

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, December 15, 2021

'Shop with a Cop' puts presents under local Christmas trees

By **Jeremy Foster**
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Dec. 11, the Blairsville Police Department teamed up with Union County Family Connection and community volunteers to take less fortunate children Christmas shopping for gifts at the Blairsville Walmart.

"This year marked our 21st annual Shop with a Cop extravaganza," Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter said. "Today, we have taken 125 local kids who are enrolled in Union County Schools shopping for Christmas, and it brings us so much joy."

"Each child was allotted \$250 to buy what they wanted, and we also gave each family a \$150 grocery

card as well so no one goes hungry."

Added Baxter, "We live in a great community that supports this program. I would rather call this 'Shop with the Community,' because they are so instrumental in helping to fund this program, and we could not do it without them because, (within reason), this will be a lot of the kids' Christmas as far as this will be the only thing they get, and it is very important that we help them with that."

Members of the local Fellowship of the Hills Church were also on hand to help with the effort, providing food baskets for each family to take home with them as a bonus.

"We have been involved with this program for the past almost 10 years by handling the

food portion for the families," Pastor Marty Duncan said. "What we do is collect food throughout the course of the past several months, and we bag them up as our 'Bundles of Joy' that we like to call them."

"We also provide them the opportunity to bring the bag back at any time to the church, and we will refill it for them, and we provide bags of food for the Family Connection. On Christmas Eve, we will be delivering bags to various families throughout our community, so we try to do a good 300-plus bags every year to those in need."

"The Christmas season can be the most difficult time for some people, and it is an opportunity for us to give back to the community

See *Shop with a Cop*, Page 6A



A Blairsville Police Officer shopping with a kid from Union County Schools during the Dec. 11 Shop with a Cop for Christmas Program. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Vogel Christmas program highlights reason for season in '21

By **Brittany Holbrooks**
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Even as the rain poured down around Vogel State Park, the 19th Annual Christmas Tree Lighting and Program went underway without a hitch. The turnout was excellent, with people of all ages coming out to celebrate the holidays in a friendly, safe atmosphere.

People began to arrive around 4 p.m., and rather than taking a hayride to the ballfield, they gathered beneath the shelter of the Lake Trahlyta Pavilion, mingling and grabbing cookies and hot chocolate or cider provided by local church volunteers before the program began.

The weather from the parking lot may have been off-putting, with a multitude of gray clouds overhead, but that was all easily forgotten as soon as guests made it to the pavilion.

According to longtime Event Organizer Janet Hill, volunteers had been there since 12 p.m., moving everything from the ballfield to the pavilion once it became clear that the weather was not going to provide a clearer evening.

They transported lights and tinsel, trees and wreaths to decorate the area under the pavilion, and brought electric candles, since lighting real ones was not feasible with the windy weather; the little artificial flames were handed out to guests upon arrival.

Will and Christi Costley, both bedecked in festive Christmas light necklaces, drove two hours to take part in the Vogel Christmas experience.

"I've been coming to Vogel for a very long time," Christi said, citing previous visits during Christmas in her childhood. Meanwhile, her husband was in slightly more unfamiliar territory.

"This is my second time coming here," Will said. "The first time was with you," he directed toward Christi with a smile.

The couple has plans to make Vogel's Christmas celebrations a new tradition, saying that they enjoy more focus put on the true reason for the

See *Vogel Christmas*, Page 6A



Several local youths participated in a live manger scene showcasing the birth of Jesus in the 2021 Vogel Christmas Program as Justin Terry performed "What Child Is This." Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Blairsville hires new attorney, changes monthly meeting day

By **Mark Smith**
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In their regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, Dec. 7, Blairsville City Council members voted unanimously to approve Blairsville native Marvin J. Harkins to succeed David Barrett as City Attorney.

After serving five years as Blairsville City Attorney, Barrett announced in the November council meeting that he would be retiring as of Dec. 31. Therefore, Harkins will take over the legal responsibilities at City Hall starting Jan. 1, 2022.

The City of Blairsville will not be Harkins' only municipal government responsibility, as he is the attorney for the City of Young Harris as well and has no plans to leave there.



Marvin Harkins attended the Dec. 7 Blairsville City Council meeting, in which he was hired as the new city attorney to fill the shoes of retiring City Attorney David Barrett.

Photo by Mark Smith

Since the monthly council meetings for both Blairsville and Young Harris fall on the first Tuesday of each month, the Blairsville City Council voted to change its monthly

meeting day to the second Tuesday of each month to accommodate Harkins' other municipal duties.

The meeting change will

See *City of Blairsville*, Page 2A

Union General breaks ground on medical office building

By **Mark Smith**
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Anyone motoring along Pat Haralson Memorial Drive near the intersection of Deep South Farm Road in Blairsville will notice a large swath of land being cleared in the vicinity of Union General Hospital.

It was revealed at the official groundbreaking ceremony on Thursday, Dec. 9, that the land is being cleared to make way for a new three-story, 42,000-square-foot medical office building to serve the North Georgia and Western North Carolina patients of Union General Health System.

Excited about the growth the big new building will enable, the Health System

See *Union General*, Page 3A



A digital rendering of the soon-to-be constructed Medical Office Building on the Union General Health System campus in Blairsville.

Speeding leads to felony drug arrest by UCSO Traffic Unit

By **Shawn Jarrard**
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

To maximize safety on local roadways, the Union County Sheriff's Office has stepped up its traffic enforcement efforts by adding another deputy to the recently created Traffic Unit.

The Sheriff's Office began its dedicated Traffic Unit with a single deputy, Lt. Leon James, in Spring 2020.

Since then, Lt. Daren Osborn said the Sheriff's Office has noticed a marked decline in accidents and traffic violations on Blood Mountain and elsewhere in the county, and UCSO is building on its success with Lt. James by adding Deputy James Blackledge to the unit.



George Kelly Robinson

Blackledge comes to the Sheriff's Office with prior law enforcement experience. He started his employment here earlier this fall and has been patrolling with the Traffic Unit

for about a month with great results, including a recent speeding stop that resulted in a felony drug arrest.

On Friday, Dec. 3, around 4:30 p.m., Deputy Blackledge stopped a vehicle for traveling 65 mph in a 45-mph zone near the Sunrise Grocery on US 129 South, Lt. Osborn said.

During the course of investigation, Blackledge discovered that the driver, George Robinson, 51, of Sautee Nacoochee, was wanted on a felony probation violation warrant originating out of White County.

Upon conducting a visual inventory of the vehicle's contents, Blackledge noticed drug paraphernalia in plain sight, specifically two glass smoking devices

See *Drug Arrest*, Page 3A

Safe Pet Project advocates for animals with Thrift Store



Safe Pet Project volunteers were thrilled to welcome the public in their Dec. 8 Thrift Store grand opening. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By **Brittany Holbrooks**
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

As Christmas draws nearer, it is important to remember the significance of gift-giving on the lives of

others.

People are not the only ones, however, who benefit from gifts, which is why, with the advent of the brand-new Safe Pet Project, residents of Union County and the surrounding areas may find

it a bit easier to help animals, from donkeys and cattle to dogs and cats.

On Wednesday, Dec. 8, the nonprofit Safe Pet Project held a grand opening for its new thrift store located in the back

See *Safe Pet Project*, Page 2A

Vol. 112 No. 51
4 Sections 20 Pages
Weather
Thurs: Cloudy Hi 65 Lo 50
Fri: Cloudy Hi 69 Lo 54
Sat: Rain Hi 63 Lo 38

Inside
Arrests 2C
Church 3C
Classifieds 2D
Opinion 4A
Legals 2D
Obits 4C
Sports 2B

SPORTS
BASKETBALL
12/17 @ Towns Co. 7 PM
WRESTLING
12/14 Senior Night
Home 6 PM

Comprehensive Plan Public Meeting
Dec. 20
See page 5A

WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA
REMEMBER • HONOR • TEACH
Ceremony Dec. 18
See page 4B

Give the Gift of Food
See page 2A

Safe Pet Project...from Page 1A

side of 307 Cleveland Street across from the North Georgia News office.

The place has a cozy feel to it, with clean wooden slats for walls and meticulously organized clothes, jewelry, records, and other interesting finds. In fact, walking into the store instantly evokes a comfy cabin experience, with the new leather sofa, ornate rug, and massive Christmas tree at the entrance.

Safe Pet Project got its start when volunteers at other local animal advocacy organizations decided to fill in some of the gaps they noticed in animal care, and the thrift store will assist them in raising funds toward that noble end.

"Our volunteers, who have been animal advocates for years, got together and looked at what was needed in the community to supplement the Humane Society and Freedom for Fido," volunteer Tom Shidaker said. "And it came back that it was low-cost spays and neuters, microchipping, dogs' tags, really helping animals that are lost find their owners. If they need to rescue, we will take them and get a rescue involved."

To grow its capabilities and provide more care, the new group decided the best bet would be to open a thrift store as a source of steady revenue. It may have taken a while



Customers had a good time in the cozy environs of the new Safe Pet Project Thrift Store, open now on Cleveland Street in the same building as Fellowship of the Hills Church.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

for them to find a building to work out of, but when the opportunity arose, Safe Pet Project was quick to take it.

"Our racks are made by a volunteer, handmade. Our light fixtures are made by volunteers. The shelves on the wall where the jewelry is - made by volunteers," Shidaker said proudly and still a bit in awe himself.

Continuing, "Our focus is to make sure it's clean, make sure it's organized, and to try to have different things than the other thrift stores and complement what they're doing. We try to make it a little bit unique."

And Safe Pet Project made tremendous progress in the three weeks it took to clear out and tidy up the space. There is a drop-off area just next door to donate everything from lightly used clothing to small appliances, and the main floor was bustling with activity that Wednesday.

As recently as an hour after their initial opening, customers were perusing fine China and Christmas decorations, as well as folks outside who continued bringing in donations.

While the organization is still a new face among Union County's animal aid groups, having been established just this year, already, volunteers are offering services like free microchipping vouchers, low-cost spays and neuters, ID tag printing, and other financial aids.

Additionally, they volunteer for community events like "Shop with a Cop" and "Santa Paws," and the project

has caught the eye of local businesses also.

Julie Ortiz of Junebug's Consignment Cottage partnered with the thrift store as soon as she learned more about the organization and its goals, committing to donating any consignment items that do not sell.

"You couldn't ask for better people to donate to," Ortiz said. On the subject of the store itself, she was impressed: "Every time we come in, it's always clean and well-organized."

The new nonprofit has not wasted a minute in making a difference in the community.

A small pocket colony of 15 outdoor cats cared for by a local woman needed to be spayed and neutered "before the 15 turned into 30." But the cost to provide medical care for all the animals was too high.

By raising awareness through social media outlets like Facebook, the Safe Pet Project managed to find sponsors to pay for the surgeries.

"We are all about this amazing community, and we are all about collaborating with other groups," Shidaker said of fundraising and general interaction with the public. "It's about the animals. What can we as a community do to protect the animals?"

Meanwhile, at the thrift store, Manager Walter Hoth stocked business cards, pamphlets, and informational fliers at the check-out to give interested parties easy access to the organization's contact information. There was even a printed map so customers could

come back, shop, and support the Project's efforts again.

The Safe Pet Project Thrift Store is always looking for lightly worn clothing, furniture "in good shape," small appliances like kitchen utilities, houseware items, and other knick-knacks.

Currently, the organization is also searching for volunteers to help with advertisement on social media. Those who are interested in helping or donating may call 706-400-7076.

The store is open Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and more information can be found at <https://safepetproject.org/>.

"From dogs to donkeys, from cats to cows, the Safe Pet Project was created to promote health, safety and security for all domesticated animals by providing services and resources to animal owners in our community," according to the website.

"Safe Pet Project is not an animal shelter or animal rescue organization," the website continues. "Instead, our focus is to provide education, information, resources and services to animal owners in order to assist them with the various challenges of pet/animal ownership."

"In addition, we aim to collaborate with other like-minded organizations whose visions match ours of creating a better world for all domesticated animals. We feel that all animals deserve to be treated with respect, compassion and love, and the Safe Pet Project is dedicated to that mission."

City of Blairsville...from Page 1A

begin in February 2022, so the next City Council meeting will take place at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022, and then every second Tuesday of each month thereafter.

Harkins graduated from Union County High School Class of 1987 before going on to attend Young Harris College, and he got his undergraduate and jurisprudence degrees from Georgia State University.

"I don't do criminal law, I don't do divorces or anything like that," Harkins said. "I do local government law. I work for the City of Young Harris. I also do work for Fulton County still."

Moving along, the council approved the first reading of Ordinance No. 2021-04, Water/Sewer Ordinance, to include a sewer service only option. The purpose of the new ordinance is to prevent or have recourse against sewer-only customers who neglect to pay their monthly bill.

This renewed ordinance supersedes any and all previous water/sewer ordinances for the city of Blairsville.

With the renewed ordinance in place, the City of Blairsville will enter into an Intergovernmental Agreement with the Coosa Water Authority such that Coosa Water will collect both their water bill and

the city sewer bill.

Coosa Water will charge the city 2% of the total monthly sewer bill owed to the city for collecting and disbursing funds owed for the sewer bill. The agreement between the city and Coosa Water will be executed and approved at the January meeting.

In other business, the council approved the purchase of a new Ford Explorer for King Ford for the Blairsville Police Department in the amount of \$32,600. The city purchases a new vehicle every year to keep the fleet up to date.

Additionally, King Ford offered to take the Ford Explorer that was purchased new last year for Blairsville PD in trade for a brand new 2022 Ford Explorer for \$1,500, which the council unanimously approved.

Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter said King Ford assured him that they would get the vehicles in as soon as they possibly could, given the recent delays in auto deliveries due to COVID-19.

Also approved that evening was the hiring of James Zdan as a part-time airport operator at an hourly rate of \$15. Airport Manager Aaron Mannheim said Zdan would work strictly on an as-needed

basis.

Mannheim also said that the Precision Approach Path Indicator or PAPI lights that were installed about two months ago are just waiting for Federal Aviation Administration approval to be made operational.

Mayor Jim Conley said the FAA has said that they will let the city know when they can come to inspect. No time frame was given by the FAA.

Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe said over 700 people turned out for the Holly Jolly Christmas and Breakfast with Santa events at the Community Center Dec. 4. The Tour of Trees and the Gingerbread Houses are going well, too, he said.

"We've got more trees than we've ever had. We went out and bought a couple extra because the turnout was so great," Rowe said.

He also announced the Chamber Annual Awards Night will be taking place on Thursday, Jan. 20, 2022, which Rowe said is the 40th Anniversary of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber.

And finally, all alcohol license renewals in the City of Blairsville, which are all paid up and current, were unanimously approved.

Give the Gift of Food to a Senior this Holiday Season

Share the gift of a meal with home-bound senior citizens in Union County this holiday season through the Home Delivered Meal Holiday Gift Certificate Program. Purchase a Holiday Gift Certificate through the Union County Home Delivered Meal program and meals will be delivered to a senior in our program, with a card from you for the holidays.

You can provide a meal for one or meals for an entire week, month or year. The cost of one meal is \$4.03, one week is \$20.15, one month is

\$88.66, one year is \$1,063.92. All gifts are tax deductible. Checks should be made payable to Union County Senior Center, Holiday Gift Certificate program and should be mailed or delivered to: Union County Senior Center, 95 Senior Center Drive, Blairsville, GA 30512.

From Thanksgiving until New Year's Day meals will be delivered to senior citizens with a special holiday card wishing Happy Holidays from the gift giver. Food is essential for everyone, but especially for seniors who cannot shop

or cook for themselves. Our staff and volunteers deliver meals Monday through Friday. We receive Federal, state, and county funding, however, the meal cost and the demand for meals increases each year. There is always a large deficit we must make up through fund raisers and donations from churches, businesses, civic groups and community members like you. Please assist us in preserving this vital program. Thank you for making a difference in your community! For more information, call 706-439-6105.

Union General...from Page 1A



Union General Health System officials invited community stakeholders to a Dec. 9 groundbreaking for the new Medical Office Building to be built opposite Union General Hospital. Photo by Mark Smith

hosted the groundbreaking ceremony at the building site just off Hospital Road last week.

Attending the ceremony were officials with Union County Government, Union General Health System, Bank OZK, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, Brasfield & Gorrie General Contractors, and medical personnel who will be relocating to the new medical facility upon its completion.

"If it all works out, we will do the ribbon cutting next year about this same time," said Health System CEO Kevin Bierschenk, acting as master of ceremonies. "I think we're talking about 12 months, the fourth quarter of (2022)."

The board for the Health System selected Brasfield & Gorrie of Atlanta to construct the three-story project, which has been in the strategic planning stage for roughly the last two years.

"On the first floor we'll have orthopedic and sports medicine," Health System COO Michael Gay said. "On that level we'll have two X-ray rooms, a total of 20 exam rooms, a casting room, and a procedure room. And this

could accommodate up to four orthopedic surgeons."

Moving the Health System's considerable orthopedic offerings will free up space for growth within the main Union General Hospital building, Gay said.

"And on the second floor, we're going to move our Women's Health Center over there. We'll have a total of 14 exam rooms, two ultrasound rooms, and two procedure rooms," said Gay, adding that four obstetrics and gynecological doctors will be dedicated there.

Currently, the Women's Health Center is located in two different buildings on the hospital campus, Gay said, and consolidating these services into the new medical office building will create space for growth as well.

"Then our third level, we are going to go ahead and finish that level out, and it's going to be leased out for private (medical) practice, though no leases have been signed at this time," Gay said.

Expanded parking is another aim of the project, as there will be 300 additional parking spaces installed as a result

of the project.

"It helps with the growth of the medical office building, the hospital, and future growth as well," Gay said. "There's a few logistics we've got to figure out, but we know that, either way, we've got to have this additional parking."

In his remarks at the ceremony, Bierschenk said the new facility will add about 13 positions to the Union General Health System workforce.

"There's a lot of stuff happening here, so thank you very much to everybody," Bierschenk said, referring to all the people who have made the coming medical building a reality.

It was the general consensus at the groundbreaking that the new facility is fulfilling a community demand that is much needed, likewise with the two new buildings that were recently constructed at Deep South Farm Road and Weaver Road.

"One of those is literally a storage building for all of our personal protective equipment," Gay said, "things that, at the beginning of COVID, we realized we were short on, did not have enough of, and had

nowhere to store them.

"We've never had a problem with a supply chain in the past. We could order something and within three days it would be here. Of course, you can see that it's certainly not that way now. So, we had to build something on-site that would allow us to house those supplies (in bulk).

"The other building is a centralized laundry building. That laundry (building) will house our entire (laundry) system – (that is) Union General Hospital, Union County Nursing Home, Chatuge Hospital, and Chatuge Nursing Home.

"All of our laundry will run through that building," he said, adding that there is a daily run between Blairsville and Hiawassee to deliver fresh linen and pick up old linen.

The Union County Commissioner's Office assisted the Health System with paving the parking lot for the two new buildings.

Drug Arrest...from Page 1A

containing what appeared to be methamphetamine residue, Lt. Osborn said.

This gave Blackledge probable cause to search Robinson's vehicle, which resulted in the deputy finding a small bag of drugs and a handgun, Lt. Osborn said.

Robinson was arrested and charged with possession of methamphetamine, possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon – all felonies – and misdemeanor charges of possession of drug-related

objects and speeding.

At press time, Robinson was still in custody at the Union County Jail with a \$22,550 bond. If he makes bond here, he will be transported to White County to face his probation violation charge, Lt. Osborn said.

Traffic stops are a valuable tool for law enforcement because they regularly lead to arrests for numerous felony charges, including for drugs and wanted individuals from Union County and beyond, the Sheriff's Office said.

Stopping people for traffic violations also leads to

deputies finding out if vehicles have active insurance, which can be a problem for motorists who end up in accidents with people who do not have insurance.

Of course, safety is the No. 1 concern with traffic enforcement, and the Sheriff's Office would like people to know that deputies are actively working the highways to reduce accidents and promote safety, all in the name of saving lives and preventing injuries.

In the interests of safety, the Sheriff's Office advises members of the public to watch their speed and pay attention to the increased traffic volume on the roads of Union County.

Peacock introduces new series featuring local talent in 2022

Hayesville's Peacock Performing Arts Center announced the 2022 schedule for the performance series, Scribes on Stage. The brainchild of writer, author, and actor-playwright Ryan Hunter, a Peacock stage veteran, began as 'sketch' shows—short performances performed locally and in north Georgia in 2020. It grew to showcase local talent in western North Carolina. As it evolved, the Peacock seized it as an opportunity to expand its offerings.

Hunter and the Peacock's Artistic Director Laurel Adams shaped and nurtured it into reality. The first performance, in the fall of 2021, entitled It's All Greek, was written by Hunter and directed by Adams. The series will continue into the new year.

"It uses a 'readers theater' format, engaging both new and experienced performers," Adams explained. "The 2022 series will consist of four performances."

Hunter and Adams are working with a group of local writers and storytellers to bring area talent to the main stage. Poets Mary Ricketson, Raven Chiong, and Car-



Ryan Hunter

roll S. Taylor, actor Richard Cary, writers Bob Grove and Sandy Benson, and storyteller Kanute Rarey are putting together an assortment of shows, including Hayesville's Got Talent! in January, An Evening of One-Act Plays in April, Appalachian Tales in July, and Writers Speak Up in September.

The January 29 Hayesville's Got Talent! showcases homegrown performers of all ages in a variety show format, including singer-songwriters, poetry and prose writers, and storytellers.

Scribes on Stage 2022 captures the magic of the



Laurel Adams

mountains and the talents of local performers, reinforcing the Peacock Performing Arts Center as a regional hub of community and cultural activity and providing entertainment for Western North Carolina and North Georgia residents. It is a great series, full of surprises.

The theater is located at 301 Church Street, Hayesville, NC. Tickets will be available at the box office. For information: officemgr@thepeacocknc.org or 828-389-2787.

The Peacock is a non-profit community theater and an Equal Opportunity Employer and Provider.

Shop with a Cop...from Page 1A



Volunteers with Fellowship of the Hills Church presented refillable food bags to families of children participating in the 2021 Shop with a Cop.
Photo by Jeremy Foster

and expect nothing in return. Like our Lord did, we want to help provide salvation for each and every one of us and be that church that gives back the gift of love.

“Not only are we providing for their table, but we hope we can provide for them spiritually, ensuring what the true meaning of Christmas is through Christ.”

Family Connection Coordinator Katy Jones said her organization puts in a lot of hard work with the various shopping programs made possible by community support, with planning and coordination

efforts starting in October.

“When we get to come shopping with the kids and see how much it means to them and how appreciative they are, it really does bring me to tears,” Jones said. “Our community is amazing, and it is really touching to see how these kids are very selfless, as they do not spend their entire money on themselves.”

“Some kids buy food for their families, and some buy gifts for other people that they want to feel special. We actually have to encourage them sometimes to shop for themselves, and that is very heartwarming.”

“We receive referrals through the school system from teachers and counselors for this project, and we are humbled to know that we see it in our community that if we ask for help with the things that these children need, they will step up.”

Various volunteers, from local law enforcement agencies to the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club and Safe Pet Project, teamed up to chaperone the kids and mentor them during their shopping experiences Saturday, and everyone went home with a smile on their face and a happy heart.

Vogel Christmas...from Page 1A



Vogel State Park Manager Jack Becker, right, welcoming guests to the annual Tree Lighting and Christmas Program on Saturday, with organizers Mike Young and Janet Hill.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

season, Jesus, than materialistic aspects of the holidays.

Filling the pavilion was a plethora of Christmas-themed ornamentation. At the farthest end of the dock sat a small white tent with lights in the shape of snowflakes. It was there that Saint Nick sat, offering a seat to kids and adults alike and an ear to take entire lists of Christmas wishes.

Photographers stood at the ready for beautiful smiles, and candy canes and stickers awaited good little boys and girls when they were ready to step away.

In front of Santa and his line was the refreshments table, including hot chocolate – with marshmallows, of course – courtesy of Pine Top Baptist Church.

Beside them was a table full of plates of cookies, with a bit of everything available. From sugar cookies to fudge, guests could pick up what they wanted and even take seconds.

From the stage, Country Music star Justin Terry and a gospel trio performed Christmas favorites like “O Holy Night” and “Christmas Shoes.” The musical groups also played gospel hits, drawing enthusiastic clapping and soulful tears from the crowd when the latter took the time to talk about the true reason for the season.

Marietta resident Stacy Blake may have enjoyed the music the most out of the Christmas program, but the rest of it was stunning enough for her to invite friends.

“We came last year not

knowing about the Christmas program, and then this year we came back on purpose,” Blake said. “We brought some friends with us this year because we enjoyed it so much.”

As the program officially began around 5:15 p.m., organizers conducted the traditional awarding of gifts to those who had traveled the farthest, the youngest visitor, and the oldest visitor.

A family from Orlando, Florida, had driven to Blairsville to enjoy Vogel’s festivities, winning the prize at over 500 miles.

The youngest visitor was an 8-month-old boy who, despite being offered the microphone, declined any comments regarding his accomplishment. The eldest visitor was an 83-year-old woman who was enjoying celebrating her first Christmas program in Vogel State Park.

Starting things off was a recitation of the classic Christmas poem, “A Visit from Saint Nicholas,” more commonly known as “The Night Before Christmas.”

Afterward, the musical lineup returned to the stage to lead visitors in caroling, and would later do the same exclusively for the youngest members of the crowd.

The rest of the Christmas program focused on the miraculous event of Jesus’ birth. With help from local kids, a manger scene was set up on-stage, giving parents time to snap photos as Terry gently sang “What Child Is This.”

Santa then read of Jesus’

birth from the Bible, sharing the true story of Christmas with all before the countdown to the tree lighting.

Because the program was not held on the ballfield this year due to rain, two miniature trees were moved down to the pavilion and placed on the left and righthand corners just behind the stage to serve in the lighting ceremony.

Both trees had already been decorated with plentiful ornaments, and they glittered beautifully once the lights came on after a very brief, satisfyingly suspenseful countdown.

To close the evening out, the lights were shut off save for the electric candles handed out upon arrival. The flickering imitation flames stood out like fireflies inside the pavilion as everyone sang “Silent Night.”

When the lights came back on, Justin Terry returned to the stage one last time for a final song as guests bought CDs and took home the last of the cookies.

Almost immediately, volunteers began scurrying to put away the hard work they had spent hours setting up for a few hours of worship and merriment – and it was more than worth the effort.



Santa Claus spoke on the birth of Jesus at Vogel State Park Dec. 11 as guests listened while enjoying hot cocoa and cookies.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks