

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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UCHS, community partners team up to honor Class of 2020

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union County High School has teamed up with several community partners to honor this year's graduating seniors, the Class of 2020, with signs around the square and slides on billboards all over town.

With the coronavirus pandemic resulting in the cancellation of on-campus instruction from mid-March on, the high school wanted to do something special to recognize its seniors.

After all, they've missed out on so much of their senior year — seeing friends on a daily basis, in-person interactions with teachers and administrators, extracurricular activities like clubs and sports, prom, U-lympics and more.

"So, the UCHS

administration designed signs with help from our yearbook staff," High School Principal C.T. Hussion said. "We got them (Friday), and we put them out with the help from the Chamber of Commerce. We obtained permission to put them out from Mayor Jim Conley and Commissioner Lamar Paris."

Steve Rowe is president of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, and he got involved with the project after looking around for something to do to honor this year's graduating seniors.

"When speaking with C.T. at the school system, we learned that there had been signs ordered for each student, so we offered to help place the signs," he said. "C.T. and the rest of the staff are working hard to make this a memorable experience for the seniors. I would like to say 'hat off' to UCHS, and congrats

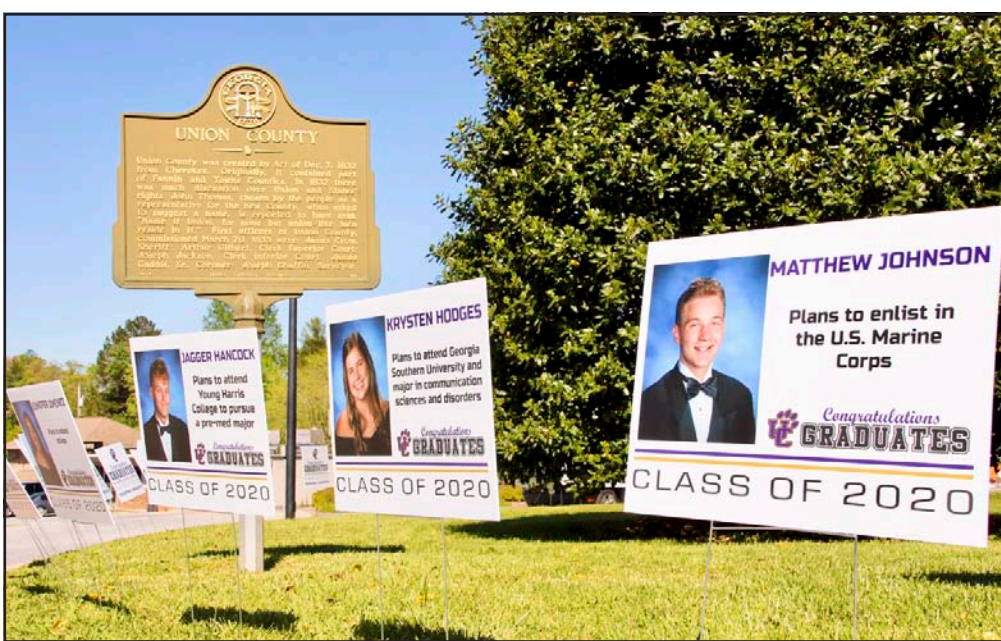
to the Senior Class of 2020."

Rowe and UCHS Assistant Principal Wesley Garrett placed the signs in the ground around the Historic Courthouse and along the frontage of North Georgia Beverage in Downtown Blairsville Friday, as both entities consented to the school sticking the signs in their yards facing the street.

The signs feature slides of each of the 191 graduates, displaying their senior pictures and plans after high school. Reportedly, several seniors and their families traveled to the exhibition over the weekend to see the slides, take pictures with them and appreciate the community support.

Additionally, an anonymous donor reached out to the high school about purchasing space for the senior

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The Union County High Class of 2020 got a nice surprise when the school displayed their senior pictures and plans after graduation in Downtown Blairsville last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Blairsville PD makes arrest in Circle K masked armed robbery

By Shawn Jarrard
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Wearing a mask during the cancellation of on-campus instruction from mid-March on, the high school wanted to do something special to recognize its seniors.



Kevin Michael Foley is the commission of the crime, and he remains in jail without bond. He has been charged only

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

The Police Department made quick work cracking the case thanks to good old-fashioned police work and tips provided by the community.

"We did act on a tip received, and upon following up and doing an investigation, we were able to arrest Mr. Foley on an armed robbery charge," Bear said. "We appreciate all the tips that were received."

Tips started pouring in after Baxter enlisted the help of social media users and North Georgia News readers in identifying the armed robber via security cam images published the weekend the crime was

See Robbery Arrest, Page 2A

Local twins 'The Olas' fight virus with masks for health care workers

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

When COVID-19 first started making its way through Georgia, putting the entire state on lockdown, local twin sisters Exola Rich Gates and Leola Rich Lyons sprang into action, using their seamstress skills to provide much-needed masks to those on the frontlines of the pandemic.

At 82 years young and known to family and friends as "the Olas," the siblings initially planned on riding out the virus along with everyone else. But in a case of divine intervention, the new calling came to their attention at church.

According to Gates, a fellow churchgoer approached to ask if she performed alterations. Upon answering yes, Gates was asked if anyone had requested that she and her sister produce cloth masks for



Twin sisters Leola Rich Lyons and Exola Rich Gates of Blairsville have made hundreds of masks for people, including health care professionals at Scottish Rite Children's Hospital and WellStar of Atlanta. Photo/Submitted

health care professionals. That simple query got the ball rolling. They performed a quick instruction for making instructions, and the rest is history. Since early April, the sisters, who live together in native home of Blairsville, have manufactured over 300 masks — a number that grows each day. See Masks for Workers, Page 6A

Georgia leads the way as other states start to reopen

By Shawn Jarrard
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Gov. Brian Kemp began allowing many businesses he'd closed earlier in the pandemic to voluntarily reopen starting April 24. Granted, these businesses must follow strict health guidelines to stay open, but now, a majority of states have begun to take Georgia's lead.



Gov. Brian Kemp perhaps even on a downward trend, despite new cases still being diagnosed and increased testing that now includes all symptomatic individuals, regardless of need for hospitalization.

Of course, the situation could get worse again at a moment's notice if people fail to embrace the recommended guidelines, but as of press time, the seven-day moving average on the state's COVID-19 Daily Status Report appeared to show a declining level of new infections.

The main caveat here is that data during this reporting period "may be incomplete due to the lag in time between when the case was tested and/or reported and submitted to the Georgia DPH for reporting purposes. This delay can vary depending on the testing facility and/or jurisdiction."

Furthermore, the oft-cited model put out by the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation shows that Georgia reached its peak in daily COVID-19 deaths a month ago, at 100 deaths on April 7.

The same model says Georgia passed its peak resource use on April 28, utilizing 1,805 of 8,323 hospital beds available

specifically for COVID patients, including 434 of 590 available ICU beds. Three hundred and ninety ventilators were needed on April 28, with no shortages reported.

Locally, between April 20 and April 27, Union County more than doubled its COVID-19 confirmed cases from 15 to 31, but the total number of positive infections remained steady at 31 through May 3, even with expanded testing.

The first two days at the state's new drive-up collection site at the Towns County Health Department featured 17 and 25 specimens collected respectively for a total of 42 tests.

These numbers may seem low for a multi-county collection site, which sees Union, Towns and Rabun residents, but the Department of Public Health said it is "scheduling the people who are calling and determined to need testing."

It's important to note that the state is still correcting reporting errors, last week reassigning two positive cases and one death away from Union. Also, testing from the area has experienced delays in some cases according to independent reports made to the North Georgia News.

The governor and health experts at the state and federal levels have called on Georgians and Americans broadly to continue well-established COVID best practices, such as facial coverings in public, social distancing, and hygiene habits like frequent handwashing and sanitation.

Kemp announced on April 30 that he would not extend his statewide shelter-in-place order, which went into effect April 3 and expired at midnight on May 1.

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Nursing homes remain vigilant in fight against virus

By Shawn Jarrard
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Assisted living facilities house some of the most at-risk individuals for COVID-19, due to the close proximity of residents and their increased likelihood of having weakened immune systems brought on by age and chronic health conditions.

That's why, when it comes to the health and wellbeing of residents and employees in the Union County and Chatuge Regional nursing homes, Union General Health System wants the community to know it's doing everything it can to keep people safe.

Even so, the invisible nature of the highly contagious coronavirus, with its nasty habit of spreading asymptotically in many people, makes absolute protection against the disease impossible. But



Leslie Daniel and Julia Barnett of Union General Health System

the Health System continues to take steps to slow the spread in its facilities. Gov. Brian Kemp

declared a public health state of emergency on March 14. At that time, the Health System

See Nursing Homes, Page 2A

US attorneys urge decade behind bars for Gowder, Heaton

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

More than four years after their highly-publicized arrests and seven months out from their multi-count convictions for prescription drug crimes, two Blairsville men will finally learn their fate when a federal judge hands down their sentences later this month.

On May 28, former hospital CEO Mike Gowder and physician James Heaton will



Mike Gowder

James Heaton

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RODEO

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