

merry christmas  
and happy new year

from the staff of  
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## 'Battle of the States' Christmas tourney returns Dec. 28-30

By **Jeremy Foster**  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

It's that time of year, when Towns County High School Indians Basketball fans get excited for the annual Battle of the States Christmas Tournament, returning in 2021 after a year hiatus due to 2020's outing having to be canceled over concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking place Dec. 28-30 with games beginning at 10 a.m. each day inside the Bill P. Kendall Sports Complex at Towns County High, Battle of the States is undoubtedly the biggest tournament in the area apart from the regional and state championships.

This year's entry will make the 27th installment of the tournament, to feature eight high school boys and girls teams from four states competing for the title

of being the best here in the northern Southeast region.

Teams will be hailing from Towns County, Rabun County, and Coosa and East Forsyth in Georgia; Murphy, North Carolina; Polk County, Tennessee; and Pendleton and Strom Thurmond in South Carolina.

"This is certainly a triumphant return for the tournament this year," said Towns County High School Athletic Director Jim Melton. "I was an assistant coach 27 years ago when we dreamed this thing up."

"It always seemed there was a lull in the schedule of games around Christmas-time, so we decided to do two things: have a local tournament to alleviate extra traveling, and help bring a little extra revenue into the community in the winter months in which typically there is not much going."

Added Melton, "Last year, we had a lot of uncer-

tainty because of COVID, and a lot of fans and businesses were disappointed because of it being something to look forward to every year, because this also a great way for everyone in our community to come together and get out to enjoy good sports.

"This is also huge for our kids and players as well. The last year we had the tournament, our boys became the champions by winning First Place and subsequently became state champions. The tournament means very much to everyone, because that is our first main goal of the season, is to win the Christmas tournament, then go to region and do well in state.

"Even though there are multiple states involved here, they still want to go in and defend our home court to have some bragging rights going into the next year."

Basketball wise, Melton

said the Battle of the States Tournament is "awesome," as players, students and community fans alike get to see great competition among several different-sized schools.

"It's a good atmosphere that makes for an exciting three days of athletics where teams can come and work on their craft, hone their skills, and create healthy competition to gear up for this last stretch of the season," Melton said.

Full brackets can be found in this newspaper's Sports Section and at townscountyathletics.com, with schedule breakdowns for all three days of the tournament, including times for the Consolation and Winners Brackets for both the girls and boys basketball teams.

The Championship Games will be played on Thursday, Dec. 30, the girls at 7 p.m. and the boys at 8:30 p.m. Go Indians!



The Towns County Indians won Battle of the States the last time the tournament was held in December 2019, pre-COVID.  
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

## 'Shop with a Hero' takes 35 kids Christmas shopping in '21

By **Brittany Holbrooks**  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – Walmart was abuzz on Friday, Dec. 17, with excited Towns County kids participating in "Shop with a Hero," a program featuring volunteer adult chaperones who got to vicariously experience the magic of the Christmas spirit they recalled from their youths.

The Shop with a Hero program has its roots in "Shop with a Cop," and technically speaking, it is still the same movement that has long been led by the Hiwassee Police Department, though the name was changed several years ago. "We had always included the (Fire Department) and

EMS," said Hiwassee Police Chief Paul Smith. "That was one of the motivating factors to change the name, because it wasn't just police officers, so we changed it to 'Shop with a Hero' to encompass everybody."

All told, it's quite the collection of volunteers: Towns County Sheriff's Office; Union County's Sheriff's Office; Blairsville Police; Young Harris College Police; Towns County Fire; Union County Fire; the District Attorney's Office; Towns County Schools; Union County Corner; Rotary Club; Mountain Movers and Shakers; American Legion Riders; Veterans of Foreign Wars; Dillard Police; and of course, Towns County Family Connection.

This year, Shop with



"Shop with a Hero" experienced a massive showing of volunteer support from multiple area agencies, organizations and individuals on Friday, Dec. 17.  
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

a Hero provided for 35 children, and for the first time in its 15-year history, there were more volunteers than students. Previously, one adult chaper-

oned two or three kids on their Christmas shopping sprees, but the community showed so much support in 2021 that the opposite was true.

As it turned out, it was for the best. "They're walking around just helping out, keeping an eye on things," Smith said of

the "extra" volunteers, adding that he invited more groups to help this year.

Comparatively, it is easier. See *Shop with a Hero*, Page 6A

## Training focuses on improving public access to government



Government officials from around the area attended last week's "Open Government" training session by the Georgia First Amendment Foundation in the Hiwassee PD Training Room.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By **Shawn Jarrard**  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

The Georgia First Amendment Foundation and the University of Georgia School of Law's First Amendment Clinic teamed up with the Hiwassee Police Department Dec. 17 to host a free training seminar at City Hall for public officials regarding "Open Government."

Covered in the training was information outlining how government officials should disseminate public records and conduct open meetings to be in compliance with state law, plus information to guide social media use and interactions with the media by public offi-

cial, elected or otherwise.

Robust state laws safeguard freedoms of speech and of the press enshrined in both the U.S. and Georgia constitutions by enforcing transparency in government, thereby ensuring the public can oversee the actions of officials by having access to all public records.

Sometimes, officials violate state law pertaining to public records, though usually, this is because they are simply unaware of the law and its many nuances. Hence the importance of proper training and education surrounding these issues.

"We provide training free to anybody who wants it," said Kathy Brister, president

of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation Board of Directors. "Often, we find that the issue with noncompliance with both the Open Records Act and the Open Meetings Act happens because people don't know the law. It's very confusing; if you are a trained lawyer, it's still confusing."

"So, we want open access to government – it's very important for our democracy. Our whole organization is 100% committed to making that happen."

Representatives from multiple local government offices went to the seminar, which counted as training credit for peace officers required to be registered or certified. See *GFAF Training*, Page 6A

## TCSO Christmas experience a joyous time for kids, adults

By **Mark Smith**  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson arrived with lights flashing at the Blairsville Walmart on Monday, Dec. 13, followed by five busloads of kids looking forward to shopping with the sheriff for an otherwise empty-stocking Christmas.

"We couldn't ask for this to be any better. We've been working on this for a good while. Everybody has come together, and it's working very well," said Sheriff Henderson, as he watched the kids begin to unload in an orderly manner, even as thrilled as they were.

"We're just excited that all these kids are going to get Christmas," Henderson continued.

Forty-eight children attended the first Towns County Shop With The Sheriff event – a new initiative by the Sheriff's Office under Henderson's leadership – and each child was allowed up to \$300 to spend, thanks to the generosity of residents and businesses.

"I can't say enough about the wonderful citizens of Towns County. They have donated, they have helped. It's just been great. There's nothing more rewarding than to help these kids."

Participating children ranged in age from kindergarten through about sixth or seventh grade. They were not



Johnny McCoy with the Towns County Sheriff's Office having some fun with his "Shop With The Sheriff" kid at Walmart on Monday, Dec. 13.  
Photo by Mark Smith

allowed to buy cellphones and were restricted to only one game, encouraged instead to focus on toys and bicycles and such, the idea being to let the kids be kids and endeavor to enhance their childhood.

"And we have not turned one kid away," Henderson said.

Walmart Store Manager

Tim Brown was on hand that Monday to watch the kids and make sure everything went smoothly on Walmart's end of the Christmas shopping extravaganza.

"It's a great thing for the community to join up law enforcement with kids, and to help kids that may not (other-

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The offices of the  
Towns County Herald and  
West Printing Company will be closed Friday,  
Dec. 24th and will reopen Monday, Dec. 27th



## TCSO Christmas...from Page 1A



**Volunteers with the Towns County Sheriff's Auxiliary once again proved indispensable, this time during the inaugural "Shop With The Sheriff" Christmas program for children.**

wise have a fun Christmas)," said Brown, noting that Walmart is part of this community, and it would be very unfair not to give back.

"The biggest thing is to see them take the gift that they're given, and they go buy something for a brother or a sister or a parent," Brown said. "It gives you a true feeling of what Christmas is. They're not just thinking of themselves — they're thinking of others, and that's an awesome sight to see."

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw drove the last bus in line with his wife Lorie and County Clerk Alisa Richards in tow to help keep the excited kids from distracting the driver.

"What a blessing it is to be involved with these children and see their faces light up," Bradshaw said. "I want to thank all the folks that have worked hard to make this possible. This is what Christmas is all about, and I'm just glad to be a part of it."

When asked how the drive over the mountain was, Bradshaw replied with one word, "loud," but added that it

was a lot of fun.

"I forgot what it's like to have small children in an enclosed area," said Bradshaw with a smile and a chuckle.

Henderson was very appreciative of all the people who came out to help with Shop With The Sheriff, which included the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and Young Harris College Police Department.

And he was especially thankful for the efforts of the Towns County Sheriff's Auxiliary, a dedicated group of local volunteers that assists the Sheriff's Office with various tasks throughout the year.

"There's no way that I could handle all the events and all the things that occur in our county without our auxiliary force," Henderson said. "These people are wonderful, they give up their free time, they come out, they help us."

"Tonight is a great example. If I didn't have the auxiliary folks helping us, I don't know that we could handle this."

Young Harris College loaned two buses for the event, with the other three coming

from Towns County Transit. The buses were driven by both deputies and auxiliary personnel, and, of course, Commissioner Bradshaw.

Each child was assigned someone to escort them around the store, and when they were through shopping, their parents came to pick them up, subject to a strict sign-in/sign-out process.

As with other community Christmas-shopping events for kids, Towns County Family Connection was instrumental in selecting participants for the Shop With The Sheriff trip.

Each family received a gift box of ham, vegetables and dessert courtesy of Towns County Food Pantry, and all told, it was a magical occasion, from kids caroling on the bus ride over to customers approaching Shop With The Sheriff organizers with donations for the event.

Chief Deputy "Colonel" Gene Moss said there are a lot of behind-the-scenes logistics that went into making the event possible, and already, the Sheriff's Office is looking forward to next year's shopping experience.

## Shop with a Hero...from Page 1A

ier to keep up with individual kid budgets with more adults assisting the children, and volunteers were able to bring out a second bus to serve as the "sleigh" that would carry all those gifts home.

Most of the participating students were middle school aged, but there were some high schoolers as well, all thoroughly enjoying getting to go shopping after school let out early on Dec. 17 — a half day and the last day before Christmas break.

With so many other donations and programs going on in the community this time of year, many families in need have been able to find something to help their children. And those behind Shop with a Hero made sure no children were left out.

"If the kids weren't being served by some other program, we included them in ours as well, so even if they weren't in the age group, they were still getting some sort of Christmas presents," Smith said.

It should be noted, though, that not all the Christmas presents were for the children themselves.

Perhaps "the most touching thing" about Shop with a Hero is that, despite having \$200 to spend on themselves, some children forego their own wants and pick up gifts for the family.

Smith, who says the choice happens every year, recalled a case from that very morning. In addition to their Christmas shopping money, all the kids are treated to a pair of shoes and a jacket.

"One kid earlier said, 'Well, I don't need shoes, but can I get shoes for my brother?' I said, 'Go ahead. You get shoes; it doesn't matter who



**Kids always enjoy their time with first responders during the annual Shop with a Hero Christmas extravaganza.**

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

it's for," the chief said. Walmart employee of seven years Sharrill Lottmann has been involved in Shop with a Cop programs before, and she believes initiatives like this are great for the community.

"I think it's a kind, understanding group," she said. "They want to help — that's the biggest thing. You know, people aren't cold and uncaring. They do want to reach out, they do want to help, they do want to see people and help the kids enjoy Christmas."

Lottmann believes the event is beneficial for both volunteers and children, as it helps less fortunate families celebrate the holiday season and puts a merry, hopeful twist on Christmas that some adults may not have felt in years.

In addition to the shopping experience, the children were treated to a pizza party at the school prior to their departure to Blairsville. On top of the 35 children in attendance, Shop with a Hero volunteers shopped

for six children who could not make the actual event.

For his part, Chief Smith would like to give special thanks to the community for the donations, as well as to the dedicated volunteers who make Shop with a Hero possible, and it is evident that all the adults were grateful to the kids for reminding them that wishes can still come true.

Coming up in 2022, Shop with a Hero will be starting a new event to benefit kids of the county. During next fall's back-to-school season, volunteers plan to use an approximately \$10,000-strong donation pool to buy students new outfits, backpacks and other school supplies.

The plan is slightly different, as students will not be going shopping in person. Instead, volunteers will collect clothing sizes and preferences of individual children and pick up the gifts before delivering them to each recipient's house or the schools.

## Insurance Commissioner urges caution with holiday decor

Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner John F. King urges Georgians to exercise caution while decorating this holiday season. If not handled appropriately, Christmas trees and other holiday decorations can become fire safety hazards.

Data from the National Fire Prevention Association shows that between 2015 and 2019, U.S. fire departments responded to an average of 160 home fires that started with Christmas trees every year. Almost half of those fires were due to lighting equipment.

U.S. fire departments also responded to an average of 790 home fires that began with Christmas decorations other than trees. These fires caused an annual average of one death,

26 fire-related injuries, and \$13 million in property damage.

In recognition of these risks, Commissioner King asks Georgians to follow the following tips for keeping your home and your decorations safe this holiday season.

Ensure that your tree has fresh, green needles that do not fall off when they are touched. Dry trees can become completely engulfed in flames in less than one minute.

Keep your tree at least three feet from any heat source, including fireplaces, radiators, candles, or heat vents. One in five trees fires could be traced to a heat source that was too close to the tree.

Check your Christmas lights boxes to see if they have

the label of a recognized testing laboratory and to verify whether they are indoor or outdoor lights.

Turn off all decorations when you go to bed and when you leave the house.

Inspect all lights and decorations for cracks, damaged sockets, and loose or bare wires. Unplug all electrical lights and devices before conducting any major or minor repair.

The mission of the Office of the Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner is to protect Georgia families by providing access to vital insurance products and safe buildings through fair regulation that creates economic opportunities for all Georgians.

## GFAF Training...from Page 1A



**Lindsey Floyd, Richard T. Griffiths, Kathy Brister and Clare R. Norins at the Dec. 17 training by the Georgia First Amendment Foundation and UGA First Amendment Clinic.**

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

fied by the Georgia Peace Officer Standards and Training Council.

Attending the training were officials with the Towns County Coroner's Office, the City of Hiwassee, the Blairsville Police Department, the Towns County Sheriff's Office & Jail, Towns County Fire & Rescue, the Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority, Towns County EMS, 911 Dispatch & Mapping, Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office, Dillard Police Department, and, of course, Hiwassee PD.

"We are thrilled with this turnout," Brister said. "In both the number of people here and the different agencies that are represented, this is terrific; this is exactly what we hope for when we come to a community and provide this training."

Assisting Brister in the training were Richard T. Griffiths, president emeritus of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation; Clare R. Norins, director of the First Amendment Clinic at the UGA School of Law and member of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation Board of Directors; and Lindsey Floyd, a legal fellow with the First Amendment Clinic.

Griffiths walked officials through the basics of open records, including what kinds of documents, files and communications count as public records and the process by which they must be prepared and released.

He also delivered a breakdown on open meetings, going over executive session requirements and punishments for violations.

Floyd discussed open records in the context of law enforcement agencies, touching on specific exemptions for active investigations and other privileged information. She also covered the level of access that must be granted to both the residents of a municipality and

its local media outlets.

Norins went over many of the do's and don'ts of social media use, advising that public officials generate social media use policies that, among other things, serve to strictly separate official and private accounts.

The reason this is important is because the line delineating when a government official is acting in an official capacity as opposed to a private one can easily become blurred, which may lead to trouble, as the First Amendment protects speech from censorship by the government.

Further, Norins highlighted some common social media misconceptions by government offices, including the idea that officials can block individual users from social media pages or moderate specific comments by people with whom they simply disagree. This is not the case.

Also in the training, it was pointed out that public officials can be complying with the law while failing to observe the spirit of the law. A government office might do this, for example, by waiting until minutes before the start of an official proceeding to hand out a meeting agenda.

This is legally permissible, but in terms of informing the public about the official business that is about to be conducted, such a practice conflicts with the spirit of the law by not giving citizens enough notice to assess the agenda and come up with questions.

Then, there are times when officials do more than is legally required to promote the best interests of the public, an example being when a law enforcement agency releases body cam footage of a violent arrest prior to the closing of an official investigation to help calm community tensions.

Brister said the Dec. 17 training came about after local reporter Robin Webb reached out recently to the Georgia

First Amendment Foundation "about some questions with access to records and also some social media questions."

That's when the foundation offered to do training for local officials who might benefit from a refresher on open records and open meeting laws, with the Hiwassee Police Department agreeing to host the training. Judging from the turnout, plenty of offices benefited that Friday.

Hiwassee Police Chief Paul Smith said he was familiar with the Georgia First Amendment Foundation through its partnership with the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police, Georgia Sheriff's Association, and Prosecuting Attorneys' Council in the creation of the extensive open records guide entitled "Georgia Law Enforcement and the Open Records Act: A Law Enforcement Officer's Guide to Open Records in Georgia."

"I received the book and open records training as a newly appointed police chief," Smith said. "The Towns Observer contacted me to tell me that GFAF was interested in providing training in our area. I offered to host the training at the Police Department. Training is always a priority, as statutes and case laws are ever evolving."

"As a police officer and government official, I am sworn to uphold the Constitution and state laws, including those that restrict and govern my actions as an officer. I am extremely pleased that so many government agencies were in attendance, and thankful for GFAF for providing the training."

For more information, to ask questions, or to seek a free training seminar, visit <https://gfaf.org/>. An excellent resource for citizens is the GFAF-produced "Sunshine Laws: A Guide to Open Government in Georgia," which can be found at <https://gfaf.org/resources/the-red-book/>.