

North Georgia News

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Assistant Police Chief Dyer pledges to work hard in new position

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With the retirement of Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll and the promotion of Assistant Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter to the department's top spot, Police Sgt. Shawn Dyer took on a new role.

Baxter swore Dyer in to serve as his new assistant police chief in the January meeting of the Blairsville City Council.

A Union County native, Assistant Chief Dyer is the son of parents who owned a construction business.

"I graduated Union County High School, grew up in Choestoe and been here my whole life," said Dyer, adding that he's always had a desire to

work in law enforcement.

"I had the opportunity to go to Mandate School, so I sent myself through Mandate School to get certified to become a police officer," he said.

The Basic Mandate Law Enforcement program at Georgia Public Safety Training Centers is required of all persons who aspire to enter the field of law enforcement in the State of Georgia. It is an 11-week program and consists of 408 hours of rigorous training.

Dyer said he started with the Towns County Sheriff's Office in 2008, then moved over to the Blairsville Police Department on a part-time basis. "They had a full-time position come open in 2009 and I took it, and I've been here ever since."

Currently, Dyer works full-time for the BPD and part-time for the Union County Sheriff's Office, with no plans to change at present.

"The promotion changes some things," said Dyer. "I'll be working strictly day shift. That's the major change, which will be good. I've been on nights since I started, pretty much. It'll be good to be on day shift."

"We've got an evening shift and a night shift, and I've been on one of the two ever since I started. The night shift is from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. The evening shift is 2 p.m. to 2 a.m. I've worked those two shifts pretty much my whole career until now."

Assistant Chief Dyer said he realizes that, when he is dealing with the public, it's

usually not their best day.

"I always treat everybody like I want to be treated," he said. "I treat everybody with respect. One of my guys said, 'Be nice until you can't be nice anymore.' That's what one of the guys told me when I got trained years ago, and that's the way I try to be."

"I understand, sometimes, the people we deal with, we're dealing with them at their worst moment, and you've got to have compassion for people. You've got to treat people (respectfully), because if you don't, they'll treat you bad real quick."

"If I can help them, I help them. If I can't, I can't. But I treat them the best I can. That's my philosophy."

When it comes to his former boss, retired Police



Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Shawn Dyer outside Police Headquarters at Blairsville City Hall. Photo by Mark Smith

Chief Carroll, Dyer said he was probably the best boss he'd ever had. "I learned a lot from Chief Carroll," said Dyer. See Dyer, Page 2A

Firefighters complete structure fire training in brand new facility



Union County Firefighters took part in the first-ever training at the new live fire burn facility behind Fire Station No. 1 on Saturday, Jan. 19. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Members of the Union County Fire Department practiced a live-fire scenario behind Fire Station No. 1 on Saturday, Jan. 19.

The purpose of the training was to prepare firefighters for real structure fire situations and assist them in figuring out how to work as

a team and properly handle the situation.

Each of the firefighters who came to the training was put into one of six separate teams, with each team having to rotate into position depending on the task at hand.

One of the tasks was to go into a burning room inside the new training facility, made with high-quality steel shipping containers, and watch how the

smoke developed and the fire moved.

After sitting in the room for a few moments, firefighters put the fire out, and the team had to quickly evacuate the building and check in to ensure that no one was left behind in the burn building.

"It's very important for people to understand how, when a fire gets in something

Plane crash survivor Whitener sees progress in goal to walk again

By Shawn Jarrard
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Brittany Thomas Whitener still has a long way to go in her recovery, but she is in good spirits and working hard at the Shepherd Center for Spinal Cord & Brain Injury Rehabilitation in Atlanta.

She and her husband Junior have been keeping people updated on her progress at the "Brittany Whitener Updates" Facebook page, complete with descriptions of her various rehabilitation exercises alongside photos and videos chronicling her journey.

Whitener suffered a broken neck and back from the impact of a plane crash that occurred on Dec. 19, 2018, off Kings Road, less than one-half nautical mile from the Blairsville Municipal Airport.

She had to be cut out of the plane and airlifted to Northeast Georgia Medical Center that night, where she underwent several emergency surgeries before being transferred to the intensive care unit of the



Brittany Thomas Whitener making a victory pose as she recovers at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta. Photo/Facebook

hospital. Whitener transitioned to Shepherd more than a week later, on Dec. 28, and she has been hard at work ever since to gain more strength and usage of her legs.

Her routine consists of regular workouts, including lifting weights, leg exercises, bicycling, stretching, getting out of and into her wheelchair from the floor and more.

She's even been using special machines to help stand and walk, and Whitener is making remarkable progress toward meeting her goal of walking on her own again. In a recent interview with Channel 2 Action News, Whitener offered a glimpse into some of the circumstances surrounding the Dec. 19 plane crash. See Whitener, Page 2A

Naftzger arrested four and a half hours away in North Carolina

By Shawn Jarrard
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THOMASVILLE, NC – Fugitive from justice Donald Eugene Naftzger, 70, of Blairsville, was taken into custody without incident in Thomasville, North Carolina, on Wednesday, Jan. 23, according to the Union County Sheriff's Office.

Thomasville is about four and a half hours northeast of Blairsville in Davidson County, North Carolina.

"He had gone into a bank up there to cash a check, and one of the local tellers recognized him from our Facebook post,"



Donald Eugene Naftzger said UCSO Lt. Daren Osborn. "They called 911, and local

police arrived, ran him and arrested him.

"He was taken into custody without incident, and he has waived extradition. We're in the process of getting him extradited back to Georgia."

Naftzger recently bonded out of the Union County Jail after having been there for more than a year on felony charges of child molestation and sexual battery for allegedly molesting his 2-year-old grandson, according to the Sheriff's Office.

The Sheriff's Office realized Naftzger was on

Chamber hosts Awards Night Banquet, welcomes new board officers

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce held its 2019 Chamber Awards Night banquet on Thursday, Jan. 24, at the Union County Community Center.

"We're recognizing the outgoing board members, we're introducing the new board members, and we're going to recognize our Ambassador of the Year," said Chamber President Steve Rowe. The chamber also recognized the Business of the Year in the meeting.

Following the official opening of the event, guests were treated to a banquet of garden salad, sirloin steak, grilled chicken, roasted potatoes, steamed broccoli and green beans. Cheesecake and coffee topped off the meal.

Rowe started the awards event with recognitions of distinguished members and ex-officio Chamber Board members Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris and Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley.

Rowe also introduced Dr. Renee Deibert, site director of the Blairsville Campus of North Georgia Technical College, "but more importantly, she is the 2019 Chairman of the Board of the Chamber of Commerce," said Rowe.

Rowe introduced Chris Wadle, now the past chairman, and table sponsors Benchmark Physical Therapy and United Community Bank, then turned the banquet meeting over to



New Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce Chair Renee Deibert accepting a gavel from Immediate Past Chair Chris Wadle on Jan. 24. Photo by Mark Smith

Wadle. Wadle started off recognizing three board members who are stepping down: Rick Siefken for three years' service; Marcie Culpepper for five years' service; and Doug Davenport for five years' service.

Joey Swanson of WoodmenLife Insurance was recognized as a past chairman for 10 years' service with the chamber.

"He's been a great support for us behind the scenes, to have a stable chamber throughout all these years, throughout the ups and downs," said Wadle. "He's been on board since 2008 – just rolled off in 2018. It's awesome to have had somebody like that to lean on in our community."

Swanson shared his gratitude with the chamber and

attendees that evening. "I have really enjoyed the opportunity that I've had to give back to the community," said Swanson. "What an honor to be here this many years later."

The official "passing of the gavel" then took place as Wadle called Deibert up to the podium to accept the chairman's gavel from him.

"I'm really excited to officially pass the gavel to Dr. Renee Deibert," said Wadle, to a large round of applause.

"As you look back to your role as chairman of the Board of Directors, please, please remind yourself that all the wonderful things that have been done in your tenure as chairman wouldn't have been

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UCSO searching for Hess, wanted in 2017 home invasion

By Shawn Jarrard
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The Union County Sheriff's Office is seeking the public's help in locating Alan Shane Hess, 31, of Salisbury, North Carolina, wanted locally in connection with a 2017 home invasion.

Hess is facing charges of home invasion in the second degree; robbery by force; aggravated assault; three counts of burglary in the first degree; false imprisonment; four counts of cruelty to children in the third degree; and four counts making

a false statement, according to court records.

Following his February 2017 arrest and subsequent indictment, he spent a year and a half in the Union County Jail before bonding out on his charges in August of 2018, said UCSO Lt. Daren Osborn.

After failing to appear for a court appearance last fall, a judge issued a bench warrant for Hess' arrest, and Union County investigators have been searching for him ever since.

Authorities believe him to be hiding in or around Salisbury, North Carolina, said



Alan Shane Hess

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