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# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909 Wednesday, September 8, 2021

## CHOA, Emory conduct COVID research, testing event

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

Children's Health Care of Atlanta and Emory University School of Medicine teamed up with Union County Government last week to offer free COVID-19 drive-thru testing at the Union County Farmers Market Aug. 29-Sept. 2.

Testing was open to all North Georgia residents and doubled as a research event for the Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics Tech Program, aka RADx-Tech, a National Institutes of Health-funded initiative "designed to transform innovative technologies into widely accessible COVID-19 diagnostic testing."

The event also served to decrease some of the testing burden on Union General Hospital, which has seen a

barrage of patients sick with COVID-19 since the beginning of August.

All told, 477 adults and 150 children took part in the testing, with a majority hailing from Union County, though many participants traveled from Towns, Lumpkin and Gilmer counties, as well as Cherokee County in North Carolina.

These 600-plus people joined the more than 7,500 Georgians who have participated in the RADx-Tech research.

COVID positivity over the five days of testing was about 30% among adults and 40% for children. These numbers were in line with recent Georgia Department of Public Health rates, which as of Friday saw Union sitting at 31.5% positivity.

Overseeing the event was Cheryl Stone, a nurse and clinical research manager with Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. Stone lives in Atlanta but is from Blairsville, and she reached out to local government here to coordinate the event after being contacted by her sister, Christy Townsend.

Townsend is a teacher at Union County Primary School, which has suffered from high levels of positivity among staff and students to start the school year, resulting in the entire campus closing the second full week into the new semester due to staff outages primarily from COVID-19.

When Stone heard from her sister how the hospital was struggling to keep up with the demand for testing, she decided the program she



Researchers from Emory University School of Medicine conducting COVID-19 testing at the Farmers Market last Thursday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Blairsville to honor lives of those lost on Sept. 11, 2001



Emergency response teams responding to the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, after al-Qaida terrorists hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 and flew it into the building. Photo/FBI

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

Saturday marks 20 years since the tragic events in New York City, Washington, D.C. and rural Pennsylvania played out on national television, wounding the country with an everlasting scar only deepened by the day's 2,977 innocent lives lost and two decades of

war that culminated in the fall of Kabul in Afghanistan on Aug. 15, 2021.

This weekend, services in both Union and Towns counties will pay tribute to the near-3,000 victims and the heroic efforts of first responders on 9/11, as well as the servicemen and women killed or wounded in service to their nation during America's 20-year Global War

on Terrorism.

Starting at 8 a.m. on Saturday, Union County will pay its respects with a memorial service at the flagpole at the upper ballfields in Meeks Park.

Local dignitaries scheduled to speak include Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley, Derek Hartley of First Baptist

## With Betty Easter's passing, a great lady will be missed

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

The Blairsville City Council and Mayor Jim Conley marked a sad occasion in their Sept. 7 regular city meeting – the passing of one of their own, Betty Easter.

Easter, 86, died at her home in Blairsville on Tuesday, Aug. 31, following a brief illness. She will be remembered for her warmth, sense of humor, straightforward demeanor, community service, care for all and so much more.

A special called election will need to take place to fill Easter's unexpired term on the council, the details of which were discussed in Tuesday's meeting that occurred after press time.

"Betty started serving on the City Council in 2012," Mayor Jim Conley said. "She



Betty Easter smiling in a 2019 Blairsville City Council meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

long as I've been mayor.

"She was dedicated to her service for the city. She believed in doing the right thing, and she believed in treating every city employee the right way. Betty will be missed tremendously by everyone, especially the employees, and also by me and the girls here in the office.

"Betty was a personal friend of mine and was the type of person that would do anything for you if you needed her to. So, it's a very sad time at City Hall."

One of nine children, Easter was born to Bill and Kate Haynes in Mount Airy, North Carolina, on July 19, 1935.

"She learned about hard work and responsibility early on, from milking cows before daylight to plowing a tobacco field behind a mule," her obituary reads. "Undoubtedly,

## Third Annual Duck Derby raises \$22,000 for kids

**By Jeremy Foster**  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Sept. 4, the Blairsville Police Department hosted its Third Annual Rubber Duck Derby Fundraiser, a family-friendly racing event that takes place annually in Butternut Creek at the Union County Farmers Market.

The fundraiser benefits the Police Department-sponsored Shop With A Cop Program in which officers and community volunteers team up to take underprivileged local children shopping at Christmastime for toys and necessities for themselves and their families.

"We appreciate our community, whether businesses or individuals alike, that came out to support us in making this one of the biggest Duck Derbies to date," Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter said. "Last year's turnout was obliterated with 2,200 ducks in the race



A whopping 2,200 ducks purchased by the community for this year's fundraiser floated down the Butternut Creek at the Farmers Market Saturday. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

this year."

For reference, the 2020 race featured 1,700 ducks and the 2019 derby saw 1,200 ducks swim the Butternut.

And with so many ducks in the water this year, each

one representing individual tickets purchased by members of the community, the Police Department was able to raise \$22,000 in 2021.

"This is without a doubt

## North Georgia Tech names library after Linda Johnston

**By Jeremy Foster**  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

In a room filled with sheer love and admiration, Linda Johnston received the honor of having the North Georgia Technical College Blairsville Campus Library renamed for her in a heartfelt dedication program on Wednesday, Sept. 1.

Johnston was the first librarian to serve at the

Blairsville Campus upon its opening in January of 1999, and she saw it through to becoming the incredible resource for student-conducted research that it is today, assisting students from all over the region, including Union and Towns counties.

Among the guests in attendance were Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, NGTC President John Wilkinson, Blairsville

Campus Director Matthew Mashburn, NGTC Foundation Director Cynthia Brown, first Blairsville Campus Director Dr. James Watkins, Director of Student Affairs Services Kristie Gibbs, Educational Technology Program Specialist Samantha Marchant, former Blairsville Campus Director Larry Culpepper, and emcee Charlie Johnston.

Many a kind word



North Georgia Tech held a ribbon cutting and library dedication Sept. 1 in honor of retired librarian Linda Johnston. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Vol. 112 No. 37 **Inside**

4 Sections 24 Pages Arrests 2D  
Weather Church 2C  
Thurs: Cloudy Hi 78 Lo 50 Classifieds 3D  
Fri: Sunny Hi 79 Lo 52 Opinion 4A  
Sat: Sunny Hi 81 Lo 54 Legals 4D  
Obits 4C  
Sports 2B

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**SPORTS**

**SOFTBALL**  
9/9 @ Banks County 5:30 PM

**VOLLEYBALL**  
9/8 vs. Fannin  
JV 5:00 • Varsity 6 PM  
Senior Night

**COVID 19 Update & Free Local Testing**  
See page 6B

**UCS**  
Union County Schools 2021 Millage Rate  
See page 5B

College & Career Academy Groundbreaking  
See page 1D

## Easter...from Page 1A

these experiences helped to shape her great strength. She loved basketball passionately and was a high school standout. Betty's been known to play hard in the backyard arena with great relish.

"After school, she worked for Sperry Manufacturing making baby clothing and became an excellent seamstress. She could make anything. She was spotted

walking to work one day by Mr. Gollie Easter, and so began their deep love and long marriage. They soon settled happily into raising a family, making Blairsville their home.

"Betty loved this community and spent years supporting causes she believed in and enjoying many friends she's made over the years. Troop leader, prolific gardener, Pink Lady, Eastern Star member, selling millions of (Krispy Kreme) donuts on the square, years of blood drives, Relays For Life, First Baptist

Church, and showering the City Hall folks with her outstanding cakes.

"We'll miss her quick wit, love of fun, fierce love of family, and her tendency to 'tell it like it is.' She really loved it all – her family, the people and this town."

Surviving Easter are her son and daughter-in-law, William Carl and Jimmie Sue Easter of Blairsville; daughter and son-in-law, Sheila and Greg Morris of Monroe; daughter Sharon Easter of Andrews, North Carolina; and

granddaughter Emily Easter.

She was preceded in death by her husband, Gollie H. Easter, and her parents.

Funeral services for Easter were held Friday, Sept. 3, in the Chapel of Cochran Funeral Home in Blairsville, with burial in the Blairsville City Cemetery.

People may make memorial contributions to Union County Relay For Life or to The American Cancer Society in Easter's memory. Condolences may be shared online at [www.cochranfuneralhomes.com](http://www.cochranfuneralhomes.com).

## Library Dedication...from Page 1A



**Linda Johnston was happy to have family present at her library dedication ceremony last week. L-R: Niece Elizabeth Marvel, sister-in-law Barbara Johnston, sister Dr. Patricia Gerber, Linda Johnston and Charlie Johnston.**

Photo by Jeremy Foster

was shared to describe Linda Johnston in the program, with a clear picture imparted of a consummate and dedicated professional, as well as a compassionate person who cared for students and others.

For her part, Johnston was humbled by the occasion, and she thanked everyone present for helping her to become the woman she is today.

Johnston's husband of 44 years Charlie was the one who nominated her to make sure that all the hard work and commitment she has put in over her lifetime, both to learning herself and helping others to learn, would never be forgotten.

Linda is an alumna of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Hawaii, and both she and Charlie are veterans of the U.S. Army, during which time she served as a Chinese linguist.

Her passion for libraries goes back to childhood and her love of books. She was very shy and quiet from a young age, and reading helped her discover an alternate reality and peaceful universe.

Prior to her time as a librarian at North Georgia Tech, she worked in the libraries of West Central Technical College and the U.S. Army libraries of Fort Shafter in Hawaii; Zweibrucken in Germany; and Fort McPherson in Georgia.

She retired from North Georgia Tech in 2012 and has managed to keep busy since then with various downtime hobbies that include the Mountain Coin Club, knitting, reading and Zumba.

Johnston and her husband also volunteer at the Colwell Probation Detention Center offering drug and alcohol addiction counseling to those detainees in the Rescue Program. Additionally, she takes two classes per semester from the University of North Georgia.

Last week's gathering featured refreshments for guests to enjoy as they reminisced about their journeys together, and the dedication featured the presentation of a plaque officially designating the "North Georgia Technical College Blairsville Campus Linda Johnston Library."

The plaque reads:

"Dedicated in honor of former librarian Mrs. Linda Johnston in honor of her hard work establishing the library facility on this site and in recognition of honorable service to her country and faithful dedication to the students, faculty, staff and community served by North Georgia Technical College."

Surrounded by family and friends, Johnston reiterated her appreciation for the college choosing to recognize her in this way. Being a librarian has been a lifelong dream accomplished, and she was excited to commemorate the momentous accolade with those in attendance.

Further, Johnston shared with attendees that, in all her worldwide travels, she decided to make Blairsville her home after working here because she loved the beautiful mountain life and friendly people.

As for her closing comments, her most powerful statement was to let everyone know that, "Although the library may have my name on it, the library truly belongs to everyone and always will – that is the greatness of a library."

## 9/11 Remembrance...from Page 1A

Church Blairsville, Union County Schools Administrator and retired Army Ranger Art McCann, and Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris.

Union County Emergency Management Agency Director David Dyer will provide the keynote address that day, followed by special music courtesy of Union County High School.

And while the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce and Union County Fire Department have hosted a Sept. 11 commemorative event in recent years, this year's observance carries added significance.

"We started this ceremony a few years ago just to make sure there was a remembrance ceremony in Union County on 9/11," Chamber President Steve Rowe said. "With this being the 20th (anniversary), we will feel more strongly about this one.

"At the chamber, we also feel that in light of current events (in Afghanistan), it's even more important to have this ceremony and remember all of those that had their lives taken or have given their life in service to our country."

Over in Hiawassee, Mayor Liz Ordiales will host a Town Square Memorial at 9:45 a.m., just minutes before the collapse of the World Trade Center South Tower at 9:59 a.m.

Approximately 18 minutes into Saturday's ceremony will mark the moment United Airlines Flight 93 crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers and crew stormed the cockpit and forced the plane to the ground at 10:03 a.m.

At 10:15 a.m., the Pentagon's E Ring collapsed, and the North Tower collapsed at 10:28 a.m.

"That was such a tragic incident that happened 20 years ago, and the crazy thing is, there are people that live here

that weren't even born yet that didn't experience something that was such a life-altering moment in many of our lives," Ordiales said.

Continuing, "It's just a sad situation, and it's no fun to get together to remember something like this. But it's the 20th anniversary, so we want to do something to make this one as special as possible."

The event will open with patriotic music provided by members of the Appalachian Saint Andrew's Pipes. Other groups scheduled to participate in the service are the North Georgia Honor Guard, the Georgia National Guard and the Towns County Fire Department.

Speakers include Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw; McConnell Baptist Pastor Danny Byers; Young Harris Mayor Andrea

Gibby; retired Sunny Isles, Florida, Police Chief and Law Enforcement Officers Hall of Famer Fred Maas; and guest speaker Ryan McPherson with the Purple Heart Trail; plus patriotic performances by local singer Grace Worley.

In addition to the memorial, Mayor Ordiales, Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith and the Rotary Club of Lake Chatuge will place 10 new "Hometown Heroes" banners on the square to honor local heroes and retire last year's banners, and local Purple Heart recipients will be recognized.

"It's important to honor our veterans, and it's something we plan on doing every year to thank them for their service and sacrifice," Ordiales said. "Of course, (the current events in Afghanistan) make this year's service a little more somber."

# COVID Research...from Page 1A

was involved in, RADx-Tech, could accomplish two things in the mountains: assist the local health system while benefitting from a rural research opportunity.

The crew that arrived on Aug. 29 had hosted many similar events in the past; however, this was the first time Stone and her hand-picked team had conducted such research and testing in a rural setting, so the event provided valuable information in that regard as well.

On top of COVID testing, research participants provided additional swabs to be used to assess the capabilities of diagnostic equipment currently under evaluation by RADx-Tech.

Kids even took part in the research process to see how well children of different ages can swab themselves, with the idea being to evaluate ways in which broad-scale testing can be safely and effectively implemented in schools. Pooled testing for schools is also under evaluation.

"Some of these kids always have a stuffy nose and always have a cough in winter, that's their baseline," Stone said. "To send all these kids home all of the time because they have a stuffy nose or a cough is not healthy for the child, because the child is out of school, trying to learn remotely, and then they come back negative (for COVID)."

"So, you sent them home for 10 days, mom had to take off work and dad stayed home — and they had allergies. It's just this vicious cycle."

As discussed above, RADx-Tech is a major collaborative effort between Emory, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta and Georgia Tech.

The goal of RADx-Tech is to speed innovation

in the development, commercialization and implementation of technologies for COVID-19 testing, ultimately for approval by the Food & Drug Administration, to get better devices faster to the market for both rapid and PCR testing.

It's a big deal, with results from the program paving the way for the mass manufacture of effective COVID testing equipment for use in homes, at schools, in businesses and office spaces throughout the Southeast.

Ensuring that reliable testing becomes increasingly available to public and private entities is important because, as the pandemic continues, the U.S. will require better ways to manage the spread of the disease amid the need to carry on the functions of society.

Testing can help to accomplish this by allowing people to know when, for example, to stay home from work or school following an exposure.

The testing last week was free, and those who took part in the research aspect received a gift card for their time.

Stone would like to thank the local partners who made the event possible, including the Commissioner's Office, the Farmers Market, Union County Emergency Management Agency and Fire Department, which came together to provide the facilities and setup.

She is also grateful to the many restaurants and everyday residents who provided food and drinks during their time here, as was Emory University's Kristi Godbolt, the associate director of outreach for RADx-Tech in charge of coordinating logistics for such events.

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta handled the testing for kids while Emory focused

on the adults, with samples from the latter being resulted at Grady Memorial Hospital under the supervision of Dr. Yun (Wayne) Wang, Director of Microbiology, Immunology and Molecular Diagnostics, another partner in the RADx research.

Godbolt said the team's job was made incredibly easy thanks to the assistance provided by residents, businesses and local government.

"This community has been amazing to us," Godbolt said. "You've been very welcoming. A lot of our lunches and dinners were actually supplied by the community, and when we came on Sunday, we called (David Dyer) from the Fire Department, and he brought the tables and chairs and let us use their refrigerators."

"Really, this is a joint effort, so the numbers that we can get are because of the community's help. That made this run so very smoothly."

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris said the county was all too happy to help, adding that everyone in Union was grateful in return for the testing and research event coming to town.

Additionally, Paris and the health care professionals conducting the event stressed the importance of vaccines in preventing COVID infections, noting that a greater percentage of the population getting vaccinated would help keep the hospital clear of the vast majority of severe cases.

Wilbur Lam, M.D., Ph.D., a Children's Healthcare of Atlanta attending physician who is one of the principal investigators of the RADx Center based at Emory, Georgia Tech, and Children's, said the work by Stone and her team this past week has been "nothing short of amazing."



Nurses and researchers from Children's Healthcare of Atlanta who worked to collect swabs from children for COVID-19 testing last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

"Their efforts truly exemplify the multiple missions of our RADx Center, as they've been able to serve the NIH and American public by evaluating the performance

of existing and novel COVID-19 tests while also helping our own Georgia communities during this public health crisis," Dr. Lam said.

For more information on the RADx-Tech Program, visit <https://www.choa.org/about-us/newsroom/nih-awards-childrens-emory-and-georgia-tech-to-continue-verification-of-covid19-diagnostic-tests>.

## Joe Troop Trio Concert in Brasstown September 19th

By Roberta Rankin

On September 19 the Brasstown Concert Association (BCA) will present the Joe Troop Trio, an ensemble whose distinctive musical style can best be described as "world music meets jazz in Appalachia." Multi-instrumentalist, singer-songwriter Joe Troop will be joined by two powerhouse musicians, Louisiana-based Cesar Bacaro and Trey Boudreaux. "BCA is delighted to present the trio as they begin their tour through the Southeast, Mid-Atlantic and Midwest," comments BCA Board member Marilyn Williamson.

Joe Troop, a North Carolina native, recently returned to the U.S. after decade in Buenos Aires, where his group Che Apache's second Album was nominated for a Grammy. Joe's style, dubbed "latingrass", melds music from the Appalachian foothills with traditional soundscapes from across Latin America. Singing in English and Spanish, Joe brings old time music

into the contemporary world. Joining Joe is preeminent Cuban percussionist Cesar Bacaro. Cesar developed a great passion for music as a young child and began formal study at age seven. In his twenty-five year career he has performed all over Latin America and Europe, and now plays with several bands in New Orleans.

Completing the trio is Trey Boudreaux on bass. A Louisiana native whose musical learning was shaped by both his father and formal study, Trey grew up surrounded by Creole and Cajun music. His energy and command of a wide range of styles have made him an in-demand bassist in New Orleans and beyond.

The Joe Troop Trio will perform at 2 PM on Sunday, September 19 in the Festival Barn at the John C. Campbell



Joe Troop will perform with his Trio on September 19 at the John C. Campbell Folk School Festival Barn.

Folk School in Brasstown, NC. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$10 for students of any age registered at any venue. Reservations may be made by calling 828-389-4210 or emailing [brasstownconcertnews@gmail.com](mailto:brasstownconcertnews@gmail.com); you will pay at the door. Any tickets unsold by concert time may be purchased at the door.

Masks are recommended but not required outdoors on the Folk School campus. Restroom facilities are available in the Festival Barn.

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These health care researchers from Emory University School of Medicine are committed to improving COVID-19 outcomes during the pandemic, pictured here at the Farmers Market Testing and Research event Sept. 2. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Duck Derby...from Page 1A



Volunteers assisted Chief Baxter in running the 2021 Rubber Duck Derby. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

our primary fundraiser every year," Baxter said. "The Shop With A Cop Program has been instituted for 21 years, and we are just too proud that our community supports us and our cause and simply could not do it without them."

The chief also shared the news that, this year, the Police Department anticipates being able to take 125 kids shopping for Christmas, "just like we did last year."

"We are highly looking forward to December to be able to take those kids shopping and seeing their happy faces and hopefully giving them a Christmas they will never forget," Baxter said.

As far as how fast the Police Department sold out of its 2,200 tickets this year, Baxter said he and his officers started selling tickets on July 1, "and we just sold our last ticket this past Thursday on

Sept. 2."

"So, they went relatively quickly, as this event is gaining more and more credibility and support from our wonderful hometown people," Baxter said. "I wholeheartedly believe that the community supports this effort of the Shop With A Cop Program because they know where the money goes and because we can account for every penny that we raise for this program, and 100% of the money is spent on these kids."

"The community has been supportive of this from the very beginning, and I think we have proven ourselves with this program."

Dozens of people won prizes donated by local businesses in this year's race, everything from cash to massages, golf packages and gift cards to local restaurants. For a full list of winners, check out the Sept. 4 Facebook

post by the Blairsville Police Department.

The Top Three finishers were Carolyn Morrell in First Place for \$500, Robbie Turner in Second Place for \$250, and Anthony Olson in Third Place for \$100.

"I am highly touched that this continues to be an increasing and meaningful display of community support where everyone wants to create a lasting legacy around their environment," Chief Baxter said Saturday. "We live in a good place where people simply care about each other, and I do not think anyone can dispute that."

Be sure to stay tuned for the Fourth Annual Rubber Duck Derby in 2022, when businesses and individuals will once again receive the opportunity to help underprivileged children realize the Christmas morning of their dreams.