

North Georgia News

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Vogel Park Christmas persists despite bad weather, COVID

By Shawn Jarrard
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Despite lower than usual attendance this year, the annual Vogel State Park Christmas Program was both joyous and triumphant Saturday, as neither COVID-19 nor a blowing rain and chilly temperatures could put a damper on the spirit of those gathered.

The program began 18 years ago and typically takes place at the ballfield across from the Great Tree, complete with hayrides, live music, volunteer-staffed tents handing out hot cocoa, cider and cookies, visits with Santa, and bonfires placed for people to assemble around for heat.

But 2020 has seen a great

deal of change from established norms, so this year's program looked a bit different.

For starters, the evening event was hosted in two parts: under the Lake Trahlyta pavilion, providing clear views for parked attendees who tuned in to the Main Christmas Program via FM radio; and around the ballfield at the Great Tree for a "Joy Land" drive-thru experience.

As always, the Friends of Vogel State Park worked hard decorating the park for the Christmas season, and volunteers from over a dozen area churches came together Dec. 12 to work traffic, staff "Joy Land" tents and host a cheer-filled live music show for guests.

Visitors were treated to some pre-session music and singing in the leadup to the main show, which started with annual organizer Janet Hill and Assistant Park Manager Mikayla Murphy welcoming people to the program.

The singing roster featured a wide array of talent, including Justin Terry, Debra Perry & Jaidyn's Call, Mike and Cheri Young, and Jim and Linda Cox, who collectively brought the spirit of Christmas to Vogel State Park that night.

In lieu of clapping, parked and socially distant attendees offered feedback by flashing their lights and honking their horns to show appreciation for the musical performances.

Santa Claus attended the event to share the real "Reason for the Season," reciting the Birth of Jesus as told in the Gospel of Luke. Pastor Justin Jarrett read "The Night Before Christmas," and show hosts put out a call for everyone to get out their flashlights.

Normally, the Vogel Christmas event features a candle lighting ceremony in which attendees and organizers unite in singing "Silent Night." Due to COVID-19, they decided to use flashlights instead of handing out candles among cars.

Next, all programmed singers took to the stage to perform "We Wish You A Merry Christmas (and a Happy See Vogel Park, Page 6A



James Harper aka Santa Claus told The Christmas Story at Vogel Saturday, assisting annual organizer Janet Hill, right, with the program. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Blairsville Boy Scouts celebrate successes in pandemic year



Troop 101 Eagle Scouts, led here by Evan Bryan, presenting a painting to Scoutmaster Chris Payne and former Scoutmaster Rick Corbin Dec. 7 as a thank you for mentoring them over the years. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Boy Scouts of America Troop 101 of Blairsville met inside the activities center of First United Methodist Church of Union County, which serves as their chartered organization, to hold a Court of Honor to celebrate recent achievements

Dec. 7. Retired Chief Magistrate Johnnie M. Garmon, local member of Allegheny Lodge No. 114 F&AM and immediate Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Georgia, made an appearance at the ceremony to award Eagle Scouts of Troop 101, of which there will be eight in 2020.

"In 2018, only 6.5% of the scouts that were eligible earned the Eagle Scout Rank," Garmon said. "The biggest benefit of a young man who earns his Eagle Scout Rank is, he is trustworthy, loyal, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty and reverent. "These traits will

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Parents, kids grateful for Shop with a Cop experience

By Shawn Jarrard
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Blairsville Shop with a Cop is a massive community undertaking each year, bringing dozens of volunteers from multiple organizations together with businesses, individuals and groups providing monetary donations to make Christmas morning special for underprivileged children.

Sponsored by the Blairsville Police Department, this year's program treated a record 125 local kids to an all-about-them morning of chaperoned gift shopping to put presents under Christmas trees.

And for the many families involved, as always, it was a meaningful expression of love from their community.

Due to COVID-19, the



Union County Sheriff's Deputy Gale Bowyer assists two young Shop with a Coppers at Walmart Saturday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Saturday, Dec. 12, excursion featured a few changes from the norm. Instead of meeting at the middle school before departing on school buses to Walmart, parents and guardians drove their kids individually to

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In-person early voting started Monday; runs through Dec. 31

GBI assisting Secretary of State with 'allegations of fraud'

By Shawn Jarrard
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Early in-person voting for the General and Special Election Runoffs began Monday, Dec. 14, and will run weekdays through Thursday, Dec. 31.

Voters are deciding who will win Georgia's two U.S. Senate seats and, at the state level, who will serve as the next District 4 Public Service Commissioner.

The three weeks of early in-person voting will occur at the Union County Courthouse between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. in the Jury Assembly Room on the bottom floor, even during lunchtime.

There will be no in-person voting Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or New Year's Day, as the courthouse will be closed for those weekday holidays, and there's no Saturday voting this election.

Elections officials are asking that people make every attempt to vote early, as the possibility of bad winter weather may impact the electorate's ability to make it to the polls on Jan. 5 Election Day.

As previously reported, voters will encounter a slight procedural change upon entering the early voting area, with the Sheriff's Office conducting weapons screening via metal detector.

State law says that, excepting qualified personnel, no weapons are allowed inside



Photo georgia.gov/voting

the courthouse, and firearms specifically are prohibited within 150 feet of any polling place.

Though there have been no threats or reason to think people will bring weapons to vote, the Sheriff's Office believes the added security will put more people at ease during early voting, especially given the contentious nature surrounding the runoff elections.

The courthouse remains under a judicial order requiring guests to wear face masks, practice social distancing and submit to temperature checks before entering the building.

People uncomfortable voting in a mask may head to the polls on Election Day, as currently, facial coverings are not being required to vote at precincts, though this is subject to change.

There's also the option of requesting an absentee

ballot to mail or drop off at the Registrar's Office in the courthouse.

Absentee ballots are being automatically mailed to voters who informed the Registrar's Office they were elderly or disabled on a previous application, though all others need to apply to get their mail-in absentee ballot for the runoffs.

People may request mail-in absentee ballots by visiting https://ballotrequest.sos.ga.gov, calling the local Registrar's Office at 706-439-6016, or swinging by the office at 65 Courthouse Street.

After requesting a mailed ballot, voters can track the progress of their ballot - before and after voting - by signing up at https://georgia.ballottrax.net/voter/. Those who receive an absentee ballot but decide to vote in person should bring their mailed ballot to the polls

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Area veterans reflect on timeless lessons of WWII

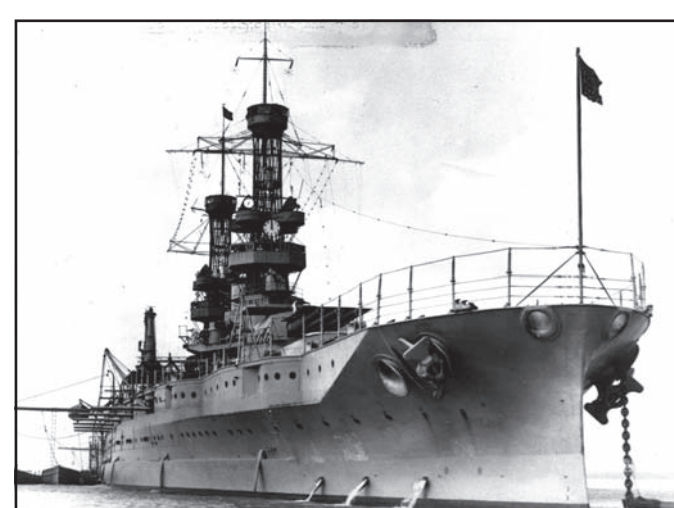
By Shawn Jarrard
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December 2020 marks the 79th anniversary of that fateful day in U.S. history - the surprise bombing of the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

On Dec. 7, 1941, shortly before 8 a.m., Japanese airplanes screamed through the sky, engaging in a one hour and 15-minute attack that led to the deaths of more than 2,400 U.S. personnel.

It was what brought the U.S. directly into the fray of World War II, resulting in a declaration of war against Japan the very next day.

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This image depicts the USS Arizona as she was in the 1920s. Note the birdcage mast and range clock over the bridge, circa 1920s. The USS Arizona now lies at the bottom of Pearl Harbor. Photo/National Park Service

Federal judge grants Heaton time to report due to COVID

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

A federal judge has granted Blairsville-based physician James Heaton's request for more time to report to prison, mere weeks before the Jan. 2 start date of his five-year stint in the medium-security U.S. penitentiary in Atlanta, court records show.

U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story issued the order Thursday in response to a request Heaton's attorneys filed Dec. 9, two days after Story postponed co-defendant Mike Gowder's prison reporting date by four months.

Both men are to report to prison no earlier than May 1, 2021, to give them a chance to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

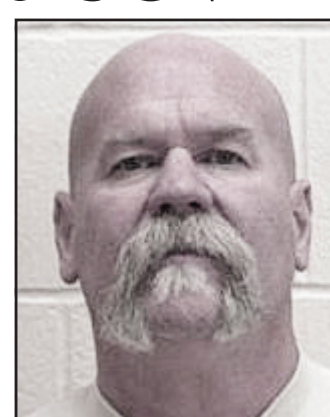
In granting his request, Judge Story noted Heaton's

age, 64, as positioning him on the "cusp of the 'older adult' age range," which puts risk "at significantly greater level for hospitalization and death if COVID-19 is contracted," per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC document referenced in the order states that adults aged 65-74 are five times more likely to require hospitalization for COVID-19 and 90 times more likely to die as a result of it.

In addition to asking for the delay in his prison reporting date, Heaton's attorneys requested that Heaton be allowed to "begin serving his sentence now on home confinement and remain on home confinement until he can be vaccinated," but Story did not address this issue.

Gowder, too, had been



James Heaton

seeking re-sentencing to home confinement to avoid the "death trap" of prison due to COVID-19, which is known to spread in congregate settings like prisons and greatly impact people with underlying health conditions, of which Gowder reported.

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