

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, February 13, 2019

## Union General ready to move on after \$5 million DOJ settlement

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The U.S. Department of Justice announced on Feb. 6 that Union General Hospital had agreed to pay a \$5 million settlement "to resolve allegations that it violated the False Claims Act by engaging in improper financial relationships with referring physicians."

These allegations stemmed from the findings of an independent internal compliance investigation commissioned by the hospital in 2016 following the arrest of former hospital CEO Mike Gowder on unrelated prescription drug fraud charges.

Resulting from the internal investigation, the hospital learned that, between 2012 and 2016, it had been out of compliance with part of a federal law requiring that all

physicians be contracted for work billed through Medicare.

Infractions included payments to several physicians for services rendered outside contractual relationships, such as the retention of doctors to work on-call hours without a contract.

Following discovery of the infractions, the Board of Directors of Union General replaced most of the hospital's executive team, instituted "a robust new compliance program," and installed other safeguards "to protect the integrity of the hospital and its ability to provide the highest quality of care to Union County residents," according to a board statement.

After receiving the results of the complete investigation in 2016, the hospital self-reported the period of noncompliance to the DOJ, which in turn



Physicians and medical staff at Union General Hospital pose for a photo to show their solidarity in support of the hospital.

announced the settlement on Feb. 6, 2019.

Included in the \$5 million settlement is the amount billed to Medicare for the services of physicians who were not contracted by the hospital,

plus a multiplier of this amount serving as a punitive measure.

Retiring CEO Lewis Kelley said the hospital paid the settlement out of its general fund last month, and he added that the hospital is still

financially sound.

"The No. 1 thing that we would like to share with the public is that we're glad that this is behind us, because this has been looming out there for close to two and a half years

now," said Kelley. "We're glad to put it behind us and glad to move forward."

"We had a Five-Star status last year, Chatuge's got

See UGH, Page 2A

## Firefighters respond to Kimsey Street fire in Downtown Blairsville



Union County Firefighters attacking the Kimsey Street blaze across multiple fronts on Friday, Feb. 8. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Two sheds caught fire behind a residence on Kimsey Street in Downtown Blairsville on Friday, Feb. 8, filling the afternoon air with rolling black smoke.

One of the first people to report the fire to 911 Dispatch was Brandy Bailey of Tanyard Branch Apartments, situated right across the street from where the fire occurred.

"I was going outside to throw some trash away in our dumpster, and when I came

outside, I saw a black smoke cloud over the apartments," said Bailey. "And I'm like, 'What the heck?' I looked over and there was a fire just blazing, and I heard a big boom."

Other witnesses also reported hearing booms and popping sounds, though explosions are common enough in structure fires, as combustible items such as aerosol cans, gas cans, tires and more react to the intense heat of a fire.

Fortunately, no one was hurt, as nobody was in either shed at the time, and the main house remained unscathed.

"The emergency response was incredible," said Bailey. "The Fire Department got there within five minutes, and they acted fast, so I'm very pleased with how they acted. They got it quick before it hit the house."

Union County Fire Chief David Dyer was also pleased with how his firefighters worked the scene, getting the fire out as quickly as possible before it could spread.

"If that fire had gotten any bigger, it would have possibly caught that house on fire," said Dyer. "It's a shame

See Fire, Page 3A

## Carlton Colwell, 92, reflects on political career, national politics

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Carlton Colwell's legacy surrounding his 31 years as a representative in the Georgia General Assembly remains apparent to this day, even though he retired from politics nearly a quarter century ago.

Georgia 515, North Georgia Technical College Blairsville Campus, the Carlton H. Colwell Probation Detention Center – these are just a few of the many lasting contributions attributed to Colwell's influence in the mountains.

What people might not remember is the reason Colwell ran for elected office in the first place all those years ago in the 1960s. He wanted to fix Union County's roads.

Nowadays, snow and ice are the biggest impediments to travel here in the mountains, causing roads to become slick and uncertain at various times during the winter months.

But in Colwell's youth, the biggest problem with roads was all the mud, which affected the county year round.

Union County was "in mud up to its knees" back then with dirt roads, according to



Carlton Colwell, who will celebrate his 93rd birthday this June, helped put Union County on the map during his time as a state legislator.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Colwell. These roads would get bogged down for days after a rain or a snow, making it difficult and sometimes even impossible for cars and school buses to get where they were going.

Unfortunately, the Georgia Department of Transportation was not doing

much to help the situation at the time, despite having active local representation.

Before Pat Colwell Sr. died, he served as the GDOT supervisor for Union County, Blairsville, having moved back from Atlanta following a 10-year stint at General Motors.

See Colwell, Page 2A

## Blairsville PD to get standalone police station next to City Hall

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Sometime in the near future, the Blairsville Police Department will be moving out of Blairsville City Hall and into the vacant building next door.

The move was announced in the Feb. 5 regular meeting of the Blairsville City Council.

It will be some time before the Police Department is ready to set up shop there, but already, the building at 96 Blue Ridge Street has been mostly gutted in preparation for renovation.

The city acquired the building for \$240,000 out of its general fund in October 2018 with the idea of tearing it down to add more downtown parking, which is at a perpetual premium.

Following a recent meeting of the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority, however, City Councilman Tony Dyer, who joined the DDA Board in January, approached Mayor Conley with the idea of converting the building into a police station.

"We didn't go too much



Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter and Mayor Jim Conley standing in front of the future site of the Blairsville Police Department.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

further on the conversation at that time, but then I mentioned something to Chief (Michael) Baxter, and he said, 'We need some privacy,'" said Conley. "When they are interviewing or interrogating (witnesses or suspects), they need their privacy."

their squad room is the only room they have for interviews, and there is no privacy there. You can hear the conversation, and some of their conversations I don't want to hear."

The city has used detainee labor to get the building ready to be remodeled, which will

See Police Station, Page 2A

## Join the Whiteners for a Benefit Dinner & Auction this Saturday, Feb. 16

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The friends and family of Brittany and Junior Whitener are hosting a public Benefit Dinner & Auction for the couple on Saturday, Feb. 16, starting at 3 p.m. inside the Haralson Memorial Civic Center in Blairsville.

Folks who attend will be able to purchase a barbecue plate and take part in an extensive Auction and Cake Walk to benefit Brittany Thomas Whitener, the sole survivor of the Dec. 19, 2018, plane crash off Kings Road near the Blairsville Municipal Airport.

Whitener suffered a broken neck and back in the crash that killed three of her best friends, and as she fights to regain her independence, she said she realizes just how fortunate she is to be alive.

"Not many people get a second chance at life, and I definitely have a second chance at life," said Whitener.

She has made remarkable progress toward recovering from her injuries at the Shepherd Center for Spinal Cord & Brain Injury Rehabilitation, and though she acknowledges the long road ahead, Whitener remains optimistic about her chances of walking again unaided.



Junior and Brittany Whitener

"I have confidence that I will, just because of me doing everything that they've told me to do, and putting 110 percent into it and wanting to walk again," said Whitener. "It's something that you have to want in order to achieve it."

On Feb. 7, she transitioned to the Day Program at Shepherd. As part of the program, she's staying in a nearby apartment so she can continue her therapies, but she's able to come and go as she pleases so long as she completes her therapy sessions.

Whitener views the transition as a graduation of sorts, like she's moved on to the next level in accomplishing her ultimate goal of getting back to

work helping others.

Prior to the accident, Whitener worked as a Certified Medical Assistant taking care of people at Aarston Stone Medical Campus in Blue Ridge.

"I love what I do because I get to help people on a daily basis," said Whitener. "Whether it's just putting a smile on their face or by talking to them or helping them get medication through patient assistance programs or whatever."

"I definitely want to go back to work because I'm used to helping people, and I've been put in a position where people are helping me now, so it's time for me to go back to work and start helping others again."

See Whiteners, Page 6A

Vol. 110 No. 07 Inside

4 Sections 28 Pages

Arrests 7A  
Weather 3D  
Churches 5C  
Thurs: Cloudy Hi 58 Lo 46 Classifieds 4A  
Fri: Rain Hi 58 Lo 35 Opinion 5D  
Sat: Cloudy Hi 47 Lo 27 Legals 6C  
Obits 2B  
Sports 2B

**SPORTS**

**BASKETBALL STATE Tourn.**  
Feb. 15 Boys - @ Spencer TBA

**WRESTLING STATE Tourn.**  
Feb. 13-16 Macon Centreplex

**Two Jima Remembrance**  
Feb 18 10 AM  
New Towns County Rec. Center

**UCHS / MECHS**  
2019 STAR  
Students and Teachers

See page 1C

**CELEBRATE ARBOR DAY**  
February 15th

See page 2C