

North Georgia News

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Capt. Kiser returns from military service as nurse in NYC

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Hometown hero and U.S. Army Capt. Mark Kiser returned to Blairsville May 24 from military service in the country's COVID-19 epicenter: New York City.

According to the New York State Department of Health, as of June 3, the state had tested over 375,000 positive COVID-19 cases, resulting in tens of thousands of hospitalizations and the deaths of more than 24,000 people for nearly a quarter of America's coronavirus deaths.

During his deployment, Kiser's medical unit was attached to the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in support of Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, which was one of the hardest hit hospitals at the onset of the pandemic.

The Army converted the Javits Center into a field hospital at the end of March, which, alongside the USNS Comfort, housed extra virus patients as an alternative care facility.

"We were trying to help the hospitals not be overwhelmed," Kiser said.

"The first day that we put boots on the ground in New York was about the same time that the Javits Center was coming up to speed.

"If you picture this like a pot boiling over, the Javits Center was to catch the boil-over. The Javits Center was getting 50 to 75 patients per day. The first day (we were in New York), they decided to take our nurses, which I was a part of, and put us in the Javits Center to meet that demand.

"It was supposed to be just COVID patients, but in reality, it was everybody, because it was hard to meet the testing demands and all that."

And the virus definitely took its toll, with Kiser witnessing first-hand just how easily the spread can occur in a large city like New York, where close contact between people is unavoidable.

"It doesn't take a scientist to see how 9 million people in New York City could spread the virus rapidly," Kiser said. "Most of the occupants in the city are taking the subway or they are taking buses to get from point A to point B."

"I can't recall but seeing very few houses - it seems

like everybody is living in apartment buildings. They are putting 400 or 500 people in those buildings where they are sharing ventilation systems.

"The closest thing we have here in Georgia is Atlanta, but that doesn't really compare. Overall, I think the American people did what we needed to do when all this happened. We flattened that curve, we went to New York and helped, where everybody stepped up and did their part.

"I think we know a lot more about this virus than we did in the beginning, so I think the governors and mayors are doing a good job, and I think it is time to take steps toward normalization. We just have to figure out what normal is going to look like now."

The Army captain spent about 10 weeks in New York working with virus patients, and upon his return, he self-quarantined for two weeks due to his prolonged proximity to virus patients.

Already, he is looking forward to returning to work at Union General Hospital in the gastrointestinal laboratory, which he plans on doing probably in July.

Kiser lives locally, though he originally hails from Union County, Tennessee. He joined the Air Force after graduating high school in the 1980s and served out of Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina.

He met his wife Kim in Charleston, and the two moved to Valdosta when he got out of the military in 1992.

"We lived there for many, many years, and I went back to college while in Valdosta and got my nursing degree and started working as a nurse (in critical care and ICU settings)," he said. "In 2001, 9/11 happened, so the bug hit me again to get back into the military."

"At the time, me and my wife had small kids, so I waited a while, but ultimately I ended up going back into the military in 2008."

Kiser went into the Army Reserve as a nurse in Jacksonville, Florida, where he served for years before retiring to Union County, Georgia.

"Shortly after moving here, the Army offered me a command position with the 382nd (Medical Company) in Asheville, North Carolina,"

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U.S. Army Capt. Mark Kiser just got back from a medical tour in NYC helping COVID-19 patients there. Photo/Submitted

Union Countians advocate wearing masks against coronavirus

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

After being asked for months to remain cautious to protect their communities from COVID-19, some people in the area have begun to question the virus and how they should feel about it.

"I'm starting to wonder how much of the virus was actually a problem and if there are really that many deaths from it," James Burke said on the Blairsville Square last Thursday.

At press time, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention were estimating the provisional death count for the virus at above 100,000 Americans.

"I'm not saying that it wasn't real or anything like



The Hole in the Wall Restaurant was hopping on Saturday in Downtown Blairsville. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

that, but I really can't help but question whether or not those numbers are accurate," Burke said. "With the protests going on, it just seems like the virus disappeared."

"Maybe it just disappeared in our minds, but I haven't heard of any big outbreaks lately. I heard that warm weather helps kill it, so

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Union County Farmers Market opens for season while maintaining safety

By Jarrett Whitener
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Following all of the uncertainty of the last few months, it was a great relief to many people Saturday when the Union County Farmers Market opened right on time to start its annual season June 6, with hundreds and hundreds of folks coming out to support the local vendors.

Due to COVID-19, the market is taking extra precautions to ensure customer and vendor safety by having

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Longtime market vendor Ray Long of Long's Produce was on hand for the Farmers Market's 2020 season opener. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

City talks reopening, Jackson Street guardrail, detainee labor and more

By Shawn Jarrard
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Due to continuing concerns over COVID-19, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and City Council held their third straight teleconferenced regular city meeting on Tuesday, June 2.

In the meeting, they discussed the potential to reopen City Hall to the public, though reopening procedures have yet to be finalized, and the council will revisit the matter toward the end of July.

Moving forward, the city's departments and staff will continue rotating work schedules to minimize any potential for the spread of COVID-19. For example, City Hall has four office staff, only two of which currently work out of the office at a time while rotating out every other week.

Once City Hall reopens, there will be a glass partition



The city will soon be installing a guardrail here at Jackson Street to protect against cars that accidentally roll downhill from Circle K from time to time. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

installed at the front counter, and furthermore, the council decided to adopt the Georgia Municipal Association's face mask policy requiring city workers and the public to wear masks when entering city

buildings.

Also in the meeting, the council approved the installation of a guardrail at Jackson Street and Cleveland Street to prevent vehicles that

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Demonstrators support Black Lives Matter; Blairsville protest June 14



Protesters from Towns and Union counties in Georgia and from Clay and Cherokee counties in North Carolina joined for a Black Lives Matter solidarity protest in Hiwassee Friday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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Hiwassee - George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor - these are more than just names that have appeared in headlines nationwide in recent weeks.

They were flesh and blood Americans whose

senseless deaths continue to inspire deep passion within the Black Lives Matter movement and society-wide calls for justice and equality for all.

Floyd, Arbery and Taylor - among many others - were the names on protesters' hearts, minds and signs in a demonstration of solidarity with Black Lives Matter on

Friday, June 5, in Hiwassee.

Tori Anderson, 18, of Hiwassee, said she organized the protest to speak out specifically against systemic racism and police brutality, "as evident in the killing of George Floyd."

Floyd died May 25 after Minneapolis Police Officer See Demonstrators Protest, Page 3A

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