

Whitener ...from Page 1A

It's hard for Whitener to believe that a year has passed since she and her friends, whom she misses terribly, boarded the small Piper PA-28 airplane for a nighttime tour of area Christmas lights.

All had gone well that evening leading up to the crash. The friends - Whitener, Michelle Seay, Renea Greiner and Robert Atkinson - knew each other from work and were excited to be up in the air.

But something went horribly wrong during their final approach to landing, and the plane collided with a stand of trees roughly one-half nautical mile from the Blairsville Municipal Airport.

Seay, Greiner and Atkinson perished in the crash, and Whitener sustained a broken neck and back that left her paralyzed below the waist and with serious doubts she'd ever walk again.

Fortunately, Whitener's journey is a story of hope, courage and unbeatable willpower.

She has experienced tremendous progress since undergoing several emergency surgeries in the immediate aftermath of the accident and spending more than two months in the excellent care of the Shepherd Center for Spinal Cord & Brain Injury Rehabilitation in Atlanta.

For example, she was told

initially that she'd never walk again, though today, Whitener is able to walk with assistance. She's also living back at home with her husband Junior, driving, and working in her position as a certified medical assistant for Blue Ridge Medical Group.

Of course, Whitener will be first to admit she's got a long road to recovery. Because she can't yet feel her legs below the knee and has no control of her ankles, she relies primarily on her wheelchair to get around and can only walk aided by a specialized walker to help her balance.

Due to the limited use of her legs, Whitener has had to get a new vehicle outfitted with hand-operated controls so she can once more get behind the wheel, and even though she's returned to work, she's only working part time due to fatigue caused by her diminished physical capacity.

Indeed, the last year has been the most challenging in her 30 years on earth, but she fights every single day to get stronger, attending physical therapy as many times a week as she can to regain "110%" of her independence, with an ultimate goal of walking again unaided.

In the meantime, Whitener fills each new day with "mini-goals" she knows she can achieve. She's always prioritized her time in this way, it's just come in extra handy since the accident, allowing her a regular measure of success one accomplishment at a time.

"From where I was laying in ICU to now is miraculous," Whitener said. "The strength I've gained in PT and everything, it's amazing."

Added Whitener, "A lot of people don't survive an airplane crash, so coming from that to where I am now in under a year is amazing, it's phenomenal, and I'm very thankful for it."

She is also incredibly thankful to all of her supporters, cheerleaders and prayer warriors, starting with her husband, Junior, all the way through to her work family and an entire community of people following her improvements on the "Brittany Whitener Updates" Facebook page.

"There's people that message me all the time, or if I'm out in town, they'll come up to me and say, 'You don't know me, but I know you, and



Brittany and Junior Whitener with their dirt track race car at the North Georgia Speedway recently. Brittany is standing in this photo with the help of her husband.

you've been a big inspiration," Whitener said. "People just come up to me and hug me, and I'm like, 'OK, who are you?' and they'll start talking."

"That has helped me a lot mentally, people doing that, because that makes me see that I need to work harder, not just for myself, but for these people too that are looking up to me. So, it makes me work a lot harder."

And though Whitener is grateful for her second chance, she misses her friends and still can't believe it's been a whole year since the crash. She thinks of Michelle, Renea and Robert daily and remains in contact with their families, keeping them always in her thoughts and prayers.

"What really has helped me is staying in touch with the other families," Whitener said. "That has really helped me quite a bit, more than they actually know. Them accepting me afterwards - it goes back to survivor's guilt, so they have really helped."

Added Whitener, "There are some days that I just want to quit, that it's too hard and I just want to stay home. But I'll get a Facebook message from somebody I don't even know, or one of the families will text me or something, and I always get a sign to keep on going, so I do."

At this time, Whitener asks that the community continue to pray for the Seay, Greiner and Atkinson families, especially during the holidays.

As to how she will spend the one-year anniversary of the accident, Whitener said she doesn't have any plans currently

and may just stay inside. But she did say she wants to visit the crash site at some point, as she's not returned since being rescued there a year ago Thursday.

Looking back, Whitener believes the accident and the long, painful road she has experienced thus far have made her a more resilient person. She's learned a number of valuable lessons along the way, lessons she wants to share with others struggling to overcome life's difficulties.

"First of all, never give up," Whitener said. "It may not be easy, but you will get through it. It may take time, and time is the key. That was my hardest thing, was accepting how long it was going to take."

"Never be afraid to ask for help, because you're going to need it. And with the help, you will succeed 10 times more."

Many miles lay ahead for Whitener, and moving forward, she plans to continue concentrating on building the strength in her legs so she can one day realize her goal of walking again unaided. No one knows how long the process will take, but Whitener is fully committed to the challenge.

People wishing to support Whitener can do so at the "Help Nurse Brittany Whitener" GoFundMe page set up by her employer, which at press time had only met \$5,501 of a \$10,000 goal.

Donated funds will be used to defray costs associated with Whitener's recovery, and people can find other ways of supporting Brittany on the GoFundMe page as well.

Historical Society ...from Page 1A

courthouse repairs and weather sealing, repair of the Mauney Barn, construction of a new pole barn at the Grapelle Butt-Mock House, and clearing of the Mock House lot.

Continuing, she said the Mock House had been recently pressure washed and newly painted, the brick walks at the Old Courthouse had been finished, with memorial bricks in place, and new handrails had been installed on the west and southside stairs.

Furthermore, new shakes for the Payne Cabin roof are in process, and the Payne Cabin roof repair will be the first thing on the agenda for 2020.

Darren Harper of Visit Downtown Blairsville partners with the society on various mutually beneficial initiatives throughout the year, and he received an appreciation plaque presented by Carpenter.

She also thanked outgoing board members Eva Decker, Tom Rafter and Geri O'Brien for their three years of service and welcomed new board members Jim Williams, Jason Henson and Freya Jones following their approval by unanimous membership vote.

Noe took the floor to present Lifetime Membership plaques to Cheryl Hamby Williams, and Steve and Lisa Cockerham.

And the Preservationist of the Year plaque was presented to Carpenter herself for all her hard work and dedication in marshalling the huge amount of restoration and repair work completed in 2019 on the Old Courthouse and the Mock House.

Bud Akins, one of three remaining original Historical Society founders, told the tale of how the Union County Historical Society came into



Local singer/songwriter Wyatt Espalin served as the main musical entertainment in the Dec. 10 Historical Society Christmas gathering. Photo by Mark Smith

existence in 1976.

"When the state of Georgia condemned the Old Courthouse (in the 1970s) and we had to build a new courthouse," Akins began, "they talked about it in town just tearing down the Old Courthouse and making it a crossroads."

"Well, there was a lot of people that didn't like that. So, Mrs. Edith Paris - Commissioner Paris and my wife Mary Carol's mother - as the story goes, stood between the wrecking ball and the courthouse. So, she protected the courthouse from being torn down."

As a result, the Historical Society was founded, then incorporated in 1976. The society eventually raised over \$1 million to acquire and restore the Old Courthouse building.

Local musician and songwriter Wyatt Espalin provided the entertainment during and after the meal, and he said he was pleased to be a

part of the event.

"I'm very honored," Espalin said. "I'm not really known for Christmas songs. I'm mostly an original songwriter and perform my original stuff, but this is the one time each year where I'm fine with learning other people's songs, because I love Christmas music."

To close out the event, longstanding Society Member Sam Ensley and Carpenter teamed up for a Christmas duet and sing-along, where everybody joined in to sing some old-time Christmas classics. About 60 people attended the event.

The dinner was open to society leadership, membership and guests. The View Grill Restaurant catered the event. And, of course, attendees experienced the Christmas Tour of Trees as they entered the Community Center building.

For more information on the Union County Historical Society, or to join or volunteer, call 706-745-5493.

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