

North Georgia News

4 Sections 28 Pages

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Sheriff Mason offers 2022 Year-In-Review

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Sheriff's Office works around the clock to protect local lives and property, requiring the office to perform a wide variety of functions: arrests, wellness checks, traffic stops, routine patrols, business checks, inmate housing, animal control, search and rescue, narcotics cases, investigation, etc.

In the performance of these duties, the Sheriff's Office works to maintain the highest quality of service for the residents of the county.

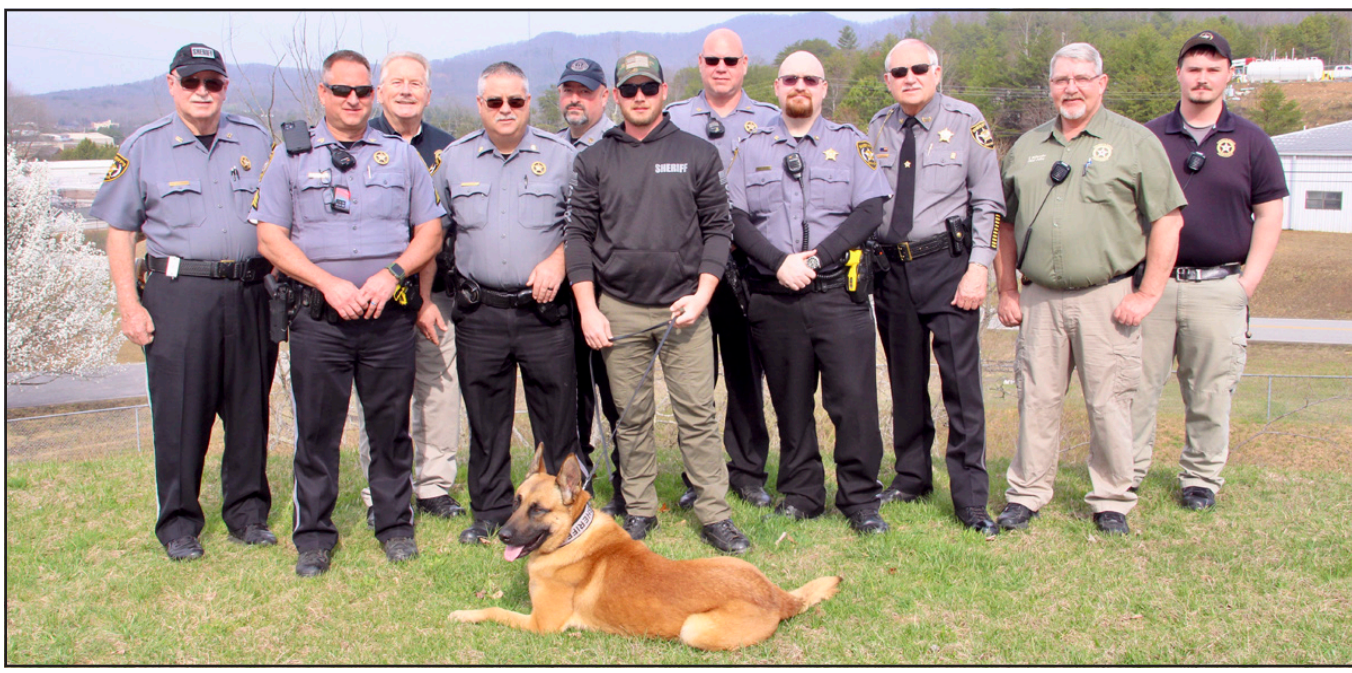
And while the Sheriff's Office is committed to faithfully undertaking this project, Sheriff Mack Mason wants the public to know that his office is increasingly having to do more with less as the population of the county continues to grow.

This becomes evident when reviewing facts and figures the office racked up over 2022.

"We were \$200,000 under budget in the Sheriff's Office with salaries," Mason said. "Unfortunately, that was because we had lost some employees going to higher-paying jobs such as the Blairsville Police Department, the school and nearby communities, and some retired."

"The overall budget, we were just short of \$600,000 under budget. We had about 10 important vacancies within the Sheriff's Office, and the level of staffing has only slightly increased since I took office in January 2013."

This is a worrying trend, as the Sheriff's Office has experienced a major uptick in calls for service over the 10 years that Mason has been



Members of the Union County Sheriff's Office and Jail: (L-R) Deputy David McGregor, Sgt. Alan Patton, Chief John George, Maj. Shawn Dyer, Staff Sgt. Brandon Hogsd, Lt. Tyler Miller w/K-9 Bolo, Lt. Doug Brackett, Deputy Brody Brackett, Sheriff Mack Mason, Chief Jailer Tommy Holbrooks and Jail Lt. Dakota Wheeler. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Truck barrels into old Jackson Insurance building

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Bobby and Beverly Jackson are relieved that a truck ran into their building.

Specifically, they are grateful that the vehicle that took

out two walls in a corner office of the old Jackson Insurance headquarters last Thursday did not hit a carload of kids on their way to school or anyone heading to work during a time of day when travel is starting to ramp up.

The accident occurred around 7:30 a.m. on March

2. A '99 Toyota Tacoma was traveling eastbound on Georgia 515, in the area of Circuit World, when it suddenly swerved across the continuous turn lane and two oncoming lanes of traffic, according to the Georgia State Patrol.

See Building Wreck, Page 2A



A Toyota Tacoma knocked out the front and side walls of a corner office in the former HQ for Robert F. Jackson Insurance Agency the morning of March 2. Photo by Todd Forrest

'Chosin Few' battle frostbite, Communists in Korean War

By Mark P. Harbison
Guest Contributor

Editor's Note: This is the second half of an article on the bravery and patriotism of Blairsville resident Jack McCorkle, a U.S. Marine who survived the Battle of Chosin Reservoir. The North Georgia News thanks McCorkle for his service as well as Harbison for honoring McCorkle and his story for our readers.

The UN forces were forced to fight their way south from the reservoir toward the port of Hungnam some 78 miles away. The fighting occurred along what was called the Main Supply Route, or MSR.

The MSR is not terribly unlike many of the mountain roadways surrounding Blairsville. Some sections were similar to what we see here, others far worse. The northern section of the MSR, from the reservoir to Funchilin Pass, was a dirt and gravel road only 15 feet wide. The overall section from the reservoir through Funchilin Pass to Chinhung-ni dropped 2,500 feet in eight miles of switchback, single lane road that clung to the sides of the mountain.



Jack McCorkle, 91, wearing his "Chosin Few" cover with the North Georgia Honor Guard uniform at a Veteran's funeral in September 2022. Photo by Mark Harbison, Sr. Vice Commander, North Georgia Honor Guard, Eastern Division

Official Marine Corp reports describe it as having a cliff on one side and a chasm on the other. After the Pass it became a one-lane road and then eventually a two-lane road to Hungnam. That eight miles from Chinhung-ni would become a pure living hell that not even Stephen King could imagine.

Weather conditions were horrendous, on that everyone can agree. As with any story, just how bad it was depends on who is telling the story. Everyone, however, does agree that the temperature dropped to around minus 30 to minus 35.

To put that into

See Chosin Few, Page 2A

12U Lady Panthers achieve glory as State Champions



The 12U Lady Panthers came out on top of the GRPA Class C State Basketball Tournament after winning four straight games in the tourney. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

CLEVELAND, Ga. - The Union County Recreation Department's 12U girls ran roughshod over the competition during last weekend's Georgia Recreation and Park Association Class C State Basketball Tournament, outscoring the field by an average score of 55-24 over four games.

The Lady Panthers returned to Blairsville on

Saturday night as state champions following a 58-36 victory over host White County.

Union County opened with a 62-23 win over Gilmer in Friday's pool play, followed by a 52-5 victory over Fitzgerald in the first round of Saturday's single elimination tournament.

The Lady Panthers punched their ticket to the title game via a 48-32 win over Fitzgerald in the semifinals.

Miya Totherow led

Union County in scoring, piling up 69 points over the four games, including a 25-point performance in the March 4 championship-clinching victory over White County.

The Lady Panthers earned a spot in the GRPA State Tournament via another blowout victory over White County during last month's District 7 title game.

The public is invited to come out to the Blairsville

See 12U Champs, Page 3A

Satterfield's legacy rooted in service, community giving

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It's hard to overstate just how much Joe Satterfield meant to the people of the North Georgia Mountains.

As a husband, he was incredibly loving. As a father, he was a strong role model. To his coworkers and employees, he was a selfless source of inspiration. And for the community, he helped to usher in a new era of growth and communication leading Blue Ridge Mountain EMC.

To all, Satterfield was a man of honor, and following a battle with cancer that ultimately took his life on Jan. 29, at the age of 75, he left behind a legacy that will be cherished by everyone who

knew him.

Roy "Joe" Gilbert Satterfield Jr. was born in Porterdale, down in Newton County about 36 miles east of Atlanta. He was a precocious young man who met the love of his life, Betty, on a blind date when the two were just a week shy of their senior year in high school.

"We were both 17. It wasn't love at first sight, but it wasn't long after that," Betty recalled.

The couple dated for two years before deciding to tie the knot in December of 1967, and on July 3, 1968, they got married. Their honeymoon didn't last long, however, because by July 23, Satterfield was in Vietnam with the U.S. Army.

While serving his



Joe Satterfield

country, he earned the rank of sergeant working with mortars in the Fourth Infantry Division. A year and a day later, on July 24, 1969, Satterfield returned to the U.S., and the couple settled into their new home in

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Building Wreck...from Page 1A

Fortunately, the truck did not hit any westbound cars, but it did strike a curb, take out a Circuit World sign, damage a Blue Ridge Mountain EMC utility box, run through a parking lot, hit another curb/sidewalk, and drive head-on into the east corner of the

Jacksons' building, per GSP.

A witness to the accident said she was traveling behind the truck, which had been driving normally to that point, when "all of a sudden (it) veered to the left and never applied the brakes before the crash," GSP said.

The witness pulled over and rendered aid to the driver, a 63-year-old Union County resident, and he was taken by ambulance for medical treatment of injuries sustained in the crash.

GSP would not release the reason the driver ran off the roadway, citing medical privacy, but reportedly, the driver is a cancer patient who was experiencing a health emergency that caused him to pass out behind the wheel.

The driver's medical condition was not known at press time, but the North Georgia News did learn that his condition seemed to be improving by Friday evening. GSP issued him a warning in the accident.

As for the building, Beverly Jackson anticipates the knocked-out walls will be repaired in short order, and on top of the miracle that no one else was injured in the crash, the rest of the building seems to have not been affected, as nothing outside that office even came down from the walls.

After 49 years of continuous operation – the Jacksons were just the third full-time insurance agency to open in the area – the Blairsville natives who are now in their 80s decided it was time to slow down, so they sold their insurance business at the end of 2022 to Kim Farner Agency.

Insurance specialist Judy Blackburn worked for the Jacksons for decades, and she had been using the office that got destroyed in the accident up until the week before, when she transferred just up the street to Farner's building.

So, the office that got hit by the truck was totally unoccupied at the time of the crash, which is a major relief to the Jacksons, who shudder to think what might have happened if Judy had been sitting at her desk when the truck came through, because her old desk is now "in splinters."

"I just went weak when I saw her desk, because she'd been with us 38 years," Beverly said. "I'd rather he would hit our building than to hit a car full of people head-on. I don't know how he crossed that four-lane and didn't hit another car.

"I was just about frantic when (Blairsville Police Chief Michael 'Bear' Baxter) called, but then, I knew from the time there wouldn't be anybody at our office. We just feel blessed that it was no worse than it was, and we hope to hear that (the driver) recovers."

For now, the Jacksons will continue to operate their rental business out of the building as they work to complete the repairs.



The wreck at the old Jackson Insurance building gives new meaning to the phrase "office with a view." Thankfully, no one was killed or suspected to be seriously injured in the accident. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Chosin Few...from Page 1A

perspective, at minus 30 degrees the temperature would have to increase by 62 degrees just to reach freezing. At one Regimental headquarters the thermometer fell to minus 54 degrees. Maybe now you can understand why these men are called the "Frozen Chosin."

The reality of just how bitter the cold was is evidenced in everyday life. If vehicles could be started, they needed to be run 24 hours a day. If you shut them off, you likely would need to abandon them where they sat. Moisture from a day's work would pool in boots, freezing before a boot could be removed. By the time the withdrawal was complete, frostbite injuries amounted to over 30,000. Cold-related injuries are a lingering issue for the Frozen Chosin to this day.

I asked Jack if he had suffered any frostbite: "I kept three pairs of socks against my chest to keep them warm," he said. "But a couple of my toes turned black. Medics wanted to take 'em off; I wouldn't let them. They stayed black until the '70s, then they started turning pink again."

When asked about the medics, he immediately responded, "They were great! Took better care of the wounded than they did themselves."

With all that, I asked him how he managed to survive the crippling cold. He answered, "Just lucky – and some intelligence." Then, being the country boy that I am, I just had to ask a more practical question. "Jack, with the extreme cold, how did you manage to relieve yourself?" His answer was typical Jack. "You just dropped your pants and hoped."

During my conversations with Jack, he revealed some insights that likely are shared by most of the Frozen Chosin. The leadership below the Division level was "no damn good." Without close air support, things would have turned out much differently and not for the good. Air support managed to get supplies to the reservoir. That, combined with the suppressive fire they provided, as well as Naval gunfire, kept them from being entirely overrun by soldiers of the Communist Chinese Forces.

Jack retired from the "Corps" as a Master Sergeant, so I'm sure that some of his answers were through the filter of that time spent coming up through the ranks. I did ask him if he felt the Chinese were good fighters. "No," he simply answered.

"Some of them surrendered to us because they had it worse," Jack said. "Their feet were wrapped with rags and were solid blocks of ice, inches thick. They could barely walk. They were on dope.

"They tried keeping us up all night with flares and making noise with bugles, anything they could to make noise." He chuckled, then added, "They used bugles to coordinate commands. Our bugler learned their calls; when they sounded advance, he would sound retreat."

Formerly classified communications, referred to as "messages," showed that the CCF did use noisemakers including bugles to harass UN troops. They used these mostly at night as distractions while they attempted to find weak spots in the UN defenses.

These messages revealed that on the days leading up to the 26th of November only a small amount of these "probes" into UN lines were attempted. Those that did occur would also use machine

gun fire to harass sleeping troops. These were quickly turned back with strafing runs using night capable aircraft.

After the 26th, these messages showed that the night probes were occurring much more frequently. The Headquarters 10th Corps Command Report, which had at the time been classified as Top Secret, documented that the CCF command would rely heavily on "guerrilla" activity. This included probing actions that were persistent and effective.

Just as Jack said earlier, this report also stated that the enemy communicated during an attack by using bells, bugles, horns, whistles or other noisemakers, the most common being the bugle. All of this proved effective from a psychological weapons standpoint. Some UN soldiers later stated that their effects were extremely demoralizing. Jack's company bugler deserves recognition for helping to dilute, to a small degree, this psychological weapon employed by the CCF.

From this same report it was clear that the main tactic the Chinese forces would use was one of harassment that kept UN troops on the move as much as possible. The Chinese theory was that "a cornered rat will fight fiercely, but if you gave it a way to escape and kept it moving, you could gradually wear it down with little loss to your own troops."

The night probes and noisemakers, as evidenced by some of Jack's statements, were deployed as part of this theory and were quite effective. The MSR was provided as the "escape route for the trapped rat."

During this fighting withdrawal, the enemy's most effective tactic was its ability to conceal its position. All along this route of escape the "rat" kept defending itself tenaciously and making counter probes with ruthless effectiveness. This rat would not go quietly!

These Marines fought their way in bitter cold, along a narrow, torturous, ice-covered road for 60 miles. They did this while fighting against an overwhelming force that included an estimated six to eight CCF Divisions. This meant that for each UN soldier there were roughly six Communist Chinese soldiers trying to stop them. Those CCF divisions suffered staggering losses at the hands of these trapped rats.

It could be said that Mao Zedong made one extreme error that cost him his desire to have one Korea firmly within his grasp. That error was the fighting tenacity of the United States Marine Corps.

One of Jack's answers reaffirmed this when I asked him, "As a result of your experiences, how do you characterize yourself?" His answer: "Just a normal Marine."

This excerpt from "The Marine Officer's Guide" sums it up far better than I can:

"Sixteen days later, having brought down its dead, saved its equipment, and rescued three Army battalions, the 1st Marine Division – supported by the 1st Marine Wing – reached the sea with high morale and in fighting order. The division had shattered the Chinese Communist Forces 9th Army Group, killed at least 25,000 Chinese, and wounded more than 12,500."

The only fitting thing I can add to that is, "You better believe that rat had teeth!"

To Jack and all his

Frozen Chosin brethren, a mere thank you will not do. So let me, with no disrespect intended, bastardize one of your revered slogans: "The Few, The Proud, The Frozen."

Two iconic quotes from Marines who led in battle at the Chosin Reservoir:

"We're surrounded. That simplifies our problem of getting to these people and killing them. Now we can fire in any direction; those bastards won't get away this time!" [Brigadier General Chesty Puller]

"Retreat, hell! We're attacking in a different direction!" [Major General Oliver Smith]

References

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2. FROZEN CHOSIN. U. S Marines at the Changjin Reservoir. By Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, U.S. Marine Corps Retired. Part of the Marines in the Korean War Commemorative Series. 14 May 2014. Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

3. Korean War Educator, online

4. From About: The Korean War Educator is based in the home of Mrs. Dale H. (Lynnita) Brown of Tuscola, Illinois, without charge or tax benefit. The site is a joint effort of civilians and veterans who are determined to establish and maintain a medium in which the general public can learn more about the Korean War. The site is a "Made in America" product.

5. Chosin Few Quarterly. Apr-May-June 2022. Editorial by Art Sharp, Editor. Permission to use any material published in the Quarterly was granted by the Business Manager, Mr. Gerald W. Wadley. Note: The question of blame being put on MacArthur and Almond is repeated throughout various issues of the Chosin Few and is repeated in numerous Veteran organization publications as well as both professional historical reviews and military academies and universities.

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7. The Frozen Chosin. Douglas Sterner. homeofheroes.com/douglas-sterner/

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Satterfield Legacy ...from Page 1A

Colorado Springs, Colorado.

He completed his military service at Colorado's Fort Carson before being discharged in 1970, at which point the Satterfields returned to Georgia and Joe began his electrical career at Snapping Shoals EMC southeast of Atlanta.

In Covington, he started with reading meters, then gradually moved up to an office job. The family moved back West for a spell, where Joe unlocked another door by becoming an office manager at Union Rural Electric Association in Brighton, Colorado.

It wasn't until 1984, when the Satterfields' daughter Joy was in sixth grade and son Justin was 5 months old, that they moved to the mountains of North Georgia and Joe got his start at Blue Ridge Mountain EMC.

"Jackie Sellers, who was the manager at Blue Ridge, called Joe and told him he was getting ready to leave there and wanted to see if he was interested in coming here for the manager's job," explained Betty.

With the knowledge he'd gained at Union REA in Brighton, Satterfield took on the job as the General Manager at the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, which would become his area claim to fame – and road to valuable relationships – for more than two decades.

"He very quickly came to know almost everybody in the company in a lot of different ways," remembers Larry Kernea, who worked for Satterfield for 10 years. Even now, at Murphy Power, Kernea carries the lessons and values instilled in him by his old boss.

"You could not work harder," Kernea said of his former employer's work ethic, adding, with a humble chuckle, "It took a long time for me to understand I couldn't outwork Joe Satterfield."

Betty and Kernea – and indeed, the other workers at BRMEMC – knew how eagerly Satterfield approached his job; in fact, Betty recalls the time that Satterfield disclosed that if he "didn't get to work before everyone else, it was hard to get anything done."

In over 25 years, Betty can't remember ever hearing her husband say he didn't want to go to work. His dedication to his employees and to his duties was simply immense. Satterfield was known to change tires, repair diesel trucks, and even help paint when the need arose.

The deployment of fiber-optic technology in Union County can also be attributed to Satterfield. Justin Satterfield, owner of DMI Collision and Custom Body Shop, recounted the important professional relationships his father fostered to serve his community.

"At the time, the (Tennessee Valley Authority) had only three board members, and they were appointed by the President of the United States," Justin said. "He was very close

with that bunch in getting the grants and all the stuff setup for the high-speed internet."

And thanks to the connections he forged with TVA, Satterfield was also able to convince the federally owned agency to allow higher summer water levels in Lake Nottely from the 1980s onward, which greatly benefited both local enjoyment and economic development.

Another aspect of Satterfield's legacy is the care he took in making time for his "work family" and the power company's customers.

For example, during the infamous Blizzard of '93, he left home for five straight days and stayed at the office, working tirelessly to restore power despite an outpouring of angry calls and even death threats. And he always made sure the people under him worked hard, too.

"He expected quite a lot from you, but he let you know that he knew you could do good work for him," Kernea said.

The EMC echoed this sentiment in an official post on the co-op's Facebook page after his passing:

"Under Mr. Satterfield's visionary leadership, BRMEMC grew its electric distribution system, its membership and its ancillary service offerings. Most notably, Mr. Satterfield recognized BRMEMC's critical role in regional economic development and laid the foundation on which BRMEMC built its fiber-optic broadband network in our rural mountain counties."

Of course, Satterfield's community contributions extended beyond his professional life. Along with Jim McAfee, he was selected from the Chamber of Commerce to organize the Blairsville Scottish Festival and Highland Games in the early 2000s, and for 15 years, he volunteered at the event despite a lack of Highland ancestry.

"Joe was one who would always work with the community to do anything he could to bring in tourism or something of that sort," Betty said. "That was just the way he was. He liked doing things like that that would help the community."

In furtherance of this civic-mindedness, Satterfield also joined forces with Jimmy Talent years back to start the Blairsville Rotary Club, which to date has volunteered countless hours of community service to projects benefiting the area.

And the list goes on: Satterfield spent nine years on the North Georgia Technical College Board and participated in the Young Harris College Advisory Board; served as president of the National Rural Electric Managers Association, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, and of the Georgia Electric Membership Cooperative; was a chairman at the Tennessee Public Power Association; participated in the local Lion's Club; and became a deacon

at the First Baptist Church in Blairsville.

"People need to realize the amount of sacrifice he made to move this community forward and to get people what they needed, even get them what they didn't think they needed at the time," Justin said of his father's many engagements.

But despite his busy personal and professional lives, Satterfield always made time for others.

"He never, never let his phone go on voicemail," daughter Joy said. "Anytime his phone rang, he would stop whatever he was doing to answer it, no matter who it was."

In 2009, Satterfield retired from the EMC after more than two decades as general manager. He grew restless, however, unable to simply let himself stay at home and wax his tractor. So, he practiced the same hard work and modesty in retirement that he had adopted in the electricity business by going to work with his son at his body shop, repairing and customizing vehicles for about 10 years, all while maintaining the same commitment to others.

"He was just so solid and could fix anything," Joy said. "He was always there for you. He would stop whatever he was doing to listen to you or help you or anything. He always had great advice."

In addition to his many friends, Satterfield is survived by his wife of over 54 years, two children, and five grandchildren, for whom he always served as a guiding light.

They will remember their patriarch, who did so much for so many people, for dedicating time to them, too, by attending ballgames, going fishing, making ziplines, fashioning a sled from a car hood, golfing, swimming, teaching his grandkids, and so much more.

The Thursday before his last day on earth, Joy asked her dad if he wanted to come home from the facility where he'd been receiving cancer treatments.

She recalls telling him that, "his whole life, he thought about everybody else, and if (coming home) was what he wanted to do, he needed to do it, that we would be fine."

"So, he came home the next day and died on Sunday," Joy said.

Now that he's gone, his loved ones say it's difficult to come up with one favorite memory of somebody who "never did bad to you, never wanted to do anything but help or see people progress."

"He wasn't a person that stood out in a crowd, but he just had a presence about him that you could admire," Betty said. "He was one of a kind. The best of the best."

"He was as close to perfect as anybody I've ever known," said Joy. "Just a great person. It's hard to lose someone like that."

"Everything he did was

for somebody else," Justin added.

"That was my good friend. He was my buddy. He was my good friend and I loved him," Kernea said in summation of the man he got to know so well over the years. "My life's been so much better because of having known Joe Satterfield."

For the people whose lives were touched by Satterfield, the words of Jim McAfee undoubtedly ring true: "Because of Joe's involvement and tireless work on our behalf, our mountain area is an improved place to live. His family, friends, and associates are the better for having known him."

At his memorial service, Pastor Ricky Powell offered some particularly fitting, poignant lines from Georgia Harkness' poem, "To My Father":

"A giant pine, magnificent and old. It fell one day. Where it had dauntless stood was loneliness and void. But men who passed paid tribute and said, 'To know this life was good, It left its mark on me. Its work stands fast.' This giant pine, magnificent and old."

The family requests that those who feel led to honor Joe Satterfield's memory do so by donating to one of the following organizations: First Baptist Church of Blairsville, Mission Dignity, Samaritan's Purse, The Gideons International or St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Candace Lee receives GACVB Lifetime Membership Award

News Special
North Georgia News

The Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureau presented Candace Lee with a Lifetime Membership Award at the organization's Annual Conference on Feb.14 in Albany, Georgia.

Lee served as president of the Towns County/Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce from 2011-2022, plus five years in a prior term, totaling 16 years devoted to tourism and economic development.

She was an invaluable asset to the North Georgia Mountains, having been a longtime fixture in the local landscape. Lee had her finger on the pulse of the entire region, and no one was better informed than her.

Friends, family, colleagues and newcomers alike valued her as an inexhaustible source of information; she could easily conjure up old dates and names from memory while having electronic files ready at hand if ever needed.



GACVB Executive Director Jay Markwalter, Candace Lee, BUCCC President Steve Rowe, and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris in a recent meeting where Lee was recognized.
Photo/Submitted

It's difficult to imagine the area and tourism industry without Lee's contributions because of how deeply entrenched she was in its inner workings.

Lee retired from the chamber world in the summer of 2022 and has since been enjoying a slower paced life

in a new home with a new best friend, a puppy named Riley.

Over the course of her career, she served as a board member of the Georgia Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives between 2019 and 2020; was a board member of Lake Chatuge Rotary for many years and received the Rotarian of the Year Award; and sat on the board of the Northeast Georgia Mountains Travel Association for at least 10 years.

She was honored locally for achieving the GACVB Lifetime Membership Award in a recent meeting of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

Congratulations to Candace Lee on this honor and award.

12U Champs...from Page 1A

Square on Saturday to cheer on the 12 U Lady Panthers for their state victory. The Rec Department will be taking the girls around the square at 10 a.m., and they would love to see the community turn out in support.

Also, the team will be

recognized in the regular county meeting of Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris on Thursday, March 9, and the players will be in attendance.

For complete game recaps and more, see the Sports Section in this week's edition of the North Georgia News.

UCSO Year-in-Review ...from Page 1A

sheriff, to the tune of a whopping 254% increase.

"We had 8,600 calls in 2013, and we answered over 22,400 calls last year," Mason said. "We've been running 22,500 on average for the last couple of years."

A greater volume of calls has translated to a greater number of arrests, keeping the Sheriff's Office increasingly active at the jail as well.

"In 2021, we had an intake of 765 inmates," Mason said. "In 2022, that increased to 938 – 91 of those were drug related, which is down somewhat from recent years. So, that was an 18% increase in the people that we took into the jail."

"Our traffic arrests amounted to over 2,000 last year. We have three deputies that pretty much work only traffic, one of them full-time, the other two part-time. We don't make traffic arrests to get revenue, we're just trying to slow drivers down."

"If the speed limit is 65 mph, and somebody's running 80 mph, they should know that they're in violation. They often have to pay a fine as part of that violation, which is a significant amount of money over the course of the year that goes into the court system in Union County."

Traffic enforcement has grown ever more important as the county continues to add residents, as more people driving means more vehicle accidents.

"Last year, we had over 900 wrecks in Union County," Mason said. "It was just a few less than the previous two or three years, but still, 900 is unacceptable."

With its own vehicles, the Sheriff's Office has been able to save taxpayer dollars while maintaining its fleet by trading in patrol cars for updated models. Not only did the Sheriff's Office get great deals last year, it also further reduced costs by bypassing the need for regular vehicle maintenance.

"We seldom have to buy tires, batteries, and everything else is under warranty," Mason said.

For example, the Sheriff's Office traded in 20 Ford Explorers and paid just \$1,500 each for newer models in 2022, resulting in a total bill of \$30,000 for the vehicles, which was less than the purchase price of a single new car!

Plus, 16 more vehicles were traded for a total of just \$28,300, of which six were Ford F-150s swapped for new ones, with Ford giving the Sheriff's Office a deal of \$700 back per vehicle for a total of \$4,200 in revenues. And four new vehicles were purchased outright for \$134,000 total.

"We have approximately 40 new vehicles now in this fleet," Mason said. "The reason we've been able to build a fleet like we have, a lot of it has been with drug seizure money. But we've also been utilizing the large state incentive that we've been getting from the car dealerships, which appears to be coming to an end."

Using drug seizure funds allowed the Sheriff's Office to pay about \$200,000 in vehicle trades and purchases and completely avoid the use of budgeted tax dollars last year*.

And thanks to state incentives, auctions of used weapons and seizure funds, the Sheriff's Office nearly broke even in '21 and '22 replacing 25 service weapons carried by officers.

The Sheriff's Office has not had to pay any money to house inmates in other counties in recent years, with the exception of \$17,000 in 2019.

One reason the inmate population has been down recently is that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in fewer arrestees being incarcerated, as many were just issued appearance citations when they would have normally been taken to jail.

Housing inmates out of the county has been a significant expense in the past. For instance, it cost a cumulative total of \$400,000 over 2017 and 2018 to house an overflow of inmates in other facilities due to limited capacity in the 54-bed Union County Jail.

"At one time, we had 111 inmates – that's double the capacity of the jail," Mason said. "If you've got too many and you've got to send them to other jails, where are you going to send them? Who's going to take them? Are all these other counties full, too?"

And the jail is currently over capacity at 58 inmates, two of which have been there for more than 365 days, as well as six more who have been there for 250-plus days, all awaiting trial.

Criminal activity has



UCISO Narcotics Lt. Tyler Miller with the newest member of the force, K-9 Bolo.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

been picking back up with the pandemic winding down, and Sheriff Mason believes that "sooner than later," the county will have to take advantage of the Shoe Factory Road property it purchased to build a new jail and 911 center.

UCSO continued to provide inmate work crews to the county in 2022, helping to offset taxpayer expenses while allowing the county to stay on top of maintenance usually done by state probationers that has been intermittently interrupted since the start of the pandemic.

Regarding the general theme of doing more with less, Sheriff Mason pointed out that, despite an ever-growing state population, state agencies have fewer law enforcement officers and other representatives available to assist at the local level compared with recent decades.

"GBI, state patrol, mental health, Department of Transportation – you name it, it seems like the state is falling way behind the curve in having these agencies caught up," Mason said. "An example of that is, they have six GBI agents working the 14 counties of Region 8, to include Union."

"It is very seldom that we get an agent to work cases when many years ago it was commonplace. I'm not knocking the agents; somebody has let that agency go down. They've got 1,200 employees, and they only have 300 that actually work out in the field for the 159 counties. We have four investigators and need more."

"Forty years ago, GBI had 10 agents for the 14 counties of Region 8. And now, they've got six – the same as 10 years ago. Why is that? The governor and legislature are the only ones that can fix this problem."

"Obviously, as long as the sheriff's offices and police departments do the work, it's no big deal to them. And when we're doing the work, the county taxpayers have to foot the bill."

Added Mason, "In dealing with the GBI, the grand jury meets four times per year in Union County, and the last term was kind of average. The district attorney had 36 arrestees' cases go before the grand jury for indictment, and true bills were returned on every case presented."

Sheriff Mason said only one case comes to mind, possibly two, that the GBI had an involvement in, and that was a murder case, "so our investigators are having to work the majority of these crimes."

"For the recent indictments," Mason said, "we had one murder, home invasions, possession of firearms, cruelty to children, thefts, Family Violence charges, aggravated batteries, elder exploitation, drug offenses like trafficking and possession, driving offenses, sex offenses."

"And that's another thing: the county sheriff is tasked with keeping up with the Sex Offender Registry for the county. No money comes to the county for that, it's just put off on the county to keep up with these sex offenders – where they live, what they drive – and monitor them."

Relatedly, the sheriff noted that, concerning the Georgia State Patrol, "I've said this until I'm black and blue in the face: 45 years ago, Georgia had 900 troopers; today, they've probably got around 700. Why is that?"

"Again, I'm not knocking the troopers," Mason said. "They can't help it because they're short-handed, but a lot of times when we call them to work wrecks, they're down in Gilmer County working a wreck, or Fannin County, and they say it'll be an hour."

"Do you want the citizen to stand on the side of the road on a state highway and have to wait for them to get here? So, we wind up working a lot of wrecks."

"We really have our plate full in trying to keep Union County a safe place to live and travel in. We just wish that the state legislature and the governor would appropriate more money for these agencies along with mental health."

Sheriff Mason said he does not recall ever receiving a state tax dollar to run his office, which would go a long way, especially in such a small county.

It is becoming more common for the county to house inmates who belong in specialized mental health facilities, with the jail having to keep these inmates for longer periods of time before they are approved for transfer, posing risks for inmates and detention officers alike.

And this trend is occurring across the state.

"One particular sheriff from Chatham County said he could identify 400 inmates that were in his jail with some form of mental illness," Mason said.

The county sheriff referenced, John T. Wilcher, wrote in a letter to Gov. Brian Kemp at the end of 2021 that "the Detention Center is not a mental hospital and should not be used as one. However, from my vantage point the situation is getting worse." Sheriff Mason agrees.

"Fortunately, we're not on the same scale as Chatham County – Savannah, Georgia – due to population," Mason said. "But when we have an issue here as we did the year before last, where we took an inmate on Jan. 3, they evaluated him finally in May, and it was Nov. 30 before he left here – 11 months."

"Drug treatment rehab and mental health bed spaces are in short supply throughout the state. That's why they have to stay in the jail so long. But my question is, why are they in the jail in the first place? The issue is, when we do encounter someone, it takes forever to get somebody up here to evaluate them, and then there's the problem of finding a place to send them."

One thing that would help the Sheriff's Office is raising deputy pay to aid in recruitment and retention. Mason noted that someone in the Georgia General Assembly recently recommended a starting pay of \$56,000 to match the national average, while the beginning salary in Union is just \$41,500.

Despite the resource issue, the sheriff is proud of his deputies and jail staff.

"We welcome the recent addition of K-9 Bolo, a 20-month-old Belgian Malinois working with Lt. Tyler Miller both for tracking lost citizens, children or criminals, and drug-sniffing purposes," Mason said.

The sheriff is also proud of the community outreach efforts of his office, like the Sheriff's Give-A-Gift for Christmas Program, which provided toys for more than 80 children ages 2-12 in need last year thanks to robust community support, which is on par with past years of giving.

People who would like to support Give-A-Gift can swing by the Sheriff's Office and Jail at 378 Beasley Street during daytime hours to pick up a commemorative challenge coin for a \$10 donation, with all proceeds going to the Christmas program.

"As I have said many times, this is not Mack Mason's Sheriff's Office – I just have the distinguished honor of heading it," Mason said. "I am thankful for the cooperation and support of Commissioner Lamar Paris and all county departments and personnel."

"I humbly request the citizens of Union County to continue their support for your Sheriff's Office. Together, we can get the job done right. Thank you, and to God be the glory."