

Towns County Herald

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Towns County Schools announce Teachers of Year

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Monday, Oct. 2, the Towns County Board of Education highlighted the school system's own by revealing the 2023-24 Teachers of the Year: Samantha Reynolds of the Elementary School, Lauren Rogers of the Middle School and Erin Schuette of the High School.

In the words of Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong, "We get to celebrate the best of the best, and the three teachers that were chosen this year were definitely that for all three of their schools."

Nominees in each school are voted upon by their colleagues, with one of the chosen in the running for System Teacher of the Year and poten-

tially Georgia Teacher of the Year.

"There's a packet for the Georgia Teacher of the Year," Berrong said. "There's five questions that you have to answer, so we choose three of those questions, and then all three of those Teachers of the Year complete those three questions and turn them in to us."

"Then, a panel outside of the school system goes through those with no names on them, and they choose our System Teacher of the Year."

This year, System Teacher of the Year went to Schuette, and she was honored in last week's regular School Board meeting as a Teacher of the Year alongside esteemed colleagues Reynolds and Rogers.

TCES Teacher of the

Year Samantha Reynolds is a native of Towns County and a 2006 graduate of Towns County High. She received her calling to teach during high school, as a matter of fact, when she was part of the Teacher Apprenticeship Program.

"I asked a number of colleagues about her, and of course they all had glowing things to say about her," TCES Principal Shannon Moss said. "Some said that she was very considerate of all students and all their varying abilities."

"They say she's a great leader who demonstrates her knowledge and concerns to her fellow coworkers and student-teachers."

Moss added that one of her peers described Reynolds



The 2023-24 Teachers of the Year for Towns County Schools are Samantha Reynolds, Erin Schuette and Lauren Rogers. Congratulations!
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Fall Festival continues thru Saturday with family fun



The Georgia Mountain Fall Festival offers unique entertainment to guests, such as the pigs of Rosaire's Royal Racers.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

As the leaves turn gold and crimson shades, transforming the North Georgia Mountains into a picturesque autumn paradise, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds invites everyone to stop by and enjoy the annual nine-day Fall Festival of arts, crafts, family fun

and live music.

The festival kicked off Friday, Oct. 6, and will run through Saturday, Oct. 14, with \$6 general admission and \$16 admission for the full festival experience with evening concerts. As always, children 12 and under get in free.

And with gates opening from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. now through Friday, and 10 a.m. to

7 p.m. on Saturday, there will be plenty of opportunities to work the fun into any family's schedule.

Not only does the festival appeal to a large crowd by running for over a week, it also attracts a diverse selection of attendees with its abundance of varying activities.

In the arts and crafts area, vendor booths range from quilting to yard art and much more, with food trucks, trailers, and stands around every corner to keep visitors' appetites in check.

For those who enjoy live music, there are four stages placed throughout the fairgrounds to showcase local talent, such as Union County High School students Gavyn Thorsell and Sammy Ensley, who dazzled crowds with their raw talent during Friday's opening.

Along with the constant live music at these four stages, there are nightly concerts inside Anderson Music Hall to keep the entertainment booming until the last second of each day, with shows starting at 6 p.m. weekdays and 7 p.m. this Saturday – hard ticket required

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Marching Exhibition unites Union, Towns County bands



The Towns County Marching Band enjoyed receiving feedback on its 2023 show from judges during a cross-county exhibition last month.
Photo by Daysha Pandolph

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – As the sun set over Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on Saturday, Sept. 23, the Towns and Union County Marching Bands took the field to receive feedback from several judges and give audience members a glimpse of their shows in preparation for upcoming competitions.

Towns County opened the exhibition at 6 p.m. with their show entitled "Bond, James Bond," featuring several fan-favorite selections from the renowned film series and showcasing soloist Nick Bargas.

Following the outstanding performance, the Towns County Band and new Director Tim Skinner gathered behind the field goal to hear comments from the evening's judges: re-

tired Ringgold High School director Robin Christian, retired Union County High director Kerry Rittenhouse, retired Towns County High director Frank McKinney, and Young Harris College Director of Bands Dr. Hayes Bunch.

The UCHS Band then fell in to the first set of its competitive space-themed show called "Into the Stratosphere," featuring

Wheel of Fortune LIVE! set for Saturday, October 28

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

For decades, folks have enjoyed the popular American game show Wheel of Fortune from the comfort of their homes via TV broadcasts, and now they can come watch – and participate – in person at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

Wheel of Fortune LIVE! is coming to Hiawassee on Oct. 28, beginning that Saturday at 7 p.m. inside the Anderson Music Hall, with doors open at 6 p.m.

"It'll be just like it is on television," said Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason, who added that Wheel Host Bob Goen himself will be present to kick off the fun, with plenty of audience games for guests to enjoy.

It's important to note that the Wheel's visit to Hiawassee will not be televised, and though people of all ages are invited to attend, anyone wishing to participate on-stage should be at least 18 years old.

Participants are chosen at random from the audience, but getting closer to the stage



will give people a better chance to call consonants, buy vowels, and solve puzzles for chances to win up to \$10,000 in prize money or luxury trips to places like Paris and Hawaii.

Standard tickets are \$47 plus handling, but fans of the show have the opportunity to purchase several "VIP" experiences.

The "Front Row Experience," priced at \$190, includes a ticket guaranteeing a seat in the front row, a chance to spin the Wheel, an official photo-

graph with the Wheel of Fortune set, an exclusive Wheel of Fortune tote bag, an exclusive Wheel of Fortune VIP Merchandise item, a Wheel of Fortune VIP laminate, and a commemorative ticket.

Coming in at \$100, the "Spin the Wheel Experience" includes a ticket guaranteeing a seat in one of the first 10 rows, a chance to spin the Wheel, an official photograph of the Wheel of Fortune set, the Wheel of Fortune tote bag, an

See Wheel of Fortune LIVE!, Page 2

Historical Society raises \$20,000 for house restoration

News Special
Towns County Herald

The Towns County Historical Society has made remarkable progress in its ambitious campaign to restore the iconic Berrong-Oakley House, reaching a significant milestone in just three short months.

To date, the Society has raised an impressive \$20,000 toward its ultimate goal of \$200,000.

A cherished piece of Hiawassee's history, the Berrong-Oakley House dates to 1905 and is a striking representation of the area's rich architectural heritage influenced by local contractor Bart Lochaby.

Over the years, the home has suffered from the wear and tear of time, necessitating extensive renovations to preserve its unique historical character.

The Historical Society embarked on its fundraising journey in June, following the purchase of the house by the City of Hiawassee. The Society launched a campaign to secure the necessary funds for the restoration project – efforts that have already paid off thanks to the generous contributions of local residents who share a



A Blue Ridge Mountain EMC crew running line for the new underground power and fiber cables at the Berrong-Oakley House.

commitment to preserving the town's heritage.

"We are overwhelmed by the outpouring of support we've received from our neighbors and friends," Society President Tyler Osborn said. "The Berrong-Oakley House is not just a building; it's a piece

of our shared history, and together, we're ensuring it stands proudly for future generations to appreciate.

"This project would not be possible without the support of our community and the City of Hiawassee."

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54th Annual Blairsville Sorghum Festival opens at Meeks this weekend

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The fall season is upon the North Georgia Mountains, bringing with it the cooler temperatures, the turning of the leaves, and, once again, the making of sweet sorghum syrup with the return of the heritage-rich Blairsville Sorghum Festival.

Always the second and third weekends in October, the 54th Annual Sorghum Festival will start at 9 a.m. on Saturday, Oct. 14, with the sorghum mill gearing up to grind cane for sweet syrup at Meeks Park.

The festival runs 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Oct. 14-15 and Oct. 21-22. Parking is free, and admission is just \$5, with children 12 and under getting in free.

Also this Saturday, locals and visitors alike will want to line the streets of Downtown Blairsville for the annual Sorghum Festival Parade that will roll through town at 10 a.m.

Fortunately, the parade was saved from cancellation this year when the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce agreed to organize it after CASA announced it did not have the volunteer manpower to put on the parade.

Float builders and other aspiring participants can get into the parade this week by registering at <https://www.visitblairsvillega.com/>, with prizes for winning entries set at \$250 for First Place and \$100 for Second Place.

2023 marks the festival's return to full strength, as the Sorghum Square Dance and Pole Climbing competition – two mainstays that have been absent the last few festivals – make their way back into the tradition.

The Square Dances will be hosted by the Union County Recreation Department at the Union County Schools Agriscience Center both Saturdays of the festival, lasting from 7-10 p.m. Admission is \$10 per person, though like the festival, children 12 and under are free to attend.

Then there's the live music aspect of the festival showcasing plenty of local tal-



The big wood-fired pan inside Meeks Park will be cooking up sweet sorghum syrup over the next two weekends.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2022

ent for people to enjoy over both weekends, plus the other traditional games like Rock Throwin' and Log Sawin', not to mention the ever-popular Biskit Eatin' contest set for noon each day of the festival.

A full scheduling breakdown of the festival entertainment can be found in the Special Section inside this week's edition of The North Georgia News.

More than 15,000 people attended the Blairsville Sorghum Festival in 2022, which undoubtedly helped to boost the area economy by connecting thousands of new customers to local businesses.

And as always, festival attendees can look forward to more than 100 hand-picked vendors specializing in handmade crafts, delicious foods, live demonstrations and more, on top of the multiple nonprofit booths that will bring awareness to various local causes.

The principal volunteer organizers of the festival – the Blairsville Sorghum Syrup Makers and Enotah CASA for Children – have made sure the

2023 event will be a success for their respective causes.

Right there in Meeks Park, the Syrup Makers make the syrup to sell in the hundreds of gallons every year, providing the festival its namesake product to raise money for local charitable giving, to include scholarships for graduating seniors and financial assistance for folks in need.

As for Enotah CASA, the festival acts as the nonprofit's largest fundraiser of the year, which in 2022 helped the organization serve more than 200 children navigating foster care in the four-county area of Union, Towns, White and Lumpkin.

Enotah CASA is a child advocacy organization specializing in assisting abused and neglected children on their journeys through the legal system, with dedicated volunteers who train to become Court Appointed Special Advocates.

These advocates ensure that children have a voice in such challenging life situations, and because Enotah CASA is a volunteer organiza-

tion where an advocate's reward is service itself, the services CASA provides ends up saving local taxpayers many thousands of dollars.

The Blairsville Sorghum Festival is truly a win for everybody, as the festival raises money for worthwhile causes while giving people something fun to do, preserving local heritage, and supporting small businesses near and far.

Thankfully, when the core group of volunteer Syrup Makers went looking for a partner to keep the tradition going in 2021, Enotah CASA stepped up to help organize the beloved event, which very likely would have called off for good if not for CASA's support.

"We would like to express our appreciation to the community for allowing us to take part in the Sorghum Festival and be more a part of the community and keep that tradition alive," said Enotah CASA Outreach Coordinator Fran Parks. "This allows us to provide funds for children in the foster system to have a CASA."

Historic Restoration...from Page 1

The funds raised so far will go toward critical initial restoration work, including restoring the original façade. The Society has contracted with Simo Community Designs, a preservation planning company based out of Atlanta, to ensure that the restoration process maintains the historical integrity of the house while making it functional as an event center for the community for years to come, which will be managed by the Society.

The project has also garnered support from local volunteers who have donated their time and expertise to help with the restoration efforts so far.

"It's not just about the money," Osborn said, "it's about the incredible sense of community spirit that we've witnessed. We encourage everyone who cares about our area's history to join us in this endeavor."

As the campaign gains momentum and the Berrong-Oakley House takes its first steps toward a bright future, the community of Hiwassee stands as a shining example of dedication to preserving its rich heritage.



The entry hall and grand staircase of the Berrong-Oakley House lit up by electricity for the first time in a decade thanks to Blue Ridge Mountain EMC and Turpin Electric.

With continued support, this historical gem is poised to shine for generations to come. Anyone interested in making a tax-deductible contribution to the Berrong-Oakley House restoration fund can mail their donation to P.O. Box 1182, Hiwassee, GA 30546.

For more information

and history on the house, visit www.townscountyhistory.com. To follow along with the restoration, follow the Berrong-Oakley House on Facebook.

The Towns County Historical Society is a non-profit organization protecting and preserving the area's rich history, culture and heritage.

Wheel of Fortune LIVE!...from Page 1

exclusive Wheel of Fortune VIP Merchandise item, a Wheel of Fortune VIP laminate, and a commemorative ticket.

For the third level of VIP tickets, \$60 can purchase the "Wheel of Fortune Merchandise Package," which includes a ticket ensuring a seat for one of the first 20 rows, a Wheel

of Fortune tote bag, a Wheel of Fortune VIP Merchandise item, a Wheel of Fortune VIP laminate, and a commemorative ticket.

Tickets should only be purchased via the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds website at <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/localevents/>

id/440, and buyers should be aware third-party resellers.

For more information, call 706-896-4191. Check out the website for other events like the Appalachian Brew, Que and Stew Festival, Scotty McCreery live in concert on Oct. 21, and Halloween at the Fairgrounds for area families.

38th Annual National Mounted Police Colloquium

Lawrence Beal of Hayesville, NC, Director of the County Mounties, a 501(C)3 non-profit mounted search and rescue group, participated along with 11 members from Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama at the 38th Annual National Mounted Police Colloquium September 11-15.

The Lexington, KY Colloquium consists of two days of training in equitation, obstacles, crowd control, jumping team work and other horsemanship skills.

There were close to 150 riders from all over the US and Canada. Approximately 40 riders and trainers from seven sectors of the US Border Patrol participated.

Lawrence Beal won first place in gaited equitation, third



Far right Lawrence Beal of Hayesville, NC and Steve Willis of Union Co., GA at Colloquium awards ceremony September 15, 2023.

place in individual obstacles and second place in combined equitation and obstacles. Ash-

ley Manning of the E. Tennessee Unit won seventh place in uniform class.

Teachers of the Year...from Page 1

as “a farm girl who brings her work ethic with her to school,” and it’s clear that she puts as much effort and care into her career as she can provide.

Reynolds has “always loved working with children,” having been in education for 14 years. According to Moss, her beloved students pick up on how much she cares and frequently give her hugs and greet her.

Indeed, Reynolds’ philosophy is that she views “each day as a new day that provides opportunities for growth and success for everyone.”

TCMS Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs introduced Lauren Rogers as Middle School Teacher of the Year. Rogers originally hails from Hayesville, North Carolina, and graduated from Western Carolina University, where she earned both bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Rogers has been an educator for 18 years, working for 10 of those years in North Carolina and eight in Towns County. It all got started when she gave classroom observation a go and had a chance to work with a stu-

dent with special needs.

“From that point on, I knew that’s what I wanted to do,” Rogers said. “And I’ve never regretted it.”

To this day, Rogers’ students are her main concern, and while she admits that earning the title of Teacher of the Year is a high honor, winning notoriety has never been a top priority.

“My favorite part of my job is working with my students and watching them grow,” Rogers said. “We become a family, and I’m always so proud of them at the end of each year on how much they have accomplished and learned. We have fun together and make the best of each day.”

As for her coworkers, Rogers believes she “works with the best of the best,” and “to have these wonderful people nominate me feels so special.”

Earning both the TCHS Teacher of the Year and System Teacher of the Year titles, Erin Schuette said she was “very shocked, but honored” and “humbled” to be chosen. Schuette has taught for 29 years, in Florida and Georgia, working in alternative schools

and acting as a substitute.

Before she came to Towns County, Schuette taught in Lumpkin County, but evidently, the former won her heart, as she’s been local for 20 years now.

Like her colleagues, she admits to always having fostered a love for children, but “it was a chance encounter with a young lady with a disability (that) helped plan my path to becoming a special education teacher.”

Today, Schuette’s expertise lies in special education, and she seeks to help her students become the best people they can be, believing that “all students can achieve and be successful at their level of learning. I just try to meet them there.”

“My classroom environment is like a family; these are ‘my kids,’” Schuette said. “My students know that my motto is an old but true one: ‘Treat others as you want to be treated.’ Seeing my students happy and growing academically (and) emotionally is my favorite part of my job.”

For his part, TCHS Principal Bryan Thomason noted



Teacher Erin Schuette, center, has been awarded the title of System Teacher of the Year, pictured here with TCHS Principal Bryan Thomason and School Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong in the School Board meeting on Oct. 2.

that “you would be hard-pressed to find a harder working person in our half of the building than Mrs. Schuette.”

“You could not find someone more dedicated, more caring, more patient,” Thomason said. “I’m telling you right now, I’d have that woman go to bat for my kids any day. She is

an amazing teacher.”

Thomason added that Schuette is “beloved” as much by her students as she is by her coworkers and appreciated a thousand times over. Hopefully, she can also earn the favor of the judges when it comes to her running for statewide Georgia Teacher of the Year.

Of course, all the Teachers of the Year wanted to extend gratitude to Berrong for recognizing them at the meeting, their coworkers for valuing them, and their students for holding them so highly. They look forward to making even more memories in a workplace that feels almost like home.

Marching Exhibition...from Page 1

ing songs from Gustav Holst’s seven-movement orchestral suite “The Planets,” “The Final Countdown” by Europe, and “Drops of Jupiter” by Train.

Union County Band Director Will Stafford arranged the show, which features soloists Ayden Burnett, Micah Messer, Evan Nicholson, Josh Pirie, Ivan Garcia, Leah Cox, Willard Woolwine and Mitchell Lickey.

The technicality of the entire drill demanded the audience’s attention from start to finish, with a 5/4 drum feature in the middle of the show encompassing a wealth of visuals by the winds. A giant inflatable rocket also wowed viewers as the Color Guard showed off their impressive routine, using the prop to mask equipment transitions.

After the march-off, the judges made their way back onto the field to give feedback on Union County’s performance. Following the commentary, both bands socialized on the sideline over a provided pizza dinner.

“The main purpose is to support local bands and to grow as band programs,” said Staf-

ford, who helped organize the event with his program’s booster club.

Although no awards or placements were handed out for the mock competition, the judges informed the bands on what they could improve and work toward in the coming weeks.

“It was huge,” said UCHS Assistant Band Director and Middle School Director Daniel Foster. “Not just getting some feedback on the stuff the kids already knew and reinforcing what we’ve already been talking about, but also hearing some other ideas that we hadn’t thought about as teachers.”

Appreciating a new set of eyes was an ongoing theme at the exhibition, with Towns County Drum Major Bella Rose Childs sharing that having the judges there was an amazing thing for that type of exhibition.

“It helped us a lot,” Childs said. “When you’re doing the show over and over and over again, some things that could be issues kind of go back in the shadows and you can’t realize them, so (the judges) pointing them out really helped.”

The Towns County Band Program is on a steady path of

improvement under the new direction of Skinner, who is taking a different approach to marching band. He only holds practices in the evenings to work around other school activities and gives students opportunities to participate even if they’re not able to be in a band class.

“He really helps us practice with a purpose, instead of just going through the motions every single time and not working towards something,” said TCHS Band Captain Max Baron. “I think by the time of our first competition, we’ll be in pretty good shape.”

In the week following the exhibition, the UCHS Band took a road trip to Franklin County High School, where they spent Saturday, Sept. 30, preparing, executing, and getting feedback on their first competitive debut of the season.

At 3:40 p.m., the band gave an outstanding performance while fighting adversity in the heat as their giant inflatable prop lost air and sagged onto the field. Despite the misfortune, the performance was a success.

Drum Majors Willard Woolwine and Leah Cox placed



The Union County High School Marching Band has been working hard to perfect its space-themed show for competitions. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

fourth overall with Superior ratings, while the color guard, percussion, and overall band rated excellent.

“These competitions are a great opportunity for students to perform in front of a new audience while receiving feedback from judges on what they can do to improve their performance,” Foster said. “It is also an opportunity for our students to watch and support other bands in the

area, because the goal for every single band at these competitions is to improve every single time they perform.”

The UCHS Marching Band will continue to practice and improve throughout the coming weeks in preparation for their final competition of the season.

“We are mainly focusing on two aspects (for the last competition): march technique and

making the big impact moments bigger. So, there is contrast in volume and ensuring that our step style is consistent across the band,” Foster said.

UCHS will compete for the final time this season at the Peach State Marching Festival on Saturday, Oct. 28, in Rome, Georgia. Towns County competed on Oct. 7 in the Yellow Jacket Classic at Rockmart High School.

GA Mtn. Fall Festival...from Page 1



Crowds will want to take full advantage of the fall weather at the Georgia Mountain Fall Festival before the nine-day event concludes this Saturday. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

for the latter.

Aside from the phenomenal listening experiences available at the festival, guests are also lured in by its famed family-friendly qualities. One notable addition to the normal selection of child-oriented activities in 2023 is the Rosaire's Royal Racers – an interactive pig-racing game.

The pigs race four separate times a day with each event composed of three interactive races. Audience members can participate before the race in "pick-a-pig," an activity where they try to guess which pig will win for a chance to get a prize.

During the race, audience members are given one last opportunity to win a grand prize by going "hog-wild" to show their enthusiasm for the racing pigs.

"It was cute and entertaining," said festivalgoer Samantha Roper, who attended with her kids. "We came in a couple hours early just so we could make sure to come to watch (the pig races)."

While the Rosaire's Royal Racers are a surefire source of family-friendly entertainment, festival organizers have offered even more variety by inviting Danny Grant back for another year of strolling through the fairgrounds with his renowned Cowboy Circus.

Grant trademarks his show as "The World's Smallest Rodeo" – a performance of circus stunts, cowboy tricks, music, comedy and more. The Cowboy Circus runs each day at 11:30 a.m., 1:30 p.m., and 5:30 p.m.

Another attraction for adventurous kids and those with a child-like spirit is the carnival, open weekdays from 4-10 p.m. and Saturday from 12-11 p.m.

For those pursuing a more laid-back Fall Festival experience, the fairgrounds offer a glimpse into the past with the "Pioneer Village." The extensive exhibit replicates 19th-century mountain living to pay tribute to local heritage.

Alongside the Pioneer Village, guests can take a lei-

surely stroll through the newly renovated Exhibition Hall, which houses an immaculate pumpkin display this fall.

From just across county lines, three Choestoe Farms pumpkins ranging from 359-406 pounds will be viewable, as will some creatively adorned gourds decorated by local children from Pre-K to fifth grade.

Michelle Haddock, a resident of the Macon area, attended the Georgia Mountain Fall Festival for the first time Friday with her granddaughter and friend.

Haddock shared that the trio drove up to Hiwassee specifically for the festival, and after enjoying the festivities, they were not the least bit disappointed in their choice.

"It's awesome. I love the setting. (My granddaughter) is having a good time. We will absolutely be back," she said.

For more information, including a complete scheduling breakdown of live music and other attractions, visit <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/localevents/fallfest>.



Blacksmithing is one of several old-ways demonstrations available in the Pioneer Village at the annual Georgia Mountain Fall Festival. Photo by Lowell Nicholson