

Towns County Herald

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Publication Number 635540 Volume 90 Number 14

Wednesday, February 6, 2019

Kelley retiring as Union General CEO; Bierschenk to start Feb. 25

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Union General Hospital, Inc. CEO Lewis Kelley is retiring, and his last day will be Friday, March 1.

Kelley has served in the top spot of the hospital since stepping up to fill a vacant leadership role in February 2016.

Prior to serving as chief executive officer, Kelley was the longtime administrator in charge of Chatuge Regional Hospital and Nursing Home, from which he retired in 2015.

He came partially out of retirement in 2015 to help at the Nursing Home, and he answered the call to become CEO when the hospital needed him again in 2016.

Replacing Kelley as CEO will be Kevin L. Bierschenk, who has led Dodge County Hospital as CEO since 2007. Bierschenk's first day at Union General will be Feb. 25.

"Kevin has a lot of experience," said Kelley. "All my team is still here, and I'm sure Kevin will come in and work with this team to ensure that we continue on like we're doing."

"I think the future is bright, that Union General can continue to grow and develop and hopefully be a regional draw for people."

The Board of Directors for Union General Hospital initiated the search to find Kelley's replacement after he signaled that he was ready to retire in June 2018.

"It's been a privilege to have worked with Union General Hospital, Inc.," said Kelley. "It's an incredible organization with now 1,300-plus incredible employees. We have a tremendous medical staff and offer a variety of medical services often not afforded in a rural community of our size."

"Our equipment has been maintained and upgraded on a regular basis and is as modern as you can find in any facility. The two nursing homes receive great reviews from patients and families and are an important part of our continuing care in our area."

Furthermore, both Union General and Chatuge Regional Hospitals achieved Five-Star ratings last year and scored well

on patient satisfaction surveys, and Union General has earned Chest-Pain Accreditation for two years in a row.

Other recent accolades include recognition of Union General as: the No. 2 hospital for Georgia Trend Magazine; a Leapfrog A-Rated hospital for safety; a Top 100 SafeCare hospital; and a recipient of the Women's Choice Award in Patient Care Satisfaction.

In short, Union General Hospital, Inc. has thrived during Kelley's tenure as CEO, and he's happy with how he is leaving everything.

"The organization has experienced tremendous growth over the last three years and is economically sound," said Kelley. "Fifteen additional

physicians and 13 advanced practice providers have been brought into the organization to staff our now 13 clinics that we operate.

"There has been a total growth of 34 percent overall. All we have accomplished is outstanding and remarkable, but what needs to be acknowledged is, these types of results cannot be accomplished without a team effort."

"I give all the credit for these accomplishments and results to our management team, physicians and every employee. Without the efforts of these individuals, this could not have been accomplished."

"As I depart, I will definitely miss the interaction with patients and families, employees and medical staff,



Lewis Kelley

and I am thankful and feel blessed to have been a part of this organization. I want to thank everyone for their support during the time that I've been here."

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Fairgrounds to host 'Best Band in the South' ahead of Hank Williams Jr.

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Not many bands get the opportunity to open up for a Country Music legend like Hank Williams Jr.

But one lucky and talented local band will get just such an opportunity when Bocephus himself comes to Anderson Music Hall to play a standing-room only show on Saturday, April 6.

Right now, Mike Blackwell of Blackwell Promotions, Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason and 106.1 WNGC Country Music are sponsoring a contest called "Best Band in the South," the winner of which will open for Hank Jr. in April.

Blackwell has been promoting nationally renowned concerts and talent shows for over 20 years, though this upcoming "battle of the bands" style contest will be a first for his company and the Fairgrounds.

The idea originated in what Blackwell described as a "groundswell of interest from the local Georgia music scene."

"We've had so many bands that called – I must have had 30 bands – that wanted to open for Hank Jr.," said Blackwell.

After speaking with Blackwell, Hank Jr.'s management team signaled its full support, with everyone on board recognizing the contest as a rare chance to boost a talented local group to such a



Hank Williams Jr.

prominent stage. Ultimately, the event will give each band that wants it the opportunity to put it all on the line to turn a dream into a reality.

Country Music groups looking to enter the contest will need to submit two original audio or video files and artwork to the WNGC website at YourGeorgiaCountry.com between now and Feb. 22.

All bands entering the contest should submit original songs that are of the Country Music or Southern Rock genres.

WNGC fans will be the ones voting for the 10 finalists

who will appear live on stage on March 30 to determine the overall winner of the contest.

Voting will run from Feb. 25 to March 15, and fans will be able to vote once a day throughout the voting period for their favorite submission.

Each fan who votes will also be entered for a chance to win a pair of front row seats for the Hank Williams Jr. concert.

On March 30, the 10 finalists will perform four cover songs in front of a live audience and judges at the Fairgrounds.

Playing well-known songs will help the audience to recognize each act's level of talent. See Fairgrounds, Page 6A

Indians advance four wrestlers to State Sectionals this weekend

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

All four Indians who competed at the Feb. 2 Area Tournament in Commerce qualified for the GHSA State Sectionals at the Darlington School in Rome on Friday, Feb. 8.

And if they place in the Top Six of their respective weight classes at Sectionals, they'll be heading to the GHSA Wrestling State Championships in Macon on Feb. 13.

Seniors Blaine Rogers, Tyler Swanger, and Wesley Calhoun all finished in Second Place in each of their weight classes at Area, and sophomore



TCHS senior Blaine Rogers wrestling at the Feb. 2 Area Tournament in Commerce. Photo by Chad Stack

Mayor Ordiales offers 'Year in Review' at Jan. 28 council work session



Hiwassee City Council Members Amy Barrett, Kris Berrong and Anne Mitchell in their Jan. 28 work session at City Hall. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Just before the start of the first Hiwassee City Council Work Session of 2019, on Monday, Jan. 28, Mayor Liz Ordiales asked for a moment of silence for Sally Varao, who passed away two days prior on Jan. 26.

Varao was an exemplary

local resident who contributed much more than mere time and money to the people of Towns County.

"She was such a great community person," said Ordiales.

To start the session off, Ordiales made a presentation reviewing all of the positive accomplishments that took place in Hiwassee during

2018. And it was a long list.

"This year, this has been my motto here: 'Start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible. And suddenly, you're doing the impossible,'" she said.

Ordiales started 2018 by downsizing the office staff at City Hall and the workforce at

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Movers and Shakers welcome Louder with Christian Financial Ministries

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

President of Christian Financial Rev. Robert "Bob" Louder spoke to a gathering of Mountain Movers and Shakers at the Sundance Grill on Friday, Feb. 1.

Louder describes the Christian Financial Ministries program as a "personal economic development project."

"We're going to help people learn what the Bible says about finances, how to apply it and then how to pass it on," said Louder.

Louder said he's worked with Larry Burkett, founder of Crown Financial Ministries, and Dave Ramsey, creator of Financial Peace University and host of the Dave Ramsey Show, for the last 25 or 30 years.

"Did you know, by the way, that the No. 1 cause of divorce in this country is finances? Or the lack thereof?" said Louder. "We have an opioid problem up here. That's true. And that does impact families."

"But I will tell you that the financial condition of our people up here, in this county and this city and in the Young Harris area, is every



Bob and Debbie Louder at the weekly meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers on Friday, Feb. 1, in Hiwassee. Photo by Mark Smith

bit as devastating, if not more devastating, than the opioid problem.

"Do you realize that the median income of the folks up here is just a little under \$40,000 a year? The median means that there's as many people above \$40,000 as below \$40,000. As a matter of fact, some of our minority population up here have an income of less than \$10,000 (per year).

"There are an awful lot of folks up here that are struggling. And Dave Ramsey and Crown and all the years we've worked, we've helped people all over the world, all over the United States."

"But there's never been an initiative in a centralized location to be able to help the people, the population, of a geographic area such as a

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Hit-and-run death of Randall 'Shorty' Penland still under investigation

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The ongoing investigation into the Nov. 16 hit-and-run death of Randall "Shorty" Penland is now stretching into its third month, with very little new information available to the public.

Investigators with the North Carolina State Highway Patrol continue to wait on evidence that's been at the State Crime Lab since November, even though the local district attorney put a rush order on the evidence in mid-December.

Penland, 49, of Hiwassee, was killed in what authorities have described as a "pedestrian hit-and-run accident" in Clay County, North Carolina.

The accident occurred



Randall "Shorty" Penland

around 3 a.m. on Friday, Nov. 16, on U.S. 64 in Haynesville, and the circumstances surrounding the accident remain a mystery.

Of course, it's not unusual for the Crime Lab to take a while getting results

back in individual cases, even in the event of a rush order, as it handles cases from all over the state with varying levels of priority.

And while investigators await the return of evidence in the case, they're also looking to get Penland's finalized autopsy report sometime in the next month, according to the NC State Highway Patrol.

It's the fact that the investigation is taking as long as it is that serves as little comfort to the friends and family of Shorty Penland, described as having been a hard worker who "loved big and had an unforgettable smile" in life.

Investigators have asked that people with information that is potentially relevant to the case please come forward.

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