

Seniors...from Page 1A

could have finished out the year, but after everything he heard and read about COVID-19, he

assumed that school closings were a possibility.

"I was sad about it, but

everything I saw on the news told me it would eventually get to this point," Etheridge said.

At Union County High School, one event that everyone looks forward to at the end of the year is the culmination of U-lympics, which is a combination of the words "Union" and "Olympics."

The U-lympics take the form of a schoolwide competition where the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior classes go head to head to earn points in everything from academic and athletic achievements, to having good behavior and avoiding lunch fines and overdue library books.

"We all look forward to building up points and hearing the winner announced during the last week of school," Andelin Hill said of U-lympics. "I told some of my friends that I would have had more fun with it if I knew we weren't going back."

Academically, Hill said adapting to a virtual classroom was a challenge initially, but that the experience soon became second nature.

"At first it was very different, but once we got that opening week out of the way, things ran smoothly after that," Hill said. "For me, the toughest part was not getting to see your friends and teachers."

At Woody Gap, the

transition was more natural, since online classes are more commonplace with the students in Suches.

"We were already using an online program, so it was more of a change of scenery than anything else," Etheridge said. "I do most of my classes online, and that's the case going back to middle school. The only difference is, there is no teacher on-site to help you if you need it."

Meanwhile, as a senior, Hill said she'd made sure to mentally prepare herself for life beyond high school, but having it end in such an unexpected fashion gave her a new perspective on her final year at UCHS.

"I was actually thinking about everything last night and how my dad always told me that high school is the best time of your life, and I really didn't realize that until the other day when it finally sunk in," Hill said. "And he is right – these really are the best days of your life."

For the athletes who participate in spring sports like baseball and soccer, they won't be walking onto the field, side-

by-side with their parents, to hear their names announced during Senior Night festivities.

Some won't get a chance to defend their state and region titles. Others will be unable to attend canceled ceremonies in recognition of college scholarships or have their academic achievements applauded at Honors Night.

Hill and fellow Union County basketball star Kait McCarter both recently signed college athletic scholarships with Brenau and Young Harris, respectively, and neither was able to celebrate with their teammates or take photos with their families and classmates.

Like Hill, Etheridge misses seeing his friends every day, though he has been practicing social distancing by taking advantage of the serene mountain life available in Suches.

"This being my last year, I wish I were able to spend more time with my friends before I begin work and school," he said. "But lately, I've been spending a lot of time fishing."

Following a much-needed

vacation during last week's spring break observance, Union County and Woody Gap students are once again learning from home.

The Georgia Department of Education has closed school campuses for the remainder of the year, and it's questionable if the school year will stretch until the previously-slated final day of May 22, with many school districts seemingly considering early closeouts to instructional calendars.

And while it remains unclear at the moment what exactly seniors will and won't be missing out on as the school year comes to an end, not all hope is lost, as school officials continue to advocate for their students.

"We are monitoring the situation and exploring all options," Superintendent John Hill said. "Under the current shelter-in-place order and government restrictions, it's going to be a major challenge, but we are committed to doing everything we can legally do for our seniors safely."

Hospitals...from Page 1A

Regional Hospital's own employees tested positive for the novel coronavirus last week – Barnett wants to assure the community that neither Union General nor Chatuge Regional is experiencing shortages of beds, ventilators, personal protective equipment or other supplies.

"We're doing as well as we possibly can at the moment," she said. "Our staff is amazing. They are doing a great job taking care of these patients and following CDC guidelines. We're doing our best to keep other staff members safe, as well as our patients, too."

The state licenses Union General for 45 beds, but that tally increases to 56 when including observation beds, Barnett said. They can currently handle seven intensive care patients but can expand if necessary. Meanwhile, Chatuge Regional has 25 regular beds and three more in ICU.

Barnett added that both hospitals have an "adequate" supply of ventilators and respirators, and they are keeping their patients segregated, with the Towns County hospital acting as a "clean" hospital and Union General housing patients with or expected to have COVID-19.

"At Chatuge Regional, for example, we have our 'swing bed' patients who are recovering and are trying to get well enough to go home," Barnett said. "We are trying our best to keep sick patients away from them."

"So anyone in the Chatuge emergency room that is considered infectious or a COVID-19 suspect is transferred to Blairsville."

Furthermore, inside Union General Hospital, the third floor is designated as a "clean unit" and is off-limits to all infectious patients.

According to Barnett, both hospitals have modified their safety procedures to coincide with the rise in local cases. Staff members are wearing masks at all times, as are any visitors allowed entry into the building.

Daniel said that the hospitals are still screening everyone who enters and limiting the number of visitors.



Personnel with Union General Hospital's Med/Surg Department are always ready to go, even during the pandemic.

Photo/Facebook

"We're trying to keep all of our patients healthy," Daniel said. "Even people coming in to get bloodwork or X-rays. Upon entering, everyone gets their temperature taken and must explain their reason for being at the hospital."

While both hospitals remain well-stocked, Barnett acknowledged they are still accepting donations, because, as cases of the highly transmissible COVID-19 continue to rise, hospital staff is having to use more personal protective equipment, or PPE, than ever before.

"We are doing well, but we still appreciate all donations," Barnett said. "We go through them very quickly due to having more people in isolation and more suspects coming into the emergency room."

"So, we are constantly working on getting more supplies. Each time an individual goes into one of those rooms, they have to put new PPE on. You can imagine how quickly we go through gowns, gloves, masks and things like that."

"I'm convinced we have the best community anywhere. They've done so much for our staff to boost morale and are so very appreciated."

Should anyone require non-emergency care, Barnett urges the community to continue visiting the clinics set up in both counties. All well visits should take place

at the Young Harris Clinic, while all sick visits should occur at Union General Family Medicine in Blairsville.

Additionally, everyone making a well pediatric visit should frequent Dr. Josh Kennedy's office in Blairsville.

On the testing front, Barnett indicated that advancements have occurred, and currently, results are available within 24-48 hours in most cases. However, the hospitals must follow state and federal guidelines and limit the number of COVID-19 tests they administer.

"Unfortunately, we must prioritize who we test, so we can't test people just because they want to get tested," Barnett said. "But we have seen improvements in testing. The Georgia Department of Public Health is doing a good job and has opened up drive-through testing."

"Patients can go to their primary care physician and get what's called a 'PUI' (Person Under Investigation). Once they get that piece of paper, they can go to a drive-through, and every district has at least one drive-through."

Additional information on testing is also available via local health departments. The Union County Health Department can be reached at 706-745-6292. In Towns County, the number is 706-896-2265.

Chatuge Regional...from Page 1A

and offer testing based on guidance by the CDC and Georgia Department of Public Health.

"It is believed that this employee's infection is likely related to a community exposure, as no suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients are being treated as inpatients at Chatuge Regional Hospital," the Health System said.

Chatuge Regional has been designated a "clean facility," Hospital Administrator Leslie Daniel said, noting that all regional Health System patients requiring local hospitalization for positive or suspected cases of COVID-19 are transported to Blairsville's Union General for treatment.

Also last week, the Cherokee County, North Carolina, Health Department reported that a Cherokee County resident employed as a health care worker in Georgia had tested positive for the virus.

There has been some speculation on social media and in the community that the Cherokee County resident and the Chatuge Regional employee are one and the same, though the North Georgia News was unable to confirm this information by press time.

Cherokee County health officials, who are actively tracing contacts of the North Carolina resident, said on

Facebook that "the decision to test was not communicated to the Cherokee County Health Department until (April 9), when the test result came back positive."

The North Carolina-based Health Department also said that the resident/health care worker in question "was not informed to isolate after being tested," which runs counter to information provided by Union General about the Chatuge Regional employee.

"Our employees have received education on COVID-19 signs and symptoms and the CDC guidelines surrounding this illness, including isolation precautions," Union General said Friday. "All employees are screened daily prior to working with temperature check and screened for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19."

"Union General Health System continues to monitor CDC and (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) guidance related to COVID-19 and will continue to collaborate with the (Georgia) Department of Public Health."

Perhaps significant, Union General issued its press release on April 10 – the day after the Cherokee County Health Department posted about the Georgia health care worker on Facebook.

Union General doesn't usually comment on details of

individual cases, though with the Chatuge Regional employee, the Health System said it wanted to ensure "the community has accurate information," and that "inaccurate statements are corrected."

Separately, Health System Administrator Daniel said she would like to put to rest any rumors regarding COVID-19 cases going unreported by the hospitals in Towns and Union counties, saying that all positive cases are reported to the appropriate authorities as mandated by state law.

"We care for patients from the entire region, and those cases are credited to each patient's place of residence per the Department of Public Health," Daniel said. "We as a hospital have no control over the speed or accuracy of the DPH map."

The Georgia Department of Public Health said recently it was working to correct internal reporting errors related to its Daily COVID-19 Status Report, which can be found at <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

"Union General Health System implements best practices in compliance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Georgia Department of Public Health guidance," Union General said. "Patient safety and ensuring the highest quality of care is a priority for the entire Union General Health System."