

North Georgia News

3 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Pruitts recognized for valor in line of duty

By Shawn Jarrard
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The small community of Suches is well-known for its close-knit ties that manifest in numerous ways, one being high volunteer participation at Union County Fire Station No. 5.

Due to their geographic isolation in being over half an hour from the county seat of Blairsville, the residents and first responders of the Valley Above the Clouds must exhibit more self-reliance than larger communities.

That's why there are 25 volunteer firefighters at Station 5, plus a career lieutenant who staffs the station five days a week. These men and women share a trait broadly referred to as "uncommon valor," though among firefighters, valor is much more common than in the general population.

So, when emergency strikes in Suches, the very first responders on the scene almost always come from Station 5, as was the case Sept. 25, when a massive leak at a local propane business caused potentially deadly vapors to rapidly traverse the ground and snake across Georgia 60.

Career Firefighter Ernie Pruitt, the lieutenant in charge of Station 5, made it to the business in no time flat – the location of the emergency was only about a quarter of a mile from the fire station.

But he had to think incredibly quickly, because a large white gas cloud was spreading fast, and even a passing motorist could have ignited a blaze that traveled back to the source, where thousands of gallons of propane threatened an explosion that would have altered the topography.

Falling back on his extensive training, Lt. Pruitt immediately established a safety perimeter around the leak and worked with other firefighters to effectuate next steps, to include a full evacuation of nearby Woody Gap School, which was potentially in the path of the creeping leak.

Thankfully, it turned out Woody Gap was never in actual danger in the incident, but the evacuation was conducted out of an abundance of caution.

Firefighters also blocked traffic inside the perimeter and evacuated close bystanders as they worked to address the leak that was coming from a rapidly emptying propane truck.

Ernie's son Doug Pruitt responded also. Doug is a career firefighter of 25 years with the City of Gainesville and volunteers at Station 5

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L-R: Union County Fire Chief David Dyer, Station 5 Lt. Doug Pruitt, Station 5 Lt. Ernie Pruitt and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris at Fire Station No. 1 Oct. 25. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Project Chimps leads off 2024 Halloween events



Children and chimps alike are curious creatures, and Project Chimps provides ample opportunities for the two to trade smiles, most recently during Chimp or Treat over the weekend.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

There are several fun Halloween events for families this week, including the Blairsville Boo Bash on Thursday, Oct. 31, from 4-7

p.m. in Meeks Park.

Trick-or-treating at the Nottely Marina will be open for three days, Oct. 29-31, with festivities kicking off each evening around 5:30 p.m.

And Stonehenge Senior Living will be welcoming all

manner of ghosts, ghouls and goblins to come trick-or-treat with residents on Oct. 31 from 4-5 p.m.

Scaring up the spooky season early with a Halloween "dress rehearsal" was the

See Chimp or Treat, Page 4A

Union dominates state rankings in early voting

By Shawn Jarrard
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This is the last week to vote early in the 2024 General Election, which continues to see record-breaking turnout heading into the final stretch.

Georgia is considered a "battleground state" in this year's presidential election, and voter enthusiasm remains incredibly high – nowhere more than in the North Georgia Mountains.

With 51.53% of the local active electorate having voted through Saturday, Union County was neck and neck with Rabun and Dawson counties in top turnout percentage, with just 0.11% separating Union from second place in the state.

Neighboring Towns County had the clear early voting turnout lead with 58.36% of its active electorate having already cast ballots through the weekend, handily



Early in-person voting runs now through Friday, so get out and vote!

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

taking the No. 1 spot among the 159 counties in Georgia.

These are very high turnout rates, always the case in the North Georgia Mountains.

Comparatively, statewide

turnout through Saturday was 38.7%. Still, nearly 2.8 million Georgians had voted as of Oct. 26, with 2024 General Election early voting continuing to break

See Early Voting Turnout, Page 2A

Local child molester headed to prison after guilty plea

By Shawn Jarrard
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Christopher Daniel Lovell, 43, of Blairsville, has admitted to molesting and sexually exploiting a local child who was not related to him.

Lovell pleaded guilty to the acts in the Union County Courthouse on Wednesday, Oct. 16, cementing his convictions on two counts of child molestation, three counts of sexual exploitation of a child, and three counts of electronically furnishing obscene materials to a minor.

For his crimes, Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge Joy Parks handed Lovell a 20-year sentence: 15 years to serve in prison and the remainder on probation.

The probation comes with special conditions, such as no contact with the victim, her family or any minors; waiving this Fourth Amendment rights protecting against warrantless

searches and drug testing; no use of substances; a prohibition on dating anyone with a minor child; and more.

And when he gets out of prison, Lovell will have to live as a registered sex offender and all that entails, according to Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley.

Lovell was arrested on Sept. 15, 2023, and was denied bond, so he will get about a year's worth of credit toward his prison sentence for time served at the Union County Jail.

Entering a guilty plea and formally confessing to his crimes allowed Lovell to avoid a jury trial, previously scheduled for Oct. 28, in which he would have faced more serious charges that carried the potential for a considerably longer prison sentence.

Had he been convicted of the two counts of aggravated child molestation he was indicted on in November of last year, Lovell would have



Christopher Daniel Lovell

been required to serve 100% of a 25-years-to-life prison sentence.

But in the interest of concluding the case without having to make the child victim publicly recount her abuse via trial testimony – an often-traumatic occurrence for victims, in Langley's experience – the most serious charges were dismissed to secure a plea deal, Langley said.

Most prisoners serve

See Lovell Pleads Guilty, Page 2A

North Carolina woman busted for drug trafficking

By Shawn Jarrard
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An area woman wanted in multiple counties was arrested this month on fentanyl and meth trafficking charges after leading the Union County Sheriff's Office on an early morning chase through Blairsville.

Kaitlyn Brianna Kincaid has been charged with aggravated assault, two counts trafficking, fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer, illegal possession of a controlled substance, and two counts possession with intent to distribute a controlled substance – all felonies.

She also received several misdemeanor charges: reckless driving and two counts of driving with a suspended license.

Kincaid, 28, is from the Murphy, North Carolina, area but was living out of a Blairsville motel at the time of her arrest.

"From what we understand, she was just laying her head here and going back to North Carolina to sell (drugs),"

said Sgt. Jay McCarter of the UCSCO Narcotics Division.

She first came on UCSCO's radar when the Sheriff's Office received a tip from a neighboring law enforcement agency saying Kincaid was wanted and suspected of being in Blairsville, according to McCarter.

The Narcotics Division initiated a brief investigation that led to an attempted traffic stop on Cleveland Street in Downtown Blairsville around 2 a.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 8.

Kincaid was driving north when a deputy tried to stop her. She turned left



Kaitlyn Brianna Kincaid

into the Circle K gas station but quickly accelerated away.

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NOTICE NOTICE NOTICE

Next week's newspaper delivery will be one day late to accommodate November 5th Election Results.



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Early Voting Turnout...from Page 1A

records closing in on Election Day.

Election Day is Tuesday, Nov. 5, and the in-person early voting period of three weeks concludes after this Friday, Nov. 1.

All in-person early voting is taking place from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. inside the Union County Voting Center at 33 Roscoe Collins Drive, located across from Union County High School off the Glenn

Gooch Bypass.

General Election voters who decide to wait until Election Day to cast their ballots will need to head to their predetermined voting precincts between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on Nov. 5.

Union County has 11 voting precincts: Blairsville, Jones Creek, Choestoe, Owtown, Coosa, Pat Colwell, Dooley, Suches, Gum Log, Trackrock and Ivy Log. The address of each is available at <https://www.unioncountyga.gov/government/elections-voter-registration/board-of-election/>.

The deadline to register to vote in this election was Monday, Oct. 7, and the deadline to request an absentee-by-mail ballot was Friday, Oct. 25.

Absentee ballots can be returned using the official Voting Center drop box during early voting hours; mailed back in plenty of time to be counted after polls close on Election Day; or dropped off at the Voting Center through 7 p.m. Election Day.

Residents may visit <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov> for mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county, sample ballots for upcoming elections, provisional ballot status and more.

As this is a presidential election year, voters will be choosing the next president of the United States as well as several state positions, but there is just one contested county-level seat up for grabs in the 2024 General Election: the office of Sole Commissioner.

Voters will also be deciding the fate of a state Constitutional Amendment to cap annual property assessment increases for taxing purposes.

If passed, the proposed constitutional amendment would create a new homestead exemption to cap assessment increases on homesteaded properties at 3% annually beginning on Jan. 1, 2025.

State lawmakers enabled the referendum this year by passing House Bill 581 and House Resolution 1022, with an "opt-out" provision for local governments.

The proposed cap comes as welcome news to many homeowners, who have seen the values of their properties rise dramatically in recent years due largely to an inflated real estate market driven by COVID-19 pandemic-era relocations to the area.

For homes receiving the exemption starting next year, 2024 would stand as the base-year assessed value. Moving forward, the home would then reflect two values: the homesteaded value that is capped for taxing purposes, and the actual fair market value as it changes over time.

"The base year value may increase each year up to the inflationary rate determined by the State Revenue Commissioner, which may utilize the Consumer Price Index," according to information from the Association County Commissioners of Georgia.

So, annual values could increase from north of 0% to the 3% cap for homesteaded properties, though assessed values would still be subject to accounting for "substantial property changes," which could result in increases or decreases in value depending on what has changed.

If a homestead-exempted property is subsequently sold, then the base-year assessed value for the new homesteader would be set at the assessed value for the year immediately

preceding the sale.

A homestead exemption reduces the amount of property taxes a homeowner owes on his or her legal residence, and according to ACCG, "this new floating homestead exemption is in addition to and not in lieu of all non-floating homestead exemptions."

HB 581 also creates a new 1% local option sales tax that could be imposed for property tax relief. But for the new tax to be put in place, it would have to be supported by voters in a local referendum.

The bill does several other things related to property and sales tax reform, such as improving the sales ratio study methodology by the Department of Audits and Accounts, removing confusing tax estimates from annual assessment notices and more.

General Election ballots

Lovell Pleads Guilty...from Page 1A

about 65% of their prison sentences, Langley said, adding that his office will be advocating with the State Board of Pardons and Paroles against early release for Lovell.

The victim and her family were consulted about the plea deal prior to its enactment, and Langley said they were satisfied with the outcome and grateful that the child would not have to testify in court.

Lead prosecutor Assistant District Attorney Anna Guardino said that, when it came time to hear victim impact statements during sentencing Oct. 16, "I don't think there was a dry eye in the courtroom."

"The victim's mother made a very poignant statement," Guardino said. "She described in a way that really created an image of the changes of a very joyful child to a child who now seems quite burdened."

"That, I think, was what made her statement so emotional. And they said they would put their trust in God and go down the road of healing. So, everyone was very, very taken with the statement in the courtroom from what I could gather."

Lovell did not say anything at sentencing, but his attorney "made a very brief statement on his behalf noting that he was in fact very remorseful and asking the court to take into consideration his full cooperation with police."

As to Lovell's crimes, over the course of roughly two years, Lovell committed multiple sex acts up to and including intercourse with

also feature a statewide referendum on raising the amount of tangible personal property tax exemption from \$7,500 to \$20,000. If passed, state law would be amended effective Jan. 1, 2025, to apply to all tax years beginning on or after that date.

State Rep. Mike Cheokas (R-Americus) sponsored the bill that created this referendum, saying, "I hope this will be the first step in reducing the burden of high taxes and prohibitive regulations that adversely affect businesses in Georgia."

Proponents of these measures believe they would provide much-needed taxpayer relief in an era of prolonged inflation, while opponents have expressed concern that they could make it more difficult to raise revenues needed to effectively operate local governments and school

systems.

Another Constitutional Amendment appears on ballots to ask voters whether they want to create a Georgia Tax Court, which would change the jurisdiction for settling tax cases from the executive branch of state government to the judicial branch of state government.

All but one state legislator supported the measure at the Georgia General Assembly this year, with proponents arguing the change would enable a separation of powers in matters of taxes and streamline the appeals process, which currently runs through Fulton County for all such matters.

Election results will be available in an insert in the Nov. 6 newspaper and online at <https://nganews.com/> and the North Georgia News Facebook page.

the child victim on more than one occasion between 2021 and 2022, according to court documents.

He also electronically sent at least three sexually explicit images of himself in the course of committing his crimes, and he was found to be in possession of several nude photographs of the victim the day he was arrested.

The victim was 12 when the abuse started and 14 when she told friends at school and word made it back to her family, resulting in an investigation and Lovell's arrest, Langley said.

But how did Lovell gain such intimate access to a victim he was not even related to?

She was the child of a family friend with whom his family and children would spend time, and his behavior with the victim featured classic elements of "sexual grooming," Guardino said.

He first gained adult family members' trust, then the child's trust by stepping into a "fatherly" role, convincing her to confide in him and going places alone with her, at which point he began taking advantage of the trust he had developed by turning the relationship sexual, Guardino said.

Langley and Guardino said parents and guardians should be hyper aware of "who you place your trust in," keeping an eye out for adults who show an inordinate amount of attention to a child and push for alone time, as most molestations occur not by strangers but by people close to families.

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to tell who might be

capable of child molestation.

"Anyone who thinks they can look over a crowd and pick out a potential child molester is fooling themselves," Langley said. "These people look just like you and me; they act just like you and me to other adults."

"It's only when they're alone with a child that this behavior comes out, and therefore it is very difficult (to tell who is going to do this)."

Prior to his arrest, Lovell was employed with the Union County School System as a bus mechanic, though the Georgia Bureau of Investigation said previously that "no incidents occurred at a school."

Lovell worked at Union County Schools for two years before the system terminated his employment immediately after the accusations against him came to light.

As a mechanic, Lovell did not have regular contact with schoolchildren on campus, though he did occasionally run bus routes as a substitute driver.

Following sentencing, Langley confirmed that, "at this point, we have no reports and no indication that any child was harmed or had been approached by him through his work with the School System."

Regarding the case outcome, Langley would like to thank Guardino for preparing a strong, trial-ready case that helped secure a guilty plea and significant prison sentence.

Langley would also like to thank Union County Sheriff's Office Inv. Marc Pilote and GBI Special Agent Cliff Tippins for their work in building such a strong case.

Drug Trafficking...from Page 1A

starting a chase that wound its way through back streets, then around the square and back onto Cleveland Street heading south, McCarter said.

The high-speed chase continued down Gainesville Highway until she lost control of her vehicle near the county line and crashed off the side of the road, coming to rest about 30 feet down an embankment on Blood Mountain, McCarter said.

An ambulance transported Kincaid to Northeast Georgia Medical Center for possible injuries, and she was released from medical care a few days later before UCSO could pick her up, McCarter said.

In addition to traffic charges related to the chase and suspended license, Kincaid racked up trafficking and possession charges when investigators found over 16 grams of fentanyl in the wrecked vehicle, which was not registered in her name, McCarter said.

Her aggravated assault

charge came after she swerved directly into the path of an oncoming patrol car during the pursuit, causing the deputy to have to veer out of the way to avoid a collision, McCarter said.

Kincaid remained at large until Friday, Oct. 18, when E-911 received a call about a woman who had hidden in the storage area of the Dollar General on Murphy Highway, across from Gumlog Road, McCarter said.

The woman, whose identity was not known to the employees, had entered the store a couple hours before the 911 call, telling workers that she was hiding from two men who were trying to get her, McCarter said.

Near closing time, the woman refused to leave the store, at which point an employee called 911 to assist in the situation, McCarter said.

When deputies arrived, they quickly determined that the woman was Kincaid and learned that she was hiding

after a deputy pulled into the store earlier in the evening while she happened to be there, McCarter said.

That initial deputy's arrival at the Dollar General was simply a coincidence, but Kincaid apparently panicked and decided to hide. McCarter said that, based on her behavior throughout the incident, deputies believed Kincaid was possibly high on drugs.

She was taken into custody at the store, and investigators searched the vehicle she had driven there — also not registered in her name — discovering 28.2 grams of meth to net her additional drug trafficking and possession charges, McCarter said.

On top of being wanted in other counties in North Georgia and Western North Carolina, Kincaid was on probation at the time of her arrest. Bond has been denied, and she remains in custody at the Union County Jail.

She is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

November is National Family Caregivers Month



Since 1997, November has been designated as National Family Caregivers Month. It is a time to honor caregivers for their dedication and sacrifice in caring for loved ones, friends or neighbors. A caregiver facilitates care for a person unable to take care of one or more of their own daily basic needs. Caregiving can be live-in care or aid provided to someone outside of the home. A caregiver most often is a daughter or son, mother or father, wife or husband who is providing care to a disabled relative.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that one in five American adults is caring for a person with a chronic disease or disability.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) shares suggestions on their website on how to honor a caregiver or provide them with much needed support. Several ideas include: sending a card to a caregiver you know thanking them for their service; cooking a meal for a caregiver and the person they provide care to; spending time with a caregiver so that they know they are not alone; offering to sit with the person in need of care; and encouraging a caregiver to spend time taking care of themselves.

It is often difficult for

caregivers to ask others for help. That is one reason why National Family Caregivers Month is so important. It is a way for friends and family to assist and honor a caregiver. It can also be a time for caregivers to recognize there are others in their situation and to reach out for support themselves. One local support group for caregivers is called We Care. We Care meets on the first Friday of every month at 11:30 am at Redeemer Baptist Church, 39 Youngstown Church Road, in Blairsville.

This month, fellowship and a Thanksgiving meal will be prepared by those who want to serve you at RBC on Friday, November 1st. If you would like to join us, please RSVP at 706-897-5221.

Chimp or Treat...from Page 1A



Minnie Mouse served as a tour guide during the 2024 Chimp or Treat pre-Halloween event at the Morganton-based Project Chimps.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

2024 “Chimp or Treat” event, where monkeying around was the name of the game at Project Chimps, the nonprofit chimpanzee sanctuary in Morganton.

This year, Chimp or Treat fell on Oct. 26 and 27, and as part of a collaboration between Project Chimps and a handful of regional businesses, families were welcome to periodically stop at tents placed along a walkway running around the chimps’ villas and their outdoor enrichment area.

Along with getting some bags full of candy and little toys, the educational aspect for attending families and costumed children was invaluable. Most special of all, however, was the opportunity to see the rescued lab animals up close and personal.

Usually, the facility is closed to the public to protect the chimps’ health and preserve their privacy, but the gates open every year on the weekend before Halloween as part of an outreach program to get the community wild about the great apes.

Tour guides led groups of about 20 to 40 people on the adventure, pointing out sites integral to the upkeep of the “chimp retirement home.” To start, the tours checked out the kitchen, where volunteers and staff prepare three meals a day for some 95 hungry apes.

Just up ahead was a shed containing donated firehoses, the cut-up pieces of which are used to make hammocks for the chimps. Right beside it

was a barn holding hay, which the chimps utilize as bedding material beneath their blankets and plush stuffed animals.

Another important stop was the veterinary center. Because chimpanzees boast similar anatomy to humans, some doctors with a history of working on people help when necessary. For example, certified cardiologists have performed heart surgeries on ailing chimps in the medical facility.

The main attractions were the buildings where the chimps live, called villas, which are decorated with portraits of the chimps who call them home. The chimps run in a circle around the 6-acre Peachtree Habitat and are released outside at different times of day to prevent fighting among the groups that live in each villa.

Along with trick-or-treating, visitors took commemorative photos against colorful murals and peeked into the sanctuary through various windows. One inquisitive chimp – either Leo or Hercules – came right up to the viewing window to investigate the festively dressed kiddos.

Whoever the friendly ape was, he entertained viewers of all ages by clutching the enclosure wire with his hands and feet, shaking his head in greeting and pouting his lower lip. He hung around for a time, soaking up the attention like a champ and showing off with a wide grin of his own sharp fangs, though there was no vampiric intent. After he had

his fill, he slipped away as easily as he came and headed back into the forested depths of the yard.

Earlier in the same tour, everyone had a one-of-a-kind experience with about six chimps on the sky bridge. After lunch, a handful of the troop came out to sit on the wired structure to get some fresh air. Children cheered and adults pulled out cameras as the primates looked on, perhaps amused by their animated guests.

The bridge conglomerate, presenting themselves not unlike some silent, judgmental council, may not have been as interactive as the window swinger, but Digital Content Coordinator Holly Chadwick assured they were certainly paying attention.

“The fact that she’s sitting there and watching says a lot,” Chadwick promised, referring to one chimp who turned her head in response to photos and quietly watched a dog-suited representative from a local animal rescue jump around on the ground below her.

That is what the event is all about, said tour guide Paige Jennings, who, in her lady Viking costume, referred to herself as Brunhilda for Halloween. Dressing up and candy are fun, but making connections and recording meaningful memories is what really counts, and Project Chimps has succeeded in doing so for all – even for the chimpanzees.

UCFD Valor ...from Page 1A



L-R: Ava Pruitt joined her firefighting father Doug Pruitt and mother Kendra Pruitt for a recognition of the veteran firefighter Friday.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

in Suches as the lieutenant in charge of the other volunteer firefighters.

The father-son duo decided Doug would attempt to stop the leaking tank, which had experienced a valve malfunction during an unrelated repair. The stakes were life-threatening for Doug, but he resolved that the stakes were potentially much higher for the community if he chose not to act.

In full turnout gear and a self-contained breathing apparatus, Doug crawled under the truck, where the leak "sounded like a jet engine." The pressurized tank spewed subzero liquid propane all over his suit and visor, dropping his body temperature and making it impossible to see.

He actually made two attempts under the truck, the second time becoming acutely aware of how limited his time was, as not only was exposure to that environment extremely hazardous in its own right, but his breathing apparatus had frozen in the free-flow position, so he was losing oxygen into his mask; he would have to make sure to get out in time to make it back to fresh air.

Blindly, he felt around under the truck to find an emergency shutoff valve, which had frozen in place. He was unable to get the mechanism to budge, but afterward, it was

determined that his efforts likely loosened the emergency shutoff and caused the leak to quit before the tank completely emptied.

Coming out from under the truck was a challenge. His mask was totally frosted over, and he stumbled his way toward the light to exit the work area, tripping over unseen obstacles in his path.

Once clear of the business proper, he held his breath and lifted his mask to see where he was going before lowering the mask to resume breathing. He continued in this manner until he was clear of the toxic vapor.

Eventually, Doug got a safe distance away, making it to the road. Liquid propane had covered every inch of him, freezing to his suit and even the bottoms of his boots so that he felt like he was walking on ice.

Doug started stomping around to break the propane loose, and the business owner asked if he was cold, to which he responded yes, even though it was a warm 70-degree day. At that point, he was advised to take his suit off to prevent the frozen propane from stealing additional body heat.

It was then that Doug noticed wrinkly, paper-white skin on both wrists that was numb to the touch, and he discovered that his left leg near the hip had sustained exposure

burns as well.

Both Ernie and Doug are medically trained, and they decided that his injuries were potentially very serious, so Doug went via ambulance to Northeast Georgia Medical Center.

Color returned to his damaged skin, but massive blisters soon formed, and he was transferred to a burn center in the Atlanta area. Doctors monitored the development of his wounds, which proved to be primarily second-degree burns, and he underwent surgery to apply cadaveric skin grafts.

Fortunately, he did not require permanent skin grafts, but the initial healing process was painful and tedious; his wife, Kendra, had to help him bathe, and he found himself limited in even the simplest of actions.

For the time being, he continues to wear protective cloth sleeves to cover the still-healing skin of his wrists, but he has gotten well enough that he was cleared to return to full firefighting duty on Friday, Oct. 25.

"I attribute my healing to prayers and the good Lord's grace to get me where I am as fast as I did," Doug said, a month on from the incident.

Aside from Doug, no one was injured the day of the propane leak, and everyone's

quick thinking during the incident kept tragedy from occurring.

For their actions, Lt. Ernie Pruitt and Lt. Doug Pruitt each received a "Community Exceptional Service Award," presented to them by Fire Chief David Dyer and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris at Fire Station No. 1 on Friday.

With gratitude from Union County Government, the Pruitts received the awards "in

recognition of the Exceptional Acts of Valor Performed, Under High Stress and at Personal Risk, at the Propane Incident of September 25, 2024, in Suches, Georgia."

As noted and demonstrated above, firefighting is a job that entails high levels of inherent risk, be it serious injury and even death, and it takes special people like the Pruitts and others to willingly sign up for

such a potentially dangerous profession – all in the service of others.

Dyer and Paris are extremely proud of the firefighters for their keen and heroic actions, as a leader of this magnitude was an unprecedented event in Union County, and therefore required levels of training, courage and determination that, gratefully, are common at Union County Fire.

United Community Junior Board of Directors program empowers future leaders

United Community has launched into another school year with its Junior Board of Directors program, an initiative it has been committed to since 2005 that introduces high school upperclassmen to local business communities. Reflecting United's dedication to youth development, the program offers a comprehensive experience including financial literacy education, leadership development workshops, community service activities and mentoring sessions with United leaders.

"Our Junior Board of Directors program aims to develop the next generation of leaders, not just in the Upstate,

but across the entire South-east. We believe that providing young people with practical knowledge about finance, leadership and community engagement helps create well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to their communities," said Moryah Jackson, SVP, director of community development and engagement. "By expanding this program to cities in Georgia and North Carolina, we hope to connect more students with their local business communities and give them valuable insights into potential career paths."

At Legacy Early College in Greenville, 11th and

12th-grade students started the program by sharing their backgrounds and discussing their leadership qualities. This partnership with Legacy Early College provides students with opportunities to learn about financial literacy, leadership development, community service and careers in banking.

Since its inception, the Junior Board of Directors program has involved more than 1,000 students across ten different communities in United's areas of operation.

The program continues to grow, aiming to provide more students with these learning opportunities across the Southeast.