second degree, eight counts of criminal trespass and one count of criminal damage to property in the second degree.

Sentencing in his case is upcoming in April, and he is very likely facing years in prison



Christopher Michael Rhodes

for his crimes, which date to a Dec. 15, 2017, burglary spree at the Hwy 515 Mini Storage in Blairsville.

"At least six units were burglarized, and eight units had locks cut off of them,"

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## Dr. David Gowder pleads guilty in federal prescription drug case

By Linda Erbele  
North Georgia News

GAINESVILLE – Former Union General Hospital ER Director Dr. David Gowder appeared in federal court on Friday, March 15, to plead guilty to a single count of prescribing oxycodone without a legitimate medical purpose in his federal prescription drug case.

Dr. Gowder, 62, of Blairsville, entered his guilty plea in a Change of Plea Hearing before U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story in federal court in Gainesville.

He stood quietly but resolute as Judge Story asked if he understood that, by entering a guilty plea, he would be giving up his right to a trial by jury, his right to be considered innocent



Dr. David Gowder

until proven otherwise, and, with few exceptions, his right to appeal.

"Yes, sir," Dr. Gowder said.

The case is being

prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys William McKinnon and Laurel Boatright.

McKinnon told the court that the maximum sentence for the crime Dr. Gowder was pleading guilty to was 20 years in prison. He said the prosecution may recommend a downward adjustment of that sentence, which could come with a fine of up to \$1 million. There is no mandatory minimum sentence.

Before accepting the guilty plea, Judge Story asked Dr. Gowder if he understood that, while the government may recommend a downward adjustment of the sentence, the court is not bound by that recommendation.

Again, Dr. Gowder said

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## Woody Gap Band of Steel steals hearts in fourth annual gala

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Woody Gap Band of Steel took over the Union County Community Center on Saturday, March 16, bringing its unparalleled brand of steel drum music to Blairsville for a night of primo entertainment and excellent food.

Saturday's concert, aptly titled the "Steel N Love Gala," featured a variety of music covering a diverse field of genres.

From the contemporary pop hits of Bruno Mars and Katy Perry to an array of oldies by legendary artists

like The Beach Boys, Bob Marley and Floyd Cramer, everyone in attendance got to hear something from one of their favorite playlists.

Although, according to Woody Gap Band Director Doug Roberts, this year's band is the youngest in its five-year history.

With only one senior, Roberts had to recruit musicians out of middle school to fill the empty spots.

But in speaking to Woody Gap Principal Carol Knight, who has had an up-close look at the Band of Steel during her four years in Suches, one would believe the band was filled with

seasoned vets.

"It's been phenomenal to watch (the band) grow over the years," Knight said. "The complexity of the songs that middle school kids are doing now is at the same level that we used to only have at the high school."

"As the years have gone by, the kids are starting as young as kindergarten, so when they reach middle school, they are playing high school-level songs."

According to Knight, Woody Gap and Flowery Branch are the only two high schools in Georgia that feature steel

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Members of the Woody Gap Band of Steel, led by Band Director Doug Roberts, performing in their annual gala on Saturday, March 16. Photo by Todd Forrest

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