

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, August 2, 2023

Union County Schools gearing up for Aug. 9 return

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In one week, students will be waving goodbye to summer vacation and saying hello to classmates as Union County Schools open once more for another exciting year of learning.

Classes will resume Wednesday, Aug. 9, and in anticipation of the big day, the system's new staff gathered on Thursday, July 27, for orientation to ensure everything is shipshape and ready to go.

The system has spent the summer preparing for the 2023-24 season with updates to facilities and careful planning by the Board of Education.

Across the mountain,

Woody Gap students can expect remodeled tennis courts in the near future. Additionally, the school is still seeking to fill a Career, Technical and Agricultural Education position, and interested parties can find out more at <https://www.ucschools.org/>.

For the little guys at Union County Primary School, Principal Debbie Decubellis said educators will be continuing to focus on literacy and preparing older children to enter Elementary School, all the while "looking forward to having all of our children and staff back, because the building comes alive with all of our kids."

The Elementary School has five new teachers, and

Elementary Principal Jerry Bavero suggests parents check out the school's Facebook page for a supply list.

Moving up to the Middle School, there are three new teachers. Certain immunizations are required for seventh-grade students, and at the Aug. 7 Open House, the Health Department will be present to provide vaccines for anyone who hasn't had a chance to get caught up.

There are several changes at Union County High. The FLEX Program will be returning with an "extra period" at the end of the day. Students keeping good grades, behavior and attendance can leave earlier to get help from teachers in

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Union County School buses will be hitting the roads again when the new semester begins Aug. 9. Photo by Shawn Jarrard/2021

Farmers Market welcomes manager Dustin Rogers

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Dustin "The Rog" Rogers has officially started his training as the new manager of the Union County Farmers Market.

This comes after 16 years with the Georgia Mountain Research & Education Center - aka the Experiment Station - two years with the Union County Recreation Department, and many more years of experience with agriculture and the great outdoors.

Rogers' grandfather, Neal Moon, was the County Agent before Mickey Cummings. Cummings was Rogers' 4H instructor, and Junior Burnette taught him about the Future Farmers of America organization. The three men served as mentors in

See New Market Manager, Page 2A



Dustin Rogers is the new manager at the Union County Farmers Market, where he looks forward to getting to know vendors and the community in his new position. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Car crashes into family medicine office; no injuries

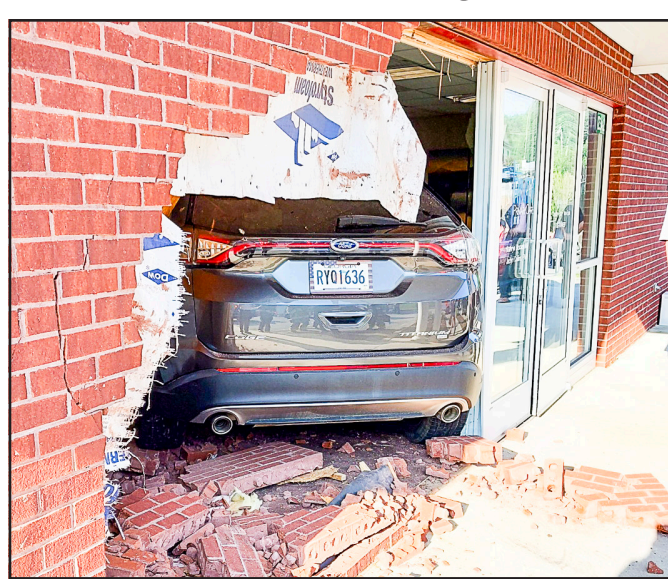
By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Trinity Primary Care experienced a miracle last week when a car barreled through its lobby during business hours and nobody was injured.

The office had just opened on Tuesday, July 25, and patients had already started filing in, with several sitting in the lobby of the building located at 123 Weaver Road.

At 8:22 a.m., a Ford Edge traveling west in the parking lot made a left turn to park out front for a lab visit. Unfortunately, the driver pressed the gas pedal instead of the brake and drove into the building through the wall to the left of the front door, according

See Trinity Car Crash, Page 3A



Here's something you don't see every day, and thankfully, no one was injured after this car crashed through Trinity Primary Care.

Community supports Deklin with bow shoot, pizza party

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

From start to finish, Deklin Jones' journey to fight cancer has been one hurdle after the next, though the bright young man, who has thankfully entered remission, continues to remain optimistic in the face of adversity.

On top of his osteosarcoma diagnosis, there have been travel expenses and medical bills to consider, which will put a strain on any family no matter their circumstances. Fortunately, the community has once again come together to lift up the Union County Elementary School student and his family.

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Deklin Jones enjoyed a pizza party in his honor on Thursday, July 27. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Stormy weather interrupts Music & Moonshine Festival

By Natalie Mintz
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It was all hands on deck Saturday night as volunteers worked to clean up the Blairsville Square after a storm blew through the downtown area around 8:30 p.m., interrupting the Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival.

For hours afterward, visiting and local merchants, downtown residents, local law enforcement, civic leaders and other good Samaritans picked up tents and salvaged as much merchandise as possible that had been strewn across the Old Courthouse lawn and downtown roundabout.

Not every vendor was hit, but an estimated 60% of vendors suffered some form of wind and water damage as

See Music & Moonshine, Page 6A



Good Samaritans helped dozens of vendors clean up after a storm swept through Downtown Blairsville later in the evening on July 29 during the 2023 Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Sonny Mahan enjoying retirement after 41 years at EMC

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A little over a month in retirement, Blairsville native Sonny Mahan is staying busy living the good life.

After 41 years at Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation, he's glad to be enjoying more family time and pursuing his hobbies - hunting, fishing, etc. - while continuing to recover from recent back surgery for an injury he sustained building a

wall at his home last year.

Mahan will miss the incredible employees and members with whom he worked daily at the EMC, though he admits it is nice wearing shorts instead of dress pants for a change and not having to wake up early five days a week, not to mention all the late-night hours he spent dealing with weather-related power outages.

When he retired June 30, Mahan was the most senior member on staff, and he has seen a lot of changes in his 41

years. He started with the co-op on July 6, 1982, as a member of a new meter-reading crew that read all the electric meters in the five-county system.

"At that time, we had about 18,000 meters and 68 employees," Mahan said. "Now, we've got roughly 205 employees (plus contractors), and we're almost at 46,000 members with 58,000 meters. So, that's a major change in 41 years."

He transitioned to Energy Services in 1995,

which involved becoming certified to do inspections for the Tennessee Valley Authority, as well as overseeing financing and maintenance programs for things like new homes, heat pumps, water heaters and surge protection units.

In 2002, Mahan took a promotion to Director of Member Services, the same position from which he retired, and he worked hard to promote a culture of workplace safety and develop wholesome relationships between EMC

employees, the membership and the broader community.

As Director of Member Services, he handled member complaints, issues and offered programs to help members make their homes more energy efficient.

Additionally, he oversaw community outreach initiatives, prompting him to join and assist multiple organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Relay For Life, Kiwanis, the Hospital Board, etc., and he

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Sonny Mahan

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Back to School...from Page 1A

particular subjects they may be struggling with.

"It's a way of making sure everybody has what they need to be successful," explained new UCHS Principal Carol Knight. She has taken over this school year from C.T. Hussion, who has transitioned to a new Board Office position as Director of Teaching and Learning.

Additionally, the College and Career Academy will feature some "innovative" changes, and soon, the new track will become available for student use on top of the hill next to the Fine Arts Center.

"I would like the community to know that we have a highly dedicated, highly effective staff, and we are ready to go," Knight said, adding that the gym floor has not only been resurfaced but repainted as well.

"We want everybody to be aware that we're back on the road," reminded Transportation Director Kody Owenby. "Everybody just make sure to stop and give plenty of room and plenty of time (for children boarding school buses)."

While there is no timeframe of arrival, Union County will soon have its first electric school buses, the costs of which have been mostly covered by grant funding. The main difference will be a

quieter ride.

"We are absolutely excited to have (our community's) children back in school," Superintendent John Hill said. "This group of folks here have worked extraordinarily hard this summer to be prepared and ready for their kids. We love their kids and want them back."

Added Hill, "We've been very diligent to be as fiscally responsible as we can with the state cut to our budget due to our property assessment increase and health care increase. We have worked as hard as possible to trim that budget down to the bare bones without impacting the service the children are going to receive."

And no matter what stage their children are at, parents should make sure to update student and contact information via the PowerSchool app on their phone or computer. Due to positive feedback, many required forms can now be completed online.

"Even if they think it's right, they need to go back and check and make sure it's right," C.T. Hussion said. "And there will be some hard-copy forms that are coming home, but we've tried to reduce those."

Open House at Woody Gap School will be Monday, Aug. 7, from about 4-6 p.m.,

and the community is invited to attend a special back-to-school gathering that is taking place at the same time.

Over at the Primary School, Open House will also be on Aug. 7 as well, but by appointment; teachers will reach out to parents to set up meetings.

"Meet Your Teacher" for Elementary, Middle and High School students will be from 4-7 p.m. on Aug. 7.

Nutrition Department representatives will be available Aug. 7 to help answer

any questions and provide assistance filling out forms alongside information on the Tools for Schools Program.

As always, parents and guardians are asked to be patient with traffic patterns during the first few weeks of drop-off and pick-up for car riders. There are no major changes, but school administrators still suggest planning ahead.

"By week three, it will improve tremendously," said Superintendent Hill, speaking from experience.

Finally, the Eighth

Annual Backpack 2 School Bash will be held at First United Methodist Church on Saturday, Aug. 5, at 938 Hwy 515 West. Be sure to click on the Union County Family Connection Facebook page to scan the QR code to register for free school supplies, food, games and fun from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Another option for registry is to call Family Connection directly at 706-835-4351 or visit <https://sites.google.com/view/backpack-2-school-bash/home?authuser=0>.

New Market Manager...from Page 1A

Rogers' early life.

Knowing this background, it was County Manager Larry Garrett who approached Rogers and asked him to take over at the Farmers Market.

Now, with help from Mickey Cummings, Patrick Fix and Milton Bradley, Rogers is becoming a student again. Cummings and Fix are former managers of the Farmers Market, while Bradley is a part-time worker and "just an expert on stuff like being a true mountain man."

"On the weekend, I'm learning it on the fly, so there's obviously a lot of scheduling," noted Rogers, talking about what some of that training has looked like so far. "We have our seasonal vendors, but on Saturday mornings, we also have walk-ups, and we try to find places for them. We don't want to turn anybody away, but the market is growing - which is a good thing."

That's saying nothing of the maintenance that goes into keeping the grounds looking presentable. Rogers joins other employees on off days at the market to mow and weed eat, and he's already completed the paperwork for proper certification at the Canning Plant.

"It'll take years for me to be on the level of Mickey, Milton and Patrick," Rogers admitted, but he has "a blue-million" plans that involve utilizing the Farmers Market

for more year-round events.

"Under my management, I'll definitely be someone you can talk to," he said. "You know, I'm just a good old boy. I ain't nothing fancy; we'll talk it out and I'll be fair and try to help you - try to help anybody out as much as I can."

And Rogers plans to remain involved with the Recreation Department in some capacity. He wants to make sure that those who know him from Suches remember that he will continue to maintain his projects with the students of Woody Gap, especially in the fall and winter seasons when the market and cannery are less active.

"A lot of people don't know that the Farmers Market is part of the Rec Department," Rogers shared before emphasizing, "I'm still going to do my hiking and my fishing programs, even with taking this on... I'm going to be busy, but I'll make it work."

In the near term, Rogers plans to provide more opportunities for walk-up vendors and sort out utilizing more space at the Farmers Market, though at just a few weeks into his new job, it's hard for him to tell anything with certainty.

For now, he's spending some time getting acquainted with this new chapter of his life.

On that note, plenty of things are staying the same. Rogers has no intention of

changing the homestead or majorly altering the Hunter-England Cabin area of the market, and the Farmers Market Dog Park will continue as it has been.

"I've seen managers jump in (at various workplaces), and they're going to change the world in the first week. I've never been that way, and like I've told our workers, I'm not a micromanager," reassured Rogers, also making sure to extend his thanks to the seasonal vendors who return time and time again. "That ain't me. That ain't my style. I'm pretty laid-back."

That said, Rogers is looking forward to getting to know the market's regular sellers - and visitors - and celebrating everything Union County has to offer together.

All produce at the Farmers Market will remain local, sourced only from Union County and the counties that touch it - Towns, White, Lumpkin and Fannin in Georgia, and Cherokee and Clay in North Carolina.

Now at the middle of the season, the market is still in full-swing and will be around through October. To come browse local crafts and food or greet "The Rog," head on over to 290 Farmers Market Way in Blairsville, either on Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. or Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Don't forget Trash to Treasures on Fridays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

July Term 2023 Grand Jury Indictments

The following individuals were indicted during the July Term 2023 of the Union County Grand Jury:

Chandler Dale Gooch, aggravated battery; battery; false imprisonment; possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony; possession of methamphetamine; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; possession of drug-related objects.

David William MacFarland, escape; theft by taking.

Calvin Nicolaus Burnette, serious injury by vehicle; driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); failure to yield right of way; open container; failure to wear seat safety belt.

Nina Book, peeping tom; criminal trespass; two counts aggravated assault; tampering with evidence; two counts obstruction of an officer.

Gregory Ryan Spivey, two counts aggravated stalking; harassing communications; terroristic threats.

Daniel Eugene Mort, battery, Family Violence.

Thomas Lloyd Black, sexual battery; criminal attempt to commit a misdemeanor; driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); driving under the influence (per se).

Christopher Scott Campbell, burglary in the first degree; disorderly conduct.

Don Wesley Stiess, possession of methamphetamine; possession of drug-related objects; simple battery; driving without a license.

Kaitlyn Rose Dey, cruelty to children in the second degree; battery, Family Violence.

Jonathan Dwayne Crowder, possession of a Schedule II controlled substance; failure to stop at a stop sign.

Christy Marie Beasley, aka Cristy Marie Beasley, possession of a Schedule II controlled substance.

Christina Lynn Nastav, 12 counts serious injury by vehicle; driving under the influence; driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); reckless driving; failure to maintain lane.

Jeremy Shane Hill, possession of a Schedule III controlled substance; crossing the guard lines with drugs; driving under the influence (less safe) (drugs); distracted driving; failure to maintain lane; driving with expired

license; failure to wear seat safety belt; littering highway.

James Keith Levi, possession of a Schedule I controlled substance; possession of a Schedule II controlled substance; possession of marijuana with intent to distribute; possession of marijuana, more than an ounce; possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony; driving under the influence (less safe) (combined influence); possession of drug-related objects; obstruction of an officer; tampering with evidence; speeding; failure to wear seat safety belt.

Sandra Lee Jones (superseding indictment), 53 counts exploitation and intimidation of disabled adult, elder person or resident; crossing the guard lines with drugs.

Danny Lee Brown, two counts aggravated assault; possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony; pointing a gun or pistol at another.

Allison Nicole Dyer, exploitation and intimidation of disabled adult, elder person or resident; four counts identity fraud.

Zachary Chance Barnhardt, two counts statutory rape.

James Berry Brown, possession of a controlled substance; driving under the influence (less safe) (combined influence); two counts driving under the influence (controlled substance); driving under the influence (less safe) (drugs); driving under the influence (per se); driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); failure to maintain lane; driving on wrong side

of roadway.

Brittany Nichole Green, four counts fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer; driving under the influence (per se); driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); open container.

Juliea Mae Rich, aggravated assault; two counts obstruction of an officer.

Randy Delain Ledford, three counts possession of a controlled substance; obstruction of an officer.

David Leland Kirby, possession of drug-related objects.

Connie Sue Nix, possession of methamphetamine.

Henry Louis Conravey, aggravated battery.

Shanna Denise Lewis, theft by taking.

Ashley Maree Dalton, furnishing prohibited items to inmates.

Raheem Terrell Wrenn, two counts aggravated assault.

Robert Chase Kelley, aggravated assault, Family Violence; aggravated assault; battery, Family Violence; battery; three counts criminal trespass, Family Violence; three counts criminal trespass.

Zachary Seth Lusk, aggravated assault; battery, Family Violence; cruelty to children in the third degree.

Scot Ray Kenimer, child molestation.

Shaun Brent, seven counts fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer; two counts obstruction of an officer; driving under the influence (less safe) (drugs); reckless driving; improper passing.

The above individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Mahan Retirement...from Page 1A

ran programs for area schools educating kids on electric safety and energy savings. Mahan has also weathered several tumultuous years at the EMC, such as the construction boom and bust of the pre/post-recession years in the middle to late 2000s; the public backlash against EMC leadership in the mid-2010s; and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter has ushered in tremendous system growth as people have flocked to the mountains from more populated areas, creating a construction boom that has led to the establishment of many new accounts not only for the homes being built, but for the workers building them, too. COVID-19 also

brought about numerous improvements inside the EMC, like enabling members to sign up for new services completely online, and the entire Customer Service Department can now work remotely so that, no matter what's happening in the area, members can be heard. Also during Mahan's tenure, the EMC acted as a fiber internet leader, generating a framework for highspeed broadband that continues to expand. Such forward-thinking by the EMC is a major reason people have moved here of late, as many are able to work from home. "The biggest change I'm seeing is the technology," Mahan said, "the fiber being out here with internet for

everyone, the ongoing development of solar power, and the big electric vehicle push that is only going to grow." Mahan started with the EMC the day before he turned 21, and back then, there weren't many good local jobs for young people, so when he got on with the co-op - "the best place you could work at that time" - he knew he'd be staying for the long haul. He married his wife Rhonda, another Union County native, the year he began with the EMC, and the couple has two adult children, Jennifer and Devan. In retirement, Mahan looks forward to getting outdoors, traveling with

Rhonda, and keeping up the property he has owned in Downton Blairsville since the early 1980s, where he considers himself blessed to have his children - and now grandchildren - living on either side of him. Mahan will be working with his son-in-law at JBK Home Renovations for the foreseeable future doing home remodeling, repairs and additions, "and if I decide I want to go hunting the next day during hunting season, I'm going to go hunting." Reflecting on his long career, Mahan wants to give credit where it's due for keeping the lights on day in, day out, no matter the weather, because so much goes into powering people's homes. "It's the hard-working employees that make all this happen," Mahan said. "I've been very fortunate to work with a lot of folks, including the ones that retired before me and taught me, and very fortunate to have worked with everyone." Ultimately, Mahan said it was difficult to leave his work family, noting that it

was an honor to receive cards, emails, text messages and many well wishes leading up to his last day. But retirement won't be the end of his relationship with the EMC. "I do miss every employee at the EMC," he

said. "Truly, they were all friends, every one of them. And (even though I'm retired), everyone knows they can call me, and I know I can call any one of them, to help each other out, because that's what we've done for years."

Trinity Car Crash...from Page 1A

to Georgia State Patrol. In the middle of seeing patients, Dr. Kathryn Blocker and Family Nurse Practitioner Jaelyn Collins heard what sounded like a bomb go off, followed by a series of other booms akin to fireworks that "just kept going." The building shook, and the women ran out of their patients' rooms and into the hallway to check on everyone and see what happened. Collins recalls someone shouting, "There's a car in the lobby!" "When we got up there, they were right - the entire car was inside of our lobby," Collins said, describing the scene as resembling "a war zone" filled with dust and debris. "It missed our front staff girls by a few inches. It was crazy." If the vehicle had crashed through any earlier or later than it did, there likely would have been casualties. Patients were leaving and entering the front door at the time of the accident, and a couple of people had just gotten up from soon-to-be-smashed chairs. Even the driver was OK, as were the people sitting on the far side of the lobby from where the car came through. On its way in, the car narrowly missed support columns

holding up the entrance overhang, which, if that had fallen, would have collapsed on four patients entering and leaving the office. The damage to the building prompted Trinity to announce that morning the medical office would have to close "until further notice." Fortunately, patients did not have to wait long, as the practice was able to re-open its doors a week later on Tuesday, Aug. 1. Union General Hospital leases the space to Trinity, and the hospital wasted no time getting everything patched up. Some exterior brickwork may need to be completed this week, but everything was on track at press time for a Tuesday re-opening. "First, I am very thankful that no one was injured," Dr. Blocker said. "A building is still just a building and can be repaired. The hospital really stepped up in helping us to repair the building quickly so that we would be able to open with as little disruption to our practice as possible. "Our patients have been so patient with us first opening the new practice but now also having to be rescheduled through another week. It's been difficult trying to get everyone seen, but most everyone has been really

accommodating. "We are blessed beyond measure with amazing staff and support from the community. We couldn't do this without them." Trinity Primary Care is a private practice run jointly by Blocker and Collins, who worked together for years as employees of Union General but struck out on their own in 2023, officially opening their office in May. The women are longtime friends who, in addition to sharing a bond in the practice of family medicine, are also devout Christians, which is where the name "Trinity" comes from. And both are grateful for everyone - including God - who has been there in their time of need. "Our purpose in life is to take care of people and to be part of a community and take care of our community, so we thought that was the perfect name for our practice," Collins said. "And we had a bunch of little guardian angels that day." Responding to the scene were the Union County Fire Department, Union County Sheriff's Office, Union General EMS, Georgia State Patrol and engineers with Union General Hospital. For more information on the practice, visit <https://trinityprimarycarega.com/>.

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Community Support...from Page 1A



Deklin Jones surrounded by family and friends at his pizza party last week, arranged by Montana and Joy Mormur.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

The Cross Worship Center held a 3-D Bow Shoot Tournament as a fundraiser on July 22. According to Outdoor Ministry Secretary Bobby Brookshire, the Cross has hosted similar events to help local families in need for years.

"We have a monthly Outdoor Ministry meeting at the church, and it's on the third Monday every month," Brookshire said. "We just basically ask if anybody knows of a family in need."

"We'll take recommendations, and then as a group, we'll pray on it and make a decision of who we want to support. And a lot of times, the other (family) — we'll push them to the next month."

The tournament that Saturday featured red, white and blue pins marking different shooting distances depending on each archer's skill level. Red was for professional shooters, blue for hunters and white for traditional bowmen, beginners or youth.

In some cases, entire families came out to the forested range to shoot at the colorful targets shaped like traditional game such as turkeys and wild boar or more exotic quarry like baboons and polar bears. One lane even offered a dinosaur.

Each target sported rings denoting different scores, and at the end of the day, archers returned their score cards to the church to be tallied up. Even then, there was no great sense of competition.

"There's no losers," Brookshire said with a grin,

joking that "there's just winners and people that need to improve."

Really, it was a win-win situation; expert bowmen and hunters had a chance to practice while novices got to try their hand at archery, and ultimately, the proceeds gathered from donations all went to helping the Jones family.

While they had never met until that day, Brookshire was already touched by Jones' story.

"He's a very, very special young man in the fact that I believe he realizes he has an extra chance at life, and he has a lot of people around him that are loving on him and want to see him do well in his treatment," Brookshire said.

The Bow Shoot raised about \$1,051 in cash donations, but the previous Sunday saw many donations from church members as well, so a total of \$2,000 was raised.

And that's not all. Separately, Montana and Joy Mormur organized a party for Jones at the Downtown Pizza Co., where they raised \$277 on Thursday, July 27. The evening wasn't necessarily meant to serve as a fundraiser but filled a no less important role.

"My husband, Montana Mormur, spearheaded this when he heard that Deklin wanted to be in the Army and then he lost a leg, and he felt really bad for him. So, he announced it at the Community Senior Center," detailed Joy Mormur, pointing out a line of hats from various branches of the United States military that

decorated a table.

"We're going to start the Purple Ribbon Club," Montana Mormur stated. Similar to the Purple Heart, a decoration awarded to soldiers wounded in battle, the Purple Ribbon will be awarded to Deklin for being "wounded in action" and displaying outstanding bravery.

"We'll pay the bills," Mormur added, hinting at the old proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. "That's what needs to be done, as far as I'm concerned. And if I have my way, it'll get done."

Because of that initial outreach at the Senior Center, Montana Mormur, himself a Vietnam Veteran with three Purple Hearts, ended up inspiring others and making more connections.

"They asked if anyone had a box to donate, and I was happy to do it," said Vernon Smith, who provided a rare World War II-era trunk he had purchased years ago.

Going home with Deklin in the trunk were all kinds of military-related items donated by veterans in the community, including branch service hats, flags, a service sweater, and patches and pins with corresponding pictures of the veterans they once belonged to.

Speaking of Deklin, he was especially excited for the pizza party and requested to indulge in pizzas topped with chicken, barbecue, cinnamon and pepperoni. Here's to more pizzas, more parties and more opportunities for Deklin to savor all that life has to offer.

Music & Moonshine...from Page 1A



The headlining act for the Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival, 7 Bridges, took the concert indoors due to bad weather on July 29.
Photo by Natalie Mintz

the storm moved in from Pat Haralson Drive and swept past the courthouse, disappearing nearly as quickly as it started but not before wreaking tremendous havoc.

Some vendors stayed on for the third day of the festival Sunday, but more than half went home early because of the storm, which was reminiscent of the microburst that caused lots of damage during the Spring Arts, Crafts & Music Festival in May 2019.

Many folks took to the hills after the storm began, but not all was lost, as the live music at Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co. moved inside, and the headliner, 7 Bridges: The Ultimate Eagles Experience, was able to carry on with their show.

After all, the show must go on.

Despite the destructive winds and rain from Saturday night, Sunday's attendance by the public appeared normal, and according to Downtown Development Authority Director Darren Harper, it was an overall successful second outing for the festival by Visit Downtown Blairsville.

The event kicked off Friday with a 5K race and campfire tales, and attendees came back out on Saturday to spend a day shopping among artisans and local businesses while listening to live music.

At 5 p.m., things moved to the distillery's outdoor stage for several more hours of live music. The Reeves Brothers opened the show, with following performances by Taylor Austin Dye and Nathan Morgan Band.

After the performance from distillery owner Tommy Townsend & the Playhouse Band was when strong winds and lightning forced everyone to run to their cars or inside the distillery, and staff and crew rushed to get equipment

indoors before the rain.

About 30 minutes later, the bar was back open and Townsend began setting up for an indoor acoustic performance by headliner 7 Bridges, making the best of an unpredictable situation. The show was especially poignant after the death of Eagles co-founder Randy Meisner last week.

Earlier in the day, Harper explained the history of the festival, noting that Downtown Blairsville hosts three festivals every year. The first is in May, the second in July, and the third in September.

The Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival grew out of the Green Bean Festival that used to occur every July.

"We were looking for something different," Harper explained. "It's hard to build a festival around (a crop) that might not come in."

Taking this into consideration, the town merchants decided to base July's festival around Granddaddy Mimm's Distillery, which had moved from Gainesville Highway to Downtown Blairsville.

The distillery "brings people to the area who otherwise might not come" due to what Harper referred to as "moonshine tourism."

"Tourism is a huge part of this community," he added. "A lot of people who moved here came as tourists first, fell in love with it and decided to call it home."

Harper also pointed out how 60% to 70% of revenue for local businesses comes from tourism, noting that most of the money to pay for things like "public restrooms and new flowerbeds" is also generated from tourism-related taxes.

And having the distillery in the area keeps people from having to travel outside the county to buy moonshine, Harper said,

stating that Union "has never really been a dry county." However, illicit sales from a bygone era were not giving back to the community the way it is now.

"We don't want to be known for it, but it's one aspect of who we are; it's part of our heritage," Harper said of moonshine, noting that the Townsends are "great people" who do "a lot for the downtown."

Festivalgoers Sherry Johnson and Amy Miles are Blairsville locals who wanted to "come out and support the local community," and Johnson said they attend shows at the distillery often.

In fact, many attendees and vendors were local. Vendor Rhonda Abraham moved to the area over 40 years ago, and she expressed how much she appreciated that Blairsville "still feels like a small town."

Judy Norton is the first cousin of Townsend and a granddaughter of Granddaddy Mimm himself, Jack "Mimm" McClure. She said the event was "very exciting" and that the turnout was "great for the community."

"We want to see Tommy succeed, and we know our grandpa would be very happy," Norton said.

As for the overall success of the festival for the second year running, Townsend credited the staff at the distillery and daughter Megan Kimsey for "making the event happen."

"I organized the music and they organized everything else," he said. Alongside planning the music, Townsend loves "playing for the hometown folks."

The Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival will continue to be an annual occurrence, with Townsend saying that planning for next year's event is "almost completed."



Tommy Townsend was just finishing up his outdoor concert at Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co. when the storm moved in Saturday.
Photo by Natalie Mintz



This was an all-too-common sight Saturday night, as reportedly more than half of the vendors in the Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival received some type of storm damage.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard