

North Georgia News

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Witnesses recount thousands of pills, sex-for-drugs at trial

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News
GAINESVILLE – Flanked by their lawyers, Dr. James Heaton and former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder faced off against Assistant U.S. Attorneys William McKinnon Jr. and Laurel Boatright in U.S.

District Judge Richard Story's courtroom starting Tuesday, Oct. 15. Both men are accused of crimes involving prescription drugs, including conspiracy to dispense and distribute controlled substances "outside the usual course of professional medical practice and for no

legitimate medical purpose." The 103 charges against them include allegations of "misrepresentation, fraud, forgery, deception and subterfuge" involving oxycodone and hydrocodone, with Heaton facing dozens of additional charges related to issuing prescriptions to several other patients.

he was paid by the hospital to manage the sleep clinic and nursing home, but she attempted to rebut the kickback allegations by noting that the hospital's replacement at the hospital received the same pay after Heaton and Gowder parted ways with Union General.



Mike Gowder and his wife Gail leaving the federal courthouse in Hall County on Friday, Oct. 18. Photo by Linda Erbele



Attorney Steve Sadow, left, speaking with Dr. James Heaton outside the U.S. Courthouse in Gainesville on Wednesday, Oct. 16. Photo by Linda Erbele

Jury selection occurred on Oct. 15 and opening statements began Wednesday, Oct. 16, with McKinnon insisting that evidence would show that Heaton issued prescriptions "for no legitimate medical purpose and outside the usual course of professional medical practice."

As for Gowder, McKinnon said "he filled these prescriptions in three different pharmacies in three states," pointing out that filling prescriptions with no medical purpose was also a crime.

The prosecutor went on to say that Heaton had a financial relationship that benefited from his association with Gowder as hospital CEO, seemingly attempting to show a relationship between the prescription writing and potential compensation.

In her opening comments, Kristen Novay, one of Heaton's attorneys, argued that Heaton had been a local doctor for 26 years, and that the hospital was simply compensating him for his work.

"Like most doctors in the area, he had several jobs at the hospital," she said, listing the sleep clinic the hospital purchased from Heaton in 2014.

Referring to testimony that would be delivered after press time in the second week of trial, the prosecution said jurors would soon be hearing from Dr. Gary Kaufman, an expert witness who examined medical records from Dr. Heaton's office.

"(Kaufman's) conclusion is that Dr. Heaton's prescriptions were outside the usual course of professional practice and without a legitimate medical reason," McKinnon said, affirming that doctors have a legal duty to prescribe drugs "in a way that doesn't make their patients addicted."

Novay said that some of Heaton's patients "were dependent on pain medication," but that dependency was different from addiction.

She contended that fewer than 7% of Heaton's patients were ever prescribed pain medication, adding that, of his almost 2,000 patient files, the government had "hand-picked" files to be examined by Kaufman.

In his opening remarks, Mike Gowder's attorney Steve Sadow accused the government of seeing his client and Heaton's past relationship "through glasses of suspicion."

According to Sadow, Gowder underwent back surgery in 2006, though the pain never went away. He was referred for more surgery in 2011 and

2012, but he'd become CEO of the hospital, and it just wasn't the right time to take off six months to recover from surgery, Sadow said.

"You'll see the first prescription for hydrocodone was in January 2012," Sadow said. "He used hydrocodone for five months, then changed to oxycodone."

As for the government's claim that his client filled illegal prescriptions elsewhere seemingly to hide his actions, Sadow said that Gowder's family was well-known in Blairsville, which is why he chose to fill his prescriptions outside of the community to prevent small-town gossip. See Trial, Page 2A

Homecoming royalty to take the field before big game Friday night



Union County High School 2019-2020 Homecoming Court. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer
Union County High School will crown its 2019-2020 Homecoming Queen at 7 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 25, just prior to the Panthers' Region 8-AA showdown with Oglethorpe County.

Aladriel Arnold, the reigning UCHS Homecoming Queen, will crown one of the 14 members making up this year's court, which includes five seniors, four juniors, three sophomores and two freshmen. The senior representatives are Caroline Collins, Brooke

Dockrey, Cydney Rich, Miranda Lockaby and Leanna Gray. The junior representatives are Katie Baumeister, Hannah Patton, Delana Stephens and Chloe Truex. Allie Brey, Mia McCombs and Niya Cobb make up the sophomore

Library board casts unanimous vote to terminate director's employment

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Mountain Regional Library System Board of Trustees voted unanimously last week to terminate the employment of Vince Stone as director of the three-county library system effective Oct. 15.

Library board trustees decided Stone's fate in a called meeting at the Union County Public Library on Tuesday, Oct. 15, making the motion to separate Stone as director "in an effort to move the system in a direction that better meets the

needs of our communities."

At the time of the board's decision, the departing library director had been away from the job for several months for personal reasons, according to the board, with Interim Regional Director Claudia Gibson having served in that capacity since Aug. 1.

"The trustees, the library staff and our communities have expressed the desire for MRLS to emphasize traditional library services that are responsive to each community's needs," Board Chair Paula Whitehead said following the meeting. Continued Whitehead,



Vince Stone
"It was the consensus of the trustees that Mr. Stone is not the best person to lead the system in this direction. We appreciate

Farmers Market to put on pumpkin carving contest last day of season



Patrons of the Union County Farmers Market lined up to get some delicious beans, greens and cornbread on Saturday, Oct. 19. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer
The Union County Farmers Market hosted a Beans, Greens & Cornbread Day to share local produce with

market visitors on Saturday, Oct. 19. "We have been doing the Greens, Beans & Cornbread Day for a pretty good while, and it may have been started when we were here for the first

or the second year," Market Manager Mickey Cummings said. "We try to do it this time of year because our collard greens are coming in. "Our turnip greens

UCSO to host popular Weapons Carry Class at Civic Center on Oct. 29

News Special
North Georgia News
Back by popular demand, the Union County Sheriff's Office is once again sponsoring a Weapons Carry Class.



UCSO Staff Sgt. Billy Purcell
P.O.S.T.-certified instructor with Firearms and Defensive Tactics as his major course of

instruction. Purcell is also a two-tour veteran of the Vietnam War. The staff sergeant was senior instructor from 1986 to 2010 at Abraham Baldwin Agriculture College Police Academy, and in addition, he was the assistant director of the academy from 2002 to 2010.

He has a degree in criminal justice and graduated from the Professional Management Program, Command College, and also from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's prestigious National Academy 159th Session.

In addition to his law enforcement service and See Weapons Class, Page 8A

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