



# Happy 4th of July

"Land of Lakes, Mountains, Scenic Beauty and Friendly People"

75¢

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County [www.nganews.com](http://www.nganews.com)

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## Former hospital CEO Gowder receives 1 year, 1 day in federal prison Codefendant James Heaton to serve 6 years behind bars

**By Linda Erbele  
North Georgia News**  
GAINESVILLE – Former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder was sentenced to a year and a day in prison by U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story in a hearing Wednesday, June 24, at the federal courthouse in Gainesville.

In addition, he will have to pay a special assessment of \$10,200, a fine of \$2,000 and will serve two years of supervision following his prison sentence.

Gowder and former physician James Heaton, who ran a family practice clinic in

Blairsville, were each found guilty on more than 100 counts of prescription drug fraud by a federal jury last October.

In a hearing that occurred earlier the same day, Story sentenced codefendant Heaton to six years in prison for his crimes. Heaton will also have to pay a special assessment of \$12,900 and undergo two years of supervision following his release.

Federal prosecutors had previously recommended 10-year sentences for both Gowder and Heaton, with Gowder asking for probation and house arrest over prison, and Heaton requesting no more than five

years in prison. Both men received their requested prison time plus one year.

Their sentencing had been delayed several times due to judicial interruptions brought on by the novel coronavirus.

Also due to COVID-19, they will not be required to surrender themselves into federal custody until at least Jan. 2, 2021, as both Gowder and Heaton, being 62 and 63 respectively, fall into the "at-risk" age category for the virus.

The two men were convicted under a federal indictment that originally included former Union General

Hospital Emergency Room Director David Gowder, brother to Mike Gowder.

Interestingly, Mike's sentence ended up being six months shorter than his brother's, despite the former having been convicted on more than 100 federal charges compared to David's single crime.

David Gowder, 63, pleaded guilty in March 2019 to one count of prescribing oxycodone to a patient without a legitimate medical purpose, and Story sentenced him to 18 months in prison on June 10.

Last week, Blairsville restaurateur Randy Brunson



Mike Gowder



James Heaton

addressed the court on Heaton's behalf, saying he had known the former family practice doctor for 50 years.

"I have never heard

him utter an illegal thought," Brunson said. "He is the most honorable person I have ever known. He has lost everything."

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## 'Don't drink and drive,' says Sheriff Mason; locals provide LEOs lunch

**By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com**

Many people will be familiar with the phrase "I've slept since then," but Union County Sheriff Mack Mason wants people to know that, when they drink, it's usually many hours before they're safe to drive – even if they've slept since then.

Case in point, while on this way to work a few mornings ago, the sheriff pulled over an individual for speeding. During the interaction, he determined that the driver may have been over the legal limit of 0.08 for blood alcohol content in people aged 21 and above.

As it happened, the driver had been drinking the night before and was unaware

that they still had alcohol in their bloodstream, a fact the sheriff confirmed prior to the individual's arrest for driving under the influence.

"When I was on the Georgia State Patrol, several times on a Sunday morning, I would have arrested two people for DUI before the church bell rang," Mason said. "They would argue, 'I haven't had anything to drink since last night.'"

"If that's what you're telling me, that's fine; the problem is, you drank so much last night that it is still in your system. So, I'm saying all this to try to educate people to where they won't wind up getting out there behind the wheel while still being under the influence."



Sheriff Mack Mason

Alcohol is metabolized in the liver, which can only process so much at a time. Much of the alcohol a person consumes circulates in their bloodstream until cleared by

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## Fireworks, boat parade to headline July 4 celebrations in Union

**By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer**

Independence Day weekend is going to look a bit different in Union County, as the novel coronavirus continues to put up a fight both locally and around the nation.

Despite the recent setbacks, there's still plenty of options in and around Blairsville for those wishing to celebrate America's birthday, most notably, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce's annual fireworks display at Meeks Park Saturday, July 4.

And according to Chamber President Steve Rowe, reserved socially-distanced parking at the park and North



The Meeks Park Fourth of July Fireworks always draw big crowds like this one situated across the street at North Georgia Technical College in 2015. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Georgia Technical College was all but sold out as of last weekend.

"Of the parking that we control, we're only selling

half of the spaces this year," he said. "Anyone interested in reserved parking may contact the chamber, but at this point."

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## Payne teams up with Historical Society for Eagle Scout Project

**By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com**

Last week, Thomas Payne completed his Boy Scouts of America Eagle Scout Service Project, helping to restore certain elements of the 1861 Payne Cabin and Mountain Life Museum behind the 1906 Grapelle Butt Mock House in Downtown Blairsville.

Payne is 17 and an upcoming senior at Union County High, and he arrived at the idea for the project last summer; as the Payne Cabin



Blairsville Troop 101 Boy Scout Thomas Payne conducted his Eagle Scout project at the home of his ancestor John Payne at the Mountain Life Museum. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## EMC general manager to resign in September; director candidates nominated

**By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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YOUNG HARRIS – The Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation announced June 26 that General Manager Jeremy Nelms would be resigning his from position at the end of September.

EMC Board directors learned of Nelms' decision the previous day, when he informed them he'd be leaving to become the new CEO of Flint Energy, effective Oct. 1. Flint is an

electric membership corporation headquartered in Reynolds, Georgia, serving customers in the Warner Robins area.

"Nelms began his career at Blue Ridge Mountain EMC in August 2016," according to the EMC's announcement. "He was hired as the seventh general manager since the inception of BRMEMC in 1938."

"During Nelms' four-year tenure, the EMC has seen a growth in its membership that now exceeds 54,000 meters, 46,791 members and 6,200



Jeremy Nelms

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## Sheriff's Office deputies nab two suspects on felony theft charges

**By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com**

A local man with a history of shoplifting was arrested June 21 for stealing about \$1,500 worth of merchandise from the Blairsville Walmart, Union County Sheriff's Lt. Daren Osborn said.

Evan Reed Daves, 23, of Blairsville, has been charged with two felony counts of theft by shoplifting in reference to June 19 and June 21 incidents at Walmart, Osborn said.

Daves initially got on law enforcement's radar on June 21 after a Walmart theft



Evan Reed Daves



Roy Everett Overby

face mask had walked out of the store without paying

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## Large crowds turn out for inaugural Pro Rodeo at fairgrounds

**By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer**

Upwards of 3,000 rodeo fans from all over headed to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Ballfields over the weekend to catch the first-ever Hiwassee Pro Rodeo June 26-27.

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw attended both nights of the rodeo to welcome folks to the area and to wish them a good time during all the bull riding, calf roping, barrel racing, bronc riding and more.

"We are excited – we have been preparing for this for a long time," Bradshaw said Friday. "We have a lot of



Bronc Riding was just one of the many fast-paced rodeo pastimes performed during the 2020 Hiwassee Pro Rodeo. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

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