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Shook House dedication honors local family legacy

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

At 115 River Street in Hiawassee stands an unassuming but no less charming little house, upon which hangs a plaque, just to the left of the front door, detailing briefly the lives and love of lifelong Towns County residents Garland and Zuria Shook.

If it weren't for that plaque, passersby could be forgiven for thinking the Shook House was a family residence, but the dreams behind the property are larger than any single family who might live there, and the legacy dedicated to its standing in the community larger still.

Courtesy of the City of Hiawassee and the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority, the plaque officially

dedicating the building to the Shooks was unveiled in a public event on May 4.

Interestingly, the Shook House was not where the Shooks lived and raised their family; in fact, the house was built within the last two years and donated recently to the city, which plans to use it for economic development purposes.

But first, some Shook Family history.

Garland Shook and Miriam "Zuria" Barrett first knew each other from school. The story goes that he proposed to her years later in the very same schoolyard, and the pair would go on to have six children in the span of their 47 years together.

The couple passed away some years ago - Garland in 1986 and Zuria in 1973 - and today, only two of their chil-

dren are still living, 87-year-old twin sisters Irene Land and Christine Allen, whose memories of their parents remain fresh in their minds.

Land noted that her parents were "good, Christian people" who worked hard and cared so much about their large family that they scraped their funds together and "saw the biggest portion of (their children) through school (and) some through college."

Allen agreed, noting that their hospitality was boundless and that her mother in particular "knew how to make people feel welcome." She remembers her father as "didn't do a whole lot of talking" but always had something profound to say when he did.

Regarded as another sister not by blood but by bond is

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L-R: Garland and Zuria Shook's twin daughters Irene Land and Christine Allen with Idell Shook, who married into the family decades ago. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Smith imparts tales of hope in dire circumstances



Stephen Smith accepting donations by various Movers and Shakers from William "Scotty" Scott last Friday, to go toward his "To The Nations" nonprofit. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

There are people who live their lives for the Lord and spreading His word.

And then there's Stephen Smith.

Called "superhuman" by some, Smith has an extensive list of good deeds and accomplishments to his name, most of which include solving problems on local and international levels. Right here in Hiawassee, he has taken 37 foster children

and about 15 foster families under his roof.

In Towns County, he is recognized as a former member of the Hiawassee City Council, a former Superintendent of Schools, and, on a more personal level, the proud father of Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith.

Elsewhere, from the Caribbean to Africa, Smith is a minister, a construction worker, and even a medic.

To some, especially the young individuals, he is known as "Papa Stephen," but most are pleased to simply call him a friend. To the members of "To The Nations Missions," Smith is a founder, a leader and an inspiration.

And on Friday, May 6, at the Sundance Grill, Mountain Movers and Shakers Co-Emcee William "Scotty" Scott called Smith something else: "It's like he's an angel."

The Movers and Shakers welcomed Smith as their guest speaker for the week, and in so doing, allowed dozens of other voices to be heard from thou-

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Wine Festival draws big crowds at the Fairgrounds



Crane Creek Vineyards was one nearly 30 regional wineries to welcome guests to the Second Annual Hiawassee Highlands Wine Festival over the weekend. Photo by Jeremy Foster

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

After the success of last year's initial run, the Hiawassee Highlands Wine Festival returned for a second annual event hosted at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds on Saturday, May 7.

The wine festival became widely popular among everyone who attended in 2021 and was able to grow even larger on the second go-round, being hosted this year in conjunction with the Rhododendron Festival, the latter of which will continue the next two weekends in May.

Despite cooler weather that featured sporadic rain,

people still had a great time enjoying Mother's Day weekend festivities with family by relaxing with delicious wine from nearly 30 local and regional wineries.

Also included were great food trucks and vendors, arts and crafts, souvenir T-shirts, shuttles to hotels and camps-

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Early voting now in second week, runs thru May 20

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

This week is the second of three full weeks of advanced in-person voting for the General Primary Election and Nonpartisan General Election, taking place in the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration Office, located inside Suite A of 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiawassee.

Early voting will continue weekdays from Friday, May 20, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., even during lunchtime.

About 480 voters cast ballots through the first week of early voting, including a slow day of weekend voting Saturday, May 7. With just over 10,000 active registered voters, a little less than 5% of the Towns County electorate voted during the first week of early voting.

In addition to in-person ballot casting, by the end of last week, 49 people had returned absentee-by-mail ballots of 164 requested. The last day to request an absentee-by-mail ballot is Friday, May 13, with all applications needing to be in the office by close of business day.

People too busy to cast in-person ballots during the three weeks of week-day early voting still have one more chance to participate in week-end early voting this Saturday, May 14, also from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Elections Office.

Election Day voting for both the General Primary and the Nonpartisan General Elec-



Who knew Santa Claus voted in Towns County's elections? Photo by Lowell Nicholson

tion will take place Tuesday, May 24, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the Hiawassee and Young Harris precincts of Towns County.

All voters will need to have an acceptable form of identification to cast ballots, such as a government-issued driver's license or identification card.

Voters looking to mail their ballots may pick up the two-sided "Application for Georgia Official Absentee Ballot" from the Elections Office or print one by accessing the "My Voter Page" at <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/>.

The "My Voter Page" website contains other valu-

able information, such as registration status, precinct information, downloadable sample ballots featuring all candidates up for election and political party questions, mailed absentee ballot status and voter participation history.

"Absentee ballots may be requested any time between 78 and 11 calendar days prior to Election Day," per georgia.gov. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, email as an attachment, or in-person to the Elections Office, again, no later than Friday, May 13.

People who have voted absentee-by-mail in the past

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71st Georgia Mountain Fair Parade set for Aug. 20

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Since 1951, the annual Georgia Mountain Fair Parade has drawn thousands upon thousands of people to Towns County and the City of Hiawassee, and it will do so again, for the 71st time, Aug. 20.

In preparation for the 2022 event, Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason, who's been around for 40 of those parades, chaired the latest in a series of Parade Committee meetings on May 3 in the lobby of Anderson Music Hall.

She and the rest of the volunteer committee are hoping to drum up major community support and interest in participating in the fair for everyone's enjoyment.

"The parade will start in downtown Hiawassee, come down through town and circle the Fairgrounds," Thomason said. "We're looking for floats; we're looking for horses and buggies. The Shriners, we hope, are going to participate."

"And we're giving away \$10,000 in prize money (for the Parade Float Contest). People have donated that money to the Georgia Mountain Fair, and that should encourage a lot of people to get involved, especially the different organizations at the schools."

"We don't know yet who the Grand Marshal is going to be. We have some ideas, but we haven't confirmed it."

"And then we have Rollo the Clown booked from Capital Entertainment, and he is going to actually be here for four days on the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds just strolling the grounds and doing all kinds of tricks and clown stuff (during the Fair), and so he's going to be in the parade, too."

"We think we're going to have a good one. It was a good one last year. So, we're celebrating 71 years this year."

The theme of the 2022 Georgia Mountain Fair Parade is "Surfin' USA," said Fairgrounds employee Miranda Burnette, who suggested the theme.

"I think I had the radio on and a Beach Boys song came on," Burnette said. "And I figured that would be an easy category because you could go with a little bit of everything."

"You could do surfin' the USA, traveling the USA. You could go with a beach scene, or you could go with a song theme of the Beach Boys. So, you've got some options with that one."

In the meeting, there was some discussion about adding a fourth place to the float competition categories, which, given the amount of money the Parade Committee has to work with this year, would help to



Hilda Thomason
Fairgrounds Manager

spread out the prize money a bit more.

The three float categories are Businesses, Churches/Individuals/Nonprofits, and School Groups. Currently there are First, Second, and Third Place prizes in each of the three categories, and adding a fourth-Place slot would not reduce the winnings for the other categories.

Thomason gave a current list of this year's applicants for a place in the parade.

Only one church, Bethel Baptist Church of Hiawassee, has applied so far.

Businesses that have applied are Model A Restorers Club of Marietta, a fixture in the parade for 55 years; Towns County Firewise Coalition; Towns County Firewise Citi-

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Shook House...from Page 1A

Idell Shook, who married Garland and Zuria's son, Dee. She knew Garland as "The Chief," and Zuria as "Mama Shook," names bestowed upon them by her son and their other children.

"I was a daughter-in-law, but they treated me like a daughter, and I thought of them as my second set of parents - they were so good to me," said Idell, who has commemorated her memories with a short memoir incorporated alongside this article.

The branches of the family tree were spread wide at the May 4 dedication, with grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and other relatives attending to see the plaque presented by Mayor Liz Ordiales and to receive congratulations from other local officials like City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick, DDA Manager Steven Harper, DDA Chair Peggy Gardner and Denise McKay.

As Joint Economic Development Director for Towns County, Hiawasse and Young Harris, it was McKay's idea to turn the little house into something the Shook descendants could be proud of.

"The Downtown Development Authority is (trying) to create the downtown area as the center of activity," McKay said. "We're looking for a business that will come in here and help complement what we're trying to do."

Ideally, whatever business moves into the house will be open into the early evening and take advantage of the spacious brick patio waiting to be furnished as a gathering area for guests, McKay said, noting that the building's convenient downtown location makes it suited for anything from a small country store to a sandwich shop.

Such an outcome would not be too far removed from the fate of the original Shook

property, which stands to this day about a mile up on Hog Creek Road, flanked by the homes of the twins and Idell.

Now owned by Heath and Amanda Caudell, the old Shook Family house and barn have been renovated into lodging for Airbnb rentals called Granddaddy's Farmhouse.

Amanda, a great-

granddaughter of the Shooks, is the family historian, and she knows the value that the Shook House at 115 River Street will have not just for the legacy of her family, but for the people of Hiawasse as a whole.

PORCH MEMORIES

by Idell M. Shook

I took a walk to the old home place of my late husband Dee Shook. As I neared the house, the porch invited me in. My thoughts took me back to the age of eighteen, when I first sat on the porch with my husband and his family.

I remember a swing hung at the end of the porch, and a blue hydrangea bush blooming nearby. A mighty poplar tree, at the front of the house, gave its shade to the family. A grapevine grew in the yard, bearing its fruit. My lips soon matched the blue of the grapes, as I tasted their sweetness.

The can house, filled with jars of home-grown fruits and vegetables, bore witness to the labor of the family. Wooden boxes were filled with wheat from their fields. The smoke house was full of hams they raised on the farm.

As I looked at the old house, sunlight bounded off the shutters and reflected through the windows. The sunlight warmed the room; the memories came out to play. The old house gathered them to her bosom. I will gather a memory while they linger, one for you and one for me.

Let's go inside, and look back in time. Warmth greeted me as I opened the door. Flames danced in the fireplace. Nestled in the hot coals was a Dutch oven, and the aroma of baking cornbread filled my senses.

My father-in-law, The

Chief, as his grown children called him, rested in the corner of the couch, watching the evening news with Tom Brokaw. Mama Shook sat in her favorite chair on the other side of the fireplace. In the wintertime, you could hear the ringing of her hammer as she cracked out walnut kernels.

As each new day broke, The Chief rose first, bringing the fires to life. Soon, Mama Shook would go into the warm kitchen with the needs of her family on her mind. The aroma of coffee, mingled with the smell of frying ham, eggs, gravy, and biscuits filled the house.

What biscuits they were! My mother-in-law would knead a mixture of home-grown wheat flour, lard, baking powder, soda, salt, and buttermilk into a smooth mound of soft dough. Then she would take her fingers and pinch off a piece of the dough, the size of a country biscuit. She shaped the biscuit in her hands; placed it in a greased pan, row after row, until the pan could hold no more.

In past years, five children joined Mama Shook and The Chief around the table. Grace was said, and the food was served. After breakfast, The Chief left for work at Ritter Lumber Company; Mama Shook tended the home and waited for the return of her family.

The Chief came home from work at five o'clock with a tired body, an empty lunch box, and a contented mind.

He had labored hard, and it felt good to be home with his family.

Their home was full of love and laughter. Guitars and banjos played as voices rose in song. All was well.

My husband and I stayed in the mountains and built a home nearby. The other Shook siblings married and moved away to work and rear their families. After their retirement, they returned to the porch at the old home place in the mountains, to search no more.

As I leave the porch, my eyes search the hills for what has been and will never be again. The swing still holds its sacred place. The can house stands as if to say, "You may need me again." Clusters of ripe grapes beckon my lips. The poplar tree, tall and proud, holds its age in its arms. Ancient shade caresses my face.

But time has moved on. Guitars and banjos lay silent; voices stilled; the old house void of life.

Leaving the yard, I walk down the steps my husband built for his mother. The steps lead to the road and beyond. The road is more traveled now, but so am I. I look around one more time, move into the road, and walk back to my place. My heart is warmed by the good memories. When I hear the porch call again, I will go and sit with my memories, bask in the sun, and hear once again the music, the laughter, and the voices.

"When I first heard about it, I cried," Caudell said. "Just to know that their name is living on is very, very special to me."

And Tony Land believes his grandparents would be "thrilled" to know that "their people have come back home and love Hiawasse." Land's mother, Irene, was also profoundly impacted by the dedication.

"They were just plain country people, but to think somebody would buy a home in remembrance of them - I just thought it was wonderful, and I'm very thankful," she said.

Allen agreed with her

twin sister, saying, "I was born and raised around here in Towns County, and when I think of a plaque put up in honor of (my parents), it just makes me want to cry, because they are worth it."

Those who envision their business thriving at the Shook House may contact McKay or Harper at the Hiawasse Downtown Development Authority by calling 706-896-4966 and emailing dmckay@hiawasseega.gov or sharper@hiawasseega.gov.

The Hiawasse DDA office is located inside Hiawasse City Hall at 50 River Street.

Early Voting...from Page 1A

will need to submit a new application this election cycle if they want to receive an absentee ballot in the mail.

Voters are encouraged to request and return their absentee ballots early to give their ballot "enough time to travel through the mail and resolve any issues that may arise when voting by absentee ballot," per georgia.gov.

Folks wanting to utilize the official drop box to turn in their absentee ballots can find

it in the Elections Office during early voting hours. Voters may also drop completed absentee ballots off at the Elections Office through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

April 25 was the voter registration deadline to participate in the May 24 elections.

The 2022 General Election will be held on Nov. 8 and will feature the election of political party candidates who clear the primary round of voting this month.

Fair Parade...from Page 1A

zens Coalition; James Richards and family of Ellijay; Challenger Demons; and the Shriners of Blairsville.

Towns County Schools Future Farmers of America; Career, Technical and Agricultural Education students; the softball and football teams; and the school band have all committed to being in the parade, said Towns County Baseball Coach Shannon Floyd.

"With it being during school next year, I think there will be a lot more excitement about it," Floyd said. The first day of the 2022-23 Towns County school year is Aug. 4.

The Tuesday committee meeting was catered by Brenda Swanson, who caters for artists performing at the Music Hall. Swanson served a three-course meal that was delicious - no wonder the big music acts like coming to the Georgia Mountain Fair.

And while the parade seems a long way off right now on Aug. 20, time has a way of slipping past folks, so it's good to keep in mind that the Georgia Mountain Fair Parade will be here before people know it, so potential applicants are encouraged to go for it now before it's too late.

Stephen Smith...from Page 1A

sands of miles away.

With him, Smith brought unassuming clothing items, like a tiny dress and a scarf, that served as physical testaments to his travels and the astounding amount of work he has accomplished in his 74 years of life.

From a projector screen at the far end of the grill's bar flashed numerous photos consisting of, for example, prisoners in bright yellow jumpsuits at prayer and a doe-eyed, adorable baby girl born with one arm and wearing a dress lovingly fashioned from a pillowcase.

"You go on a mission trip, and you think that you're just doing the best thing in the world," Smith said. "Oh, yes, I'm a missionary. I'm a do-gooder, I'm going to help take care of all these people."

"(The missionaries) find out it's the other way around. They come back so filled with a new look at life. They come back blessed and with a desire to do more. That's how it works; you don't come back empty-handed."

A handful of slides in particular moved and awed Smith's audience. Early in his presentation, Smith shared the story of an 18-year-old girl who was waiting in line for food. He urged her to the front, and when she took two plates, he learned of her four children, one of them just an infant.

"And they live on the street. You know, we hear about homelessness all along, but a mother and babies living in the gutter just isn't right," Smith said, going on to say he found the family a one-room apartment with two mattresses, a charcoal stove, a water can, and bags of rice and beans able to sustain them for three months. From there, other missionaries stationed locally will support her.

But sometimes, help does not arrive in time. As impressive as Smith's efforts are, he is humble enough to recognize he cannot save everyone. Still, he does what he can in the unassuming, quiet moments when time seems to slow before grief takes hold, serving as a comfort to the dying.

"This little baby here wasn't looking very good, and the priest that was with us came over and said, 'Stephen, that baby's not going to make it.' And I said, 'What can we do?' He said, 'Has the baby been baptized?' I said, 'I don't know.' He said, 'Get me some water.'"

Smith happened to have a bottle of water on hand. Using what they could in the moment, the baby was baptized. She died moments later, as if having held on for one final, critical moment. Smith still tears up when thinking about the experience.

"It was a very difficult, emotional moment for us. You

know, it's one thing to see an older person pass. That's hard. My wife passed away in August, and I'm still coping with that, but she lived many good years. That poor little child didn't make Year One," Smith said, showing a candid photo of himself holding the impossibly small bundle moments before she joined the Lord.

Despite all the tragedy he has faced, Stephen Smith carries on with determination in his soul and love in his heart. Admittedly, he doesn't like to talk about himself, and just as he did that morning, he illustrates his traits through stories.

When Hurricane Matthew devastated Haiti in 2016, the unsafe conditions of ruined infrastructure called for a soft ban on travel. Smith had a plan regardless, although those around him were concerned. He shared something that his pastor told him before he left for the island nation.

"Stephen, I know you want to go and feed every starving child down there, clothe every naked person, and build everybody a house. You can't do that, but you have to go be Jesus to the nations."

And so he has, founding the organization "To The Nations," which continues to help the impoverished and needy around the world, no matter their race, creed or situation.

In addition to his mission work in communities, To The Nations has visited jails, giving hope to those society has locked away.

"If you've never gone to a prison to visit the inmates there, you ought to try it," Smith suggested, relaying the story of the time he visited a center in Uganda for men who faced charges such as theft, domestic violence and driving with an expired license.

"These men were so grateful to have us come. They wanted to touch us - they wanted to be hugged, they wanted to hold your hand, they wanted to talk to you, they wanted to listen to you tell stories. It was just a wonderful time," Smith said.

Another photo on the projector Friday showed the men in bright yellow jumpsuits standing with To The Nations missionaries, with Smith in the center. There was also a gaggle of grinning children off to the side.

Smith explained that "this particular prison has an open gate where they could actually leave if they wanted to, and their children or grandchildren can actually come in and visit them if they wanted to."

It was such an odd concept that Smith had to ask an inmate why he didn't leave. When given the answer that it "wasn't his time," Smith understood that the facility offered help to

the prisoners. He can attest that the inmates were not treated cruelly and were instead shown kindness in the hopes that they would bring the same gentle touch to the outside world upon their return.

One member of the audience, positively shocked, blurted out, "That sounds like the way it should be everywhere."

Smith's list goes on. He has erected schools, churches and nursing homes. He has raised money to purchase food, and even inspired a priest to introduce barbecue to his hungry flock, prepared as it would be in North Georgia.

That being said, Smith feels blessed simply to be able to perform good deeds, but he has in many ways been paid back. With tears in his eyes, he shared photos of a boarding school that had been named after his late wife. A small sign stood outside, reading "In Memory of Mary Katherine Bauer Smith, Died August 16, 2021."

Smith stands as a witness to how much is possible when one simply extends love to their neighbor. The inspiration he ignited in the Movers and Shakers, after all, raised about \$400 in donations for To The Nations.

In the end, Smith just wanted to share a simple dogma that he has himself followed for years.

"In the Scripture, God said, 'Love God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.' I think that sums it all up," Smith said.

With this in mind, one man from Hiawasse has been able to save countless lives in a ripple effect halfway across the globe from his home. For this, the soul cannot help but be inspired and the imagination cannot help but wonder what would be possible if everyone pitched in with good deeds.

"If everyone on this planet would do those two things, we wouldn't have any violence, we wouldn't have wars, (and) we wouldn't have poverty," Smith believes. "And there's a lot of people who have so much that they could share, but they don't. And I'm not judging them, but if everyone could just look out for their neighbor just a little bit ... Help your neighbor; it comes back."

Perhaps Scott was on to something when he called Smith an angel.

To those who feel so led to aid the effort, To The Nations will be returning to Uganda June 12-25. Keep in mind that preparation takes months with testing and vaccination requirements and booking flights. Action should be swift, so call Smith at 706-835-9846 or email him at stephensmith@gmail.com.

Wine Festival...from Page 1A



The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds has already confirmed that the Wine Festival will be returning in 2023 by popular demand. Photo by Jeremy Foster

grounds, golf cart tours to the Hamilton Gardens, and live music from True Youngblood, Goldpine, Wyatt Espalin & The Riverstones, The Murphys, Michael Jones and Austin Coleman.

Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason expressed her excitement at how the event turned out Saturday, saying it was "a great day despite being chilly outside."

"We have a great crowd here and sold 500 tickets in advance and have already seen that in walk-ups," Thomason said. "People want to come out and do things in the mountains on the weekends to celebrate and have fun, and we are so happy we are able to provide people in any community the option to come here and enjoy themselves with everybody."

Shannon Baldwin-Nguyen is the Event Coordinator for the Fairgrounds, and she said that the Hiawasse Highlands Wine Festival will definitely be returning next year.

"We are planning to make this an annual event from now on after seeing how much it has grown in popularity," Baldwin-Nguyen said. "We love to see that people

from all over enjoy our events so much that each one seems to be bigger than the last, and I am grateful to be a part of that happening for everyone."

Marianne Chastain attended as a booth vendor for her local company MC Designs, in which she handmakes crafts for home decor, jewelry, suncatchers, wood items and more. And marking her second year as a vendor, she was elated to be close to the action once more.

"I love being a part of this very friendly and down-to-earth community," Chastain said. "I like being a vendor here so I can see and talk to everyone being so happy about all of our common interests."

"Community events are important because they let you get to know people, and it brings everyone together to make new friends."

Additionally, the visitors

who come from far and wide to attend community events like the Wine Festival greatly assist the local economy, with shops and other businesses benefiting from the influx of guests, and more sales tax dollars going toward local initiatives.

Sponsors for the event were Union General Health System, The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge, Lake Chatuge Lodge, Cottrell Motorsports, Towns County Convention and Visitors Bureau, SWBC Mortgage, The Happy Nomad Crafts, VanKeith Insurance Agency, United Community Bank, and Coldwell Banker.

The next major event at the Fairgrounds is scheduled for May 27-29: the Hiawasse Pro Rodeo. Visit www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com or call 706-896-4191 for complete information on tickets for events, volunteering, applying as a vendor and more.

Correction:

A news article in the May 4 edition of the Towns County Herald incorrectly stated that Hamilton Gardens was "now part of Towns County Parks and Recreation." While Ham-

ilton Gardens is a county park, it is not a part of or managed by the Towns County Recreation Department. Hamilton Gardens is under the purview of Georgia Mountain Fair, Inc.