

# North Georgia News

5 Sections 44 Pages

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, May 18, 2022

## Students observe honored tradition before graduation

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

At First Baptist Church in Blairsville on May 15, in recognition of a time-honored tradition, Union County High School seniors observed a Baccalaureate Service the Sunday before graduation, which will take place this Friday, May 20, inside Mike Colwell Stadium at 8 p.m.

And there was plenty to be said of the occasion's poignancy and of the gracious manner in which the Class of 2022 was sent off. Of the 210 graduating students this year, it's estimated that at least half of them, if not more, attended the baccalaureate along with their families and friends.

There was also

some involvement from underclassmen, particularly UCHS Juniors, heralding things to come for the next graduating class.

Shortly after the Class of 2022 filed into the sanctuary to the "March to Aida," Taylor Carroll offered a Welcome.

"On behalf of the Union County High School Senior Class and Fellowship of Christian Athletes, I would like to welcome you to our 2022 Baccalaureate Service today," Carroll said. "We would like to thank all our parents, teachers, administrators, and superintendent, for without their continuous support, we would not be in this position today. Each of you has helped us to learn, grow, and mature into young adults ready to go out and change the world."

It was then that Lorelei Skinner led those present in the Invocation, and Easton Sosensky read from Psalms 23 for the Old Testament Reading, and Mattie Brookshire read from Philippians 4:9 for the New Testament Reading.

Savannah Evans and Tori Tracy performed a duet of "My Jesus," originally by Anne Wilson, after urging the audience to stand and sing along if they felt so led, and more than a few voices joined those of the girls, with all involved thanking the Lord for His care.

Afterward, Caleb John led a prayer for the Class of 2022 in a broadcasted video, apologizing for his absence but no less asking the Lord for His guidance on the path ahead and

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Members of the Union County High School Chorus Program performed for Class of 2022 seniors in the Baccalaureate Service Sunday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## 'Pan Rocks 22' blows away guests at Fine Arts Center

By Jeremy Foster  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Returning in 2022, the crowd-favorite "Pan Rocks" concert featuring the Woody Gap Band of Steel welcomed back professional pan artist

Tracy Thornton of international acclaim for an electrifying evening of steel drum rock music on Saturday, May 14, inside the Fine Arts Center.

Guests were wowed with the signature Caribbean sounds of the Band of Steel playing everyone's favorite

rock 'n' roll hits from the 1960s through today, all with the help of Thornton, who previously worked with the local students to improve their performances.

Now in its seventh year of operation with middle and

See Pan Rocks 22, Page 2A



World renowned steel drummer Tracy Thornton led the Woody Gap Band of Steel in a rocking world time during the "Pan Rocks 22" concert May 14. Photo by Jeremy Foster

## Special Olympics makes triumphant return in 2022



Union County football players and other students assisted the Special Olympians in their games on May 12. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Preparations for the 2022 Special Olympics began early out on the Mike Colwell

Memorial Field the morning of Thursday, May 12.

Thirty minutes before the Opening Ceremony, McConnell Memorial Baptist Church of Hiawassee was there setting up grills to prepare over 400 hot

dogs, and Union County High School students, from sports players to club members, were helping to organize and set up chairs, tents, and prepare for the honored athletes they would be

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## UCHS recognizes graduates entering military service



UCHS seniors Quentin Magnusson and Joshua Grizzell with their families, Marine Corps recruiter Sgt. Dylan Syverson and retired U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Art McCann at the high school last week. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On Monday, May 9, Union County High School graduating seniors Joshua Grizzell and Quentin Magnusson were formally recognized in a ceremony at the high school for their commitment to joining

the United States Military in service to their country.

"There's a lot of people who serve in direct combat roles, a lot of people that serve in supporting roles, but it's all geared towards the defense of the United States of America," UCHS Administrative Assistant and retired U.S.

Army Command Sgt. Maj. Art McCann said.

"That's very honorable for people to do," he added, noting that less than 1% of the nation's population joins the military.

Grizzell has committed to a six-year enlistment in the

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## Station 4 holds first open house since pandemic start

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Like so many organizations over the past two years, the Union County Fire Department has opted not to hold general public gatherings out of an abundance of caution over the potential spread of COVID-19, precluding popular community celebrations like fire station open houses.

But as COVID has receded and fears have dissipated, the Fire Department has decided to reestablish open house events throughout the county.

So, on Saturday, May 14, the volunteers of Fire Station No. 4 in north Union County held their 2022 Open House event for local families, providing burgers, hot dogs and all the fixings alongside water and soda pop to wash them

down, all served by the Station 4 Auxiliary.

Nearby residents showed up, many with their children who love climbing into the fire trucks and having firefighters turn on the lights and sound the siren.

And, of course, Air Life 14, the medevac helicopter based at Union General Hospital, made an appearance, which is always exciting to

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L-R: UCFD Firefighters David Ueltzen, David Prezkop, Mark Carr, Daniel Byrd, Bill Lombardo, Ken Meder, John Dixon and Evelyn Ueltzen at the Station 4 Open House Saturday. Photo by Mark Smith

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The Union County Election Results Newspaper will be available on Wednesday, May 25, after 10 a.m. See our Special Insert next week for details and results from the May 24 Elections. Also see www.nganews.com.



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# Early in-person voting ends Friday; Election Day is Tuesday, May 24

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

This is the last week to vote early in-person for the General Primary Election and Nonpartisan General Election, so anyone wishing to vote before May 24 Election Day should head to the Jury Assembly Room of the Union County Courthouse at 65 Courthouse Street in Blairsville.

The third and final week of early in-person voting will officially end at the close of business on May 20, with voting hours running from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. now through Friday, even during lunchtime.

Election Day voting

for both the General Primary and the Nonpartisan General Election will take place Tuesday, May 24, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the 11 pre-assigned precincts of Union County.

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

About 2,350 voters cast ballots in the courthouse through the second week of early voting, including two days of weekend voting on Saturday, May 7, and Saturday, May 14.

In addition to in-person ballot casting, by the end of last week, 153 people had returned absentee-by-mail ballots of 341 requested. The last day to request an absentee-by-mail ballot was Friday, May 13.

With just under 20,000 active registered voters, about 12.5% of the Union County electorate had voted early as of Saturday.

Appearing alongside candidates on the May 24 ballot will be the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax continuation referendum.

Union County voters will be asked to support or reject the continuation of ESPLOST, a countywide 1-cent sales and use tax levied on purchases of local goods in support of the Union County School System.

For more than two decades, Union Countians have supported ESPLOST for use by local schools to build new facilities, renovate existing facilities, upgrade HVAC systems, add to aging bus fleets, update technology and more.

Should voters approve the measure once more, the local sales tax will remain at its current 7% rate.

By accessing the "My Voter Page" via <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/>, voters may find their 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.

Voters are encouraged to 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](http://georgia.gov).

Folks wanting to utilize the official drop box to turn in their absentee ballots can find it in the Jury Assembly Room during early voting hours. Voters may also drop completed absentee ballots off at the Registrar's Office inside the courthouse 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.

## Pan Rocks 22...from Page 1A



The Woody Gap Band of Steel has accomplished a tremendous amount of success over the last seven years, becoming a musical tour de force throughout the region. Photo by Jeremy Foster

high school students who have grown accustomed to performing regionally, the Band of Steel spent Saturday night giving audience members exactly what they came for – a high energy concert of world-class caliber.

In the leadup to the concert, Band of Steel Director Doug Roberts said of the pan drum: "This instrument holds a magical ability to entertain and captivate audiences of all ages." And the performances over the weekend held up to that description.

"We have been planning and building up to this level of performance for several years, and now we are ready to blow people away with an amazing show tonight because the sound is so magnetic, and it just really pulls people in and makes it feel personal," Roberts said.

Throughout the course of the one-hour concert, the band did just that by astounding attendees with soulful sounds alongside a beautiful, colorful lighting display.

Although the Band of Steel did not play "Light My Fire" by The Doors, all of the musicians really "set the night on fire" performing stellar covers of all-time hits, including "Baba O'Riley" by The Who, "You Really Got Me" by The Kinks, "Isn't She Lovely" by Stevie Wonder,

"Seven Nation Army" by The White Stripes, "Sunshine of Your Love" by Cream featuring the Woody Gap Band's Alumni community, "Easy Does It" by steel drum educator and composer Chris Tanner and much more.

Joining in a standing ovation at the end were local spectators Rick Turnbull and Raymond Jimenez, both of whom were excited to share their firsthand experiences after the show.

"This concert certainly exceeded my expectations," Turnbull said. "When I think of what I have paid for to go see famous acts, I enjoyed this as much as any concert I have ever been to in my life."

"This entire show was just amazing," Jimenez added. "The fire and energy of these kids are the future generation of America, and it is this platform that will allow them to grow into better musicians with such a bright future ahead of them and amazingly at such a young age."

Happy to perform with the kids was Thornton, a professional steel drum artist and pannist, clinician, producer, composer and performer who first traveled to Suches last year in preparation for the inaugural local "Pan Rocks" outing after striking a friendship with band director Roberts.

Thornton has many accomplishments in the music industry, including founding the Sons of Steel and Steel Pandemic Records, with music featured in "Keeping Up With The Kardashians" and the popular videogame "Fortnite."

"We have been putting on eight to 12-hour days in preparation, and I am just so proud of these kids for how hard they have worked and how young and talented they are," Thornton said.

"I have traveled all over the world, and this is one of not only my favorite venues to play in, with its classy and state-of-the-art facilities, but also one of my favorite communities to come to; everyone here is so nice and inviting."

"Tonight was one of the best feelings musically I have had. I loved everyone's energy and connecting with the audience, and I cannot wait to come back here."

The main source of income for the Band of Steel is through playing by donations, so those interested in contributing to the band via booking inquiries may contact Roberts through The Woody Gap Band of Steel Facebook page or via his email at [droberts@ucschoools.org](mailto:droberts@ucschoools.org).

And Thornton can be reached on his website at [www.ttpan.com](http://www.ttpan.com).

## The Blairsville – Union County Memorial Day Parade

The Blairsville – Union County Memorial Day Parade Committee invites you to attend and participate in the parade which will start at 10:30 am on Saturday, May 28, 2022. Grand Marshal and guest speaker for the parade and the following ceremony will be Wade Smith, recently recognized in North Georgia News articles.

Any church, business, civic organization or other group can participate in the parade to support the theme: "Honoring Our Fallen Heroes". Whether it's a decorated float, vehicle, or anything else, participation is key to properly supporting our Veteran community and remembering those that gave the ultimate sacrifice. However, at the minimum, entries are asked to respectfully display our American flag. This year all entries will be judges for 1st, 2nd and 3rd place overall.

The parade route will begin at the old gymnasium, past Union County War Memorial Park, turn right on Cleveland St. and wind around the old courthouse onto Blue Ridge Street. It will then turn left at the public library and head back to the Union County War Memorial Park. Also, please join our Veterans at the park for a Memorial Day ceremony that will begin shortly after the parade.

Even though this is an

### Memorial Day Parade

#### Downtown Blairsville

**Saturday, May 28 • 10:30 am**

**"Honoring Our Fallen Heroes"**

Name of Entrant: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate number of the following types of entries:

\_\_\_\_\_ Float (Length: \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_\_\_\_ Vintage Car/Truck (Type of vehicle: \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

**Please no throwing of candy or other items along the parade route**

If your civic organization, church, business or other group wishes to participate in the Memorial Day Parade, please fill out this entry form and send it to:

**Leon Davenport Veterans Center, 78 Blue Ridge Hwy Blairsville, GA 30512 or email to: [ga.iraweaver121.com](mailto:ga.iraweaver121.com)**

Please have your entry checked in between 8:30–9:30 am in front of the old recreation gym at 371 School Circle, Blairsville, GA 30512

**Sponsored by all Union County Veterans Organizations**

election year, Memorial Day commemorates U.S. men and women who died while in military service. The committee asks that everyone put aside all political issues and honor our fallen heroes with a large turnout showing a sincere display of American patriotism.

For more information on how to participate in the parade fill out the form below and return to the Leon Davenport Veterans Center, 78 Blue Ridge Hwy, Blairsville, GA 30512 or contact the committee at [ga.iraweaver121@gmail.com](mailto:ga.iraweaver121@gmail.com). N(May18/22)CA



# Baccalaureate...from Page 1A

thanking Him for the hardships and victories that have shaped his peers into who they are at the present.

In a candlelighting ceremony, Autumn Skinner, Alyssa Sweat, Eli Underwood and Allie Brey took part in the proverbial passing of the torch. Recited in that moment was Psalm 78:2-4 and Hebrews 12:1, reminding the upcoming generation of students of the weight of the mantle they now carry.

Union County High School's Ensemble Chorus performance served as an emotional if poetic goodbye to the closing chapter of the Class of 2022's lives in high school. Seniors and underclassmen performed "Homeward Bound" together, with choir teacher Alicia Covington backing up the singers with a piano instrumental. Seniors were marked by their Union purple robes and underclassmen could be picked out by their black suits and dresses.

It was Emma Roxbury's role to introduce a guest speaker, and as she left the stage and he approached, they shared a tender hug. From there, Robby Roxbury, Vocational Teacher and Coach at UCHS, and father of graduating senior Emma, presented the Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2022.

"My friends, I come to you today and just want to say congratulations to this Class of 2022," Roxbury began, saying that this year's graduating class was "near and dear" to his heart not just because of his daughter's involvement, but also because he has coached many of the seniors in football and softball from a very young age. He has also had the opportunity to teach many of them directly in class.

"I know y'all are a special group. We appreciate you and wish you the very best," Roxbury said before going into the spiritual aspect of the address.

"I've got three questions," stated Roxbury. "And I want you to realize that I'm not speaking earthly, I'm speaking spiritually. The three questions: How did you get here? What is your purpose? And what is your exit plan off this Earth?"

Although Roxbury



**Math Teacher Robby Roxbury, father to graduating senior Emma Roxbury, delivered words of wisdom to the Class of 2022 in attendance for the May 15 Baccalaureate Service.** Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

couldn't answer the questions for any of the students present, he said he hoped that the individual souls of the Class of 2022 would find their own responses.

"The Word of God will endure forever. Think about that," Roxbury urged, communicating that the students could find inspiration in the Bible. "I want y'all to understand this, because the world is going to tell you something different: You are enough. You think about that ... And that's not coming from me; let me tell you this - it's coming from the Bible."

Roxbury cited Psalms, paraphrasing that each person, including the students before him, was created for a purpose. He also attempted to impart that the Class of 2022 should put their faith in God, not in the imperfect matters of the Earth.

"If your trust or faith is in me or in a person, my friends, there's a good chance that they may fail you. They may let you down. They may not want to, but let me say this, if you put your faith in Jesus, He will never leave you or forsake you," Roxbury said. "Be not conformed to this world. Study to be quiet - nobody else has anything toward you - work with your hands, do those things. It's in the Bible."

Finally, Roxbury gave students an example of the virtues that follow a good life: "But the Fruit of the Spirit is

love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. Against such, there is no law.' That means if you have the Spirit of Jesus in you, you have all of that fruit. Every bit of it."

Chad Sisum, Youth Pastor of the First Free Will Baptist Church of Hayesville, North Carolina, administered the closing prayer to the Class of 2022.

"(Jesus) created each and every one of you to be who you are. Don't ever let anybody else tell you different. Always know that He loves you. When you leave and go off to school, I want to challenge you to keep Him first in your life. If you don't know Him as your personal Savior, there's not a greater time than today," Sisum said, inviting those seeking guidance to be Saved.

"He loves you. He loves all of us, and I promise you He'll go with you. Robby's already told you that He'll never leave you and He'll never forsake you. He'll be your best friend when your friend's not there. Jesus will always be there."

And with the end of the warm, hopeful prayer, Hunter Hartzog thanked the audience for their attendance and their support on behalf of the Graduating Class of 2022:

"We could not have done it without the support of parents, grandparents, teachers, and all those involved in our journey. Thank you and God bless."

# UCFD Open House...from Page 1A



**Air Life Georgia 14 made a community outreach appearance at the Fire Station 4 Open House May 14.** Photo by Mark Smith

see.

"We've got about 12 (volunteer) members now," said Station 4 Lt. David Ueltzen, adding that the Fire Department is always looking for volunteers, Station 4 included.

"This is the first open house we've had in about two years because of COVID, so we're having a good turnout. We're showing off a lot of our new equipment," he said.

Ueltzen said Station 4 has acquired several vital pieces of equipment over the last two years, including a new tanker with a 1,500-gallon capacity tank and an enclosed pump control board, which is very helpful in extreme weather, all thanks to local donations and SPLOST.

Continuing, he said the new equipment is battery operated instead of pneumatic, which is a big time saver in an emergency where seconds count.

"It costs us about \$5,000 to equip a volunteer now," Ueltzen said. That's turnout coat and pants, boots, helmet, gloves, radio, hood and wildland gear. And that doesn't include training.

Volunteer firefighters do fight fires, but they're also trained to assist with extricating victims of auto accidents, assist on EMT and paramedic calls, perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and use an Automated External Defibrillator (AED), among other things.

And with all the people

moving into the county, the demand for men and women with those skills is only increasing.

So, that's really what the open house is all about. It's a chance for nearby residents to see and touch the things their donations and support enable their station to have, and to meet the firefighters that stand ready, 24/7, to help them in any emergency.

"We appreciate the support," Ueltzen said. "This is a countywide effort. It's not just Precinct 4; people (from sister stations) participate as well."

Union County Fire Chief and EMA Director David Dyer was, of course, on hand and in uniform to meet, greet and answer questions.

"It's always good to have these open houses," Dyer said, "because it's an opportunity for people to come in, see the fire station and meet all the people who are volunteering in their area."

"When you drive by a fire station, sometimes all you see is a building. You don't know what's inside that building, you don't know what kind of equipment they have. So, this is an opportunity for everybody to see all that equipment and see those fire trucks."

"And, if they donate money to their volunteer stations, they have an opportunity to see where their money is going," Dyer said, adding that it's also a great opportunity for fellowship.

Concerning the land donated by the developer of Hidden Harbor on Murphy Highway to build Fire Station No. 13, Dyer said the county is in the process of seeking construction bids for that project.

"We're hopeful that we can put career firefighters in that station," Dyer said, meaning that the intention is for the station to be manned 24/7, just like Station 1. An office for sheriff's deputies is in the plans for that location as well.

"We are also making it available for the Union General ambulance service to put a standby ambulance there if they so choose," he said. "We haven't negotiated the plans for that yet, but it is in the works."

Finally, Dyer said, "Throughout the county, especially in Suches (at the far southern end of Union), we're desperately in need of volunteers. It seems like the volunteer service has dropped off. There are a lot of people who don't have time or think they can't do it."

"We are really looking for people, especially now, because we're starting a (fire) suppression class in August," said Dyer, noting that they are hoping for a class of at least 20.

Being a volunteer firefighter is a great way to get to know and to contribute to the community. It's also a great way to develop lasting friendships. For more information, call the main station at 706-439-6095.



# Special Olympics...from Page 1A

helping in a matter of minutes.

2022's Special Olympics was an unprecedented event, being at the grandest scale longtime organizer Becky Tracy had ever seen.

"We have 181 participants today," Tracy said, and that was only taking the athletes into account. "Frito Lay is donating the chips, and Aaron's Rent to Own in Murphy is donating our waters and Gatorades. The Kiwanis Club has made donations (of) tents and cornhole boards, so (it's) just the whole community coming together."

The most prominent change this year was that athletes came from three different counties. Union County's students and adults participated, as did the students of Towns County, but for the first time in the history of Blairsville's iteration of the competition, Rabun County students traveled over the mountain to get in on the fun.

Lynn Talley, a special education teacher from Rabun, said she and her team were "so grateful to be a part of what's going on over here."

On behalf of her home county, Talley was delighted for their inclusion in the Special Olympics, adding, "It is magnificent, and their facility is wonderful ... It was great, and we love seeing all the crowd here." It's very likely that Rabun will return in future years.

Union County students represented their school in purple shirts, with Towns County in blue and Rabun in red, while the Masters Adult Division from Avita Community Partners sported burgundy.

Making up each of the school-aged teams were kids ranging from elementary to high school, with the oldest — high school seniors — getting ready to graduate in a few days. As for the divisions of the actual sports, there were four levels based on the amount of help an athlete needed to run a course or complete a task.

"Level 1 (is) for those who are completely independent and can do it on their own," Tracy explained. "Level 2 means they might need somebody close by to keep an eye (out) in case they need a little assistance. Level 3, they might have somebody running next to them or helping them just a little bit. Level 4 would be full assistance from a peer or a parapero."

But students and teachers weren't the only ones cheering on athletes. From the grandstands, Union County students of varying ages slipped out of class for a time to root for their team, and some even made posters to hang up in celebration



Of the many activities available for students in the 2022 Special Olympics, the soccer kick was a particularly popular event. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

# Military Service...from Page 1A

United States Navy and will train as a nuclear electrician's mate on an aircraft carrier following boot camp.

"I come from a military family, predominately Navy — my great grandfather was in World War II in the Navy; he was a Seabee," Grizzell said. "So, it's a six-year enlistment with two years of schooling right off the bat and four years of active duty. And if I reenlist for four more years, I'll get my full \$128,000 sign-up bonus."

"(The military) is a good option, especially for people who are trying to find their path. You don't have to go in a full 20 years. And it's free schooling, free housing, free food, free health, all that."

For his part, Magnusson has committed to a four-year enlistment in the United States Marine Corps and is open to making a career in the Marines.

"At the end of the day, I'm worried that there's nothing here for me," Magnusson said. "A lot of (my friends) just went to fast food joints and stuff like that. I was worried that I would get stuck in that for the rest of my life."

"So, I thought, let me

of their friends.

Parents also came out to support their children no matter the age. At 26, Tracy's own son was part of Avita's adult team, but his history with the event is extensive, with him having been a participating athlete since the age of 8.

To start the Opening Ceremony, Union County student Chad Jensen led athletes and guests alike in prayer before Joseph Ferris, a Union County High School senior, offered a beautiful rendition of the National Anthem. Tracy herself led the athletes in repeating the Special Olympics Oath:

"Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."

With that, the 2022 Special Olympics officially kicked off. Activities included racing, softball, soccer kicking and more, although athletes were free to wander the field and explore some of the tents on the periphery, like the bubble-blowing booth.

Parents and caretakers had the opportunity to check out "Not Your Average Autism Mom," a supportive sisterhood that hosts podcasts and offers training, advocacy programs and "proven strategies and techniques to help you manage your own wellbeing along your autism parenting journey."

Other volunteers stayed out in the sun, like the Interact Club, the members of which worked on painting faces — and arms.

"We wanted to serve our community, and we said, 'Special Olympics are coming up; what can we do?'" said 16-year-old Dakota Stanger, who sat at a table laden with stencils and a veritable rainbow of colors while her friends decorated just about every inch of football player Larry Blackwell's face with honeybees and hearts.

"The Special Olympics are a really great way to recognize everybody in our community," added Stanger, who moved here six years ago from Atlanta and was pleasantly surprised by the attention and love offered to the local special needs population.

"Our school system really likes to include everybody," Stanger said, "and it's really amazing, especially coming from an Atlanta school where they tried their best to separate (disabled and able-bodied students). It's really a better environment in the school systems up here."

She wasn't the only one who noticed the great strides toward acceptance and normalcy. Jessica Owens moved up here about seven months ago from the suburbs just outside of Atlanta, with her own children

being what drove her family to find a better school.

"We wanted to find a good school system for them, so that's why we chose up here," Owens said. "I'm loving it. I love the community support with the kids, I love the school's support, everything — it's great."

Both Stanger and Owens noted that one would be hard-pressed to find an event with so much attention to detail and individuality as the local Special Olympics in the much busier metro area, where "there was support," but time and population restraints can sometimes hamper results.

"This is amazing — I have no words. Coming from where I came from, it was nowhere near this (supportive). It's amazing to see other counties to come in (and) the adults come in," Owens said, adding that it "made her heart happy" to witness so much love, even from students.

Perhaps one of the greatest reasons 2022's Special Olympics earned such acclaim — and popularity — wasn't just because of the tri-county involvement, but also because it was the first Special Olympics held in about three years.

It was no secret that COVID-19 dampened the spirits of many. With no safe way to combat the restlessness that tends to grip people and especially kids around the onset of summer, many athletes and their caretakers faced personal challenges of endurance with no outlet for such restless energy.

Susan Reilly, an educator from Towns County, knows how important the event is to her students, adding to the overall positive, vibrant vibe with, "These kids have been waiting to do this, and they have such fun. I'm glad we're able to open up and get back together as a family for these special events."

Student John "Coy" Mull, 13, was excited to be back on the field to continue his five-year tradition of running the track. It was also a bonus that he was reunited with his friends, much like the case of Will Figg and Judah Makai Batyehurt, a duo of young Towns County students.

"(I like) soccer and running," said Figg, with Batyehurt agreeing that his favorite activity to participate in was soccer.

Heading up the Avita line in the starting procession was Ben Gregory and his girlfriend, Sabrina, the latter of whom loves "being outside because I can get a little suntan ... I don't like the rain. When you're stuck in there, inside with no sun, you get white skin."

But nobody was inside when, finally, in 2022, they were able to return to the field. In fact, to symbolize their triumphant return, the Special Olympics shirts featured art of a flexing bicep to show that trainers, coaches, parents, teachers and especially the participants themselves were back and stronger than ever.

Flexing their muscles and proving their mettle earned the participants some shiny medals to take home, too, with 65 earning Gold, 45 earning Silver, and 115 earning Bronze. At the end of the day, though, it wasn't about the awards or the glory.

"It doesn't matter if they win or lose," observed Tracy, "they're going to have the biggest smile on their face and have the best time. It's their day to shine."

Stanger agreed, smiling as she watched athletes race around the track. "I love watching them."

Union County football



The Union County Special Olympics Team and helpers posed for a photo last week to commemorate the amazing time everyone had. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

player Jensen Goble, 16, walked away from the event having made new friends, like Rabun student Isabelle Adler, to whom he personally presented a bronze medal. After looking through a different lens for a day, he had a message for anyone in the community who might be thinking about participating in future Special Olympics.

"Just come out here and have fun and have a blast and love everything you can," Goble said. "Bless everybody

that you can."

It should be noted that Goble and his teammates, along with volunteers from the Union County Softball and Baseball Teams, received special thanks from Tracy for their involvement.

Additionally, shout-outs went to the Union County Key Club, the Union County Maintenance Department, Union, Towns and Rabun Transportation, the Union County Recreation Department,

Union County Schools Police, and, of course, all the staff, parents, and fans cheering on their loved ones from the sidelines.

The Special Olympics are expected to return this fall around October and November, featuring indoor sports such as basketball and bowling.

For more information, call Becky Tracy at 706-835-4351 ext. 1546, email her at btracy@ucschools.org or visit parentmentors.org.