

North Georgia News

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Union County graduates turn to new chapter

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The accomplished and union County High School Class of 2025 stepped into a bold new world on Friday, May 23, graduating before proud family and friends inside Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Senior Class Representative Huston West welcomed everyone in attendance and addressed his class as the first speaker of the evening.

"The time has come to end our journey through high school, and what might have felt like a never-ending 13 years is just a new beginning," West said. "Our experiences are like many puzzle pieces that all fit together."

And everything certainly came together that night to lead 223 young souls across the field to accept their diplomas before facing bright futures.

As noted by West and UCHS Principal Josh Davis, this class stands out; 71% of them are eligible for the HOPE Scholarship, at least one already has a college degree and many more have secured the first steps for jobs in health care, business and more besides.

Aubrie Akins, Lily Helton and Jayden Karnes delivered a class reflection, pulling from their own experiences as three life-long best friends to guide their peers through memories of primary, elementary, middle and finally high school, and how it all shaped them into the people gathered before the podium, ready to take on the world.

Then, Hope Taylor sang a powerful rendition of Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All" as a sendoff for her classmates.

Salutatorian Turner West spoke from the class as he addressed his class,

See Class of 2025, Page 6A



The UCHS Class of 2025 took part in the time-honored tradition of graduation on Friday, May 23. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Roberts stands apart as Woody Gap sole graduate



Woody Gap School Valedictorian Mia Roberts celebrating during her solo commencement exercises on Saturday. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Sports Editor

SUCHES – All eyes were on Mia Roberts during Woody Gap School's graduation exercises on Saturday, May 24.

The sole member of the Woody Gap Class of 2025, Roberts received her diploma from Union County Superintendent John Hill during a ceremony held at the school auditorium.

Roberts' Valedictory Address drew inspiration from President Theodore Roosevelt's 1910 address, "Citizenship in a Republic," which is more commonly known today as "The Man in the Arena."

"A famous passage from the speech captures the essence of what it means to always try our best and to take action, despite failures, fears and criticism," she said before going on to quote Roosevelt.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who actually does the deed."

See Roberts Graduates, Page 2A

Residents, veterans honor sacrifice on Memorial Day



Parade Grand Marshal Jack McCorkle, Frank Merritt, Roger Pilcher and other Korean War veterans highlighted the theme of the 2025 Memorial Day events on Saturday. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Despite the fear surrounding the early morning drizzle, the rain held off for this year's Memorial Day parade

and subsequent Union County veterans service organizations on Saturday, May 24.

Many people gathered on the Blairsville Square not just to browse vendors for the well-

attended Spring Arts, Crafts & Music Festival, but to check out the decked-out vehicles and fanciful floats meant to invoke a sense of patriotism and pride.

This year's theme is "The Forgotten War." See Memorial Day, Page 7A

County breaks ground at E-911 Center construction site

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With an official groundbreaking on Tuesday, May 20, the dedicated dispatchers of the Union County E-911 moved another step closer to realizing their dream of a new facility designed specifically for their needs, located conveniently next to Fire Station No. 1 on Shoe Factory Road.

"One of the very first things (Commissioner Harold Collins) came into the office and said was, 'We're going to go ahead with the 911 Center,'" said 911 Director and Fire Chief David Dyer, explaining that, after years of planning, the concept was finalized at the beginning of this year.

Commissioner Collins attended the groundbreaking to see the start of the project, divulging that he greenlit the new center because he had serious concerns about the facility currently housing dispatchers: the decades-old,

repurposed Nursing Home building on Hunt-Martin Street.

"They had been desperately needing one for a long time," noted Collins, describing the impetus behind the decision. "The county's growing – we did need a new center ... It'll be a lot better working environment for the employees."

At any given time, there are three dispatchers working at a job that must run like clockwork to answer emergency calls and/or administrative calls, so having an adequate environment is crucial.

Dispatchers have always done a stellar job where they are now, but the call volume is only expected to increase as the local population and infrastructure grow, so the new center is a way to prepare for progress in addition to providing a more suitable workspace.

That's why the center is being built to accommodate growth, with the ability to add a fourth dispatcher on "active duty," upgraded technology,



After years of planning, county officials are excited that the new E-911 Center has finally broken ground. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

better equipment and more room.

Measuring in at 3,171 square feet, the 911 Center will serve as a ground-level floor with a public-access top level spread out across 4,000 square

feet. The second floor will house the 911 Mapping Office, secure records storage and extra space for future needs.

Right now, the department is seeking one more hire to be fully staffed.

And when the center opens next year, there might be a need for even more dispatchers due to the anticipated rise in calls, so Dyer said there will be an evaluation before move-in to gauge dispatching capacity.

For perspective, dispatchers fielded 51,752 calls from January to December of 2024, with about 13,539 of those calls coming into 911.

"Depending on the new center, we could see a significant increase in calls." See 911 Groundbreaking, Page 2A



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911 Groundbreaking...from Page 1A

technology that comes along and how busy we get, I'd say within the next couple of years, we really need to be serious about trying to get more staff," Dyer said.

Construction is being handled by Winkler & Winkler and is expected to take about nine or 10 months depending on the weather. Chad Winkler revealed that the process will be divided into phases,

but the center itself will be continuously built.

"About 90% of the people that we have working on the job are from Union County," noted Winkler, proud to keep the team as local as possible.

The contract for construction is \$3.8 million and will be covered by SPLOST funds. All new 911 equipment – computers, phones, servers,

etc. – will be going into the center, though it's still too early to provide cost estimates.

"I am super excited," said 911 Lt. Millie Baxter, who has worked in local dispatch for nearly 30 years. She and fellow Dispatcher Amanda Hammond posed with proud smiles at the groundbreaking, holding golden shovels to mark the beginning of a new era for Union County's unseen heroes.

Roberts Graduates...from Page 1A

the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;

"Who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause;

"Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

In light of this message, Roberts urged her captive audience not to shy away from failure, emphasizing that true fulfillment comes from the journey of rising after setbacks and believing in something greater than oneself.

As a member of Woody Gap's basketball, cross country and tennis teams, Roberts stepped into her own arena, where rather than letting her losses define her, she learned to showcase the spirit of resilience and determination.

"Although we didn't dominate in any sports, we can still take great pride in knowing we did our best and always strived for improvement," she said. "But when we did win, the triumph was even sweeter."

Turning her focus to the underclassmen at Woody

Gap, she encouraged them to cherish every moment and to overcome challenges, sharing her own experiences from dual-enrollment college courses and personal struggles.

"Even though I was at my wits end with some of those courses, I managed to get through them with the support of friends, family and none other than my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," she said. "The past four years have been some of the hardest of my life."

"I've been through heartache, pain, sadness, joyfulness and so much more. There are few things I regret, but it's the realization that I can't change any of them that make me even more grateful for the lessons I've learned and the things I did right."

"As a result, I've learned to cherish every little moment I get in life, knowing that at any given moment, everything can change."

The event featured a commencement speech by Harmony Grove Baptist Pastor Scotty Jarrard, whose echoed Roberts by stating that it's not the moments of uncertainty that define a person but how we respond to those moments – positively or negatively.

Jarrard also referenced the coinciding occasion of Memorial Day Weekend and the sacrifices made by countless members of the U.S. military.

"It wasn't a moment they chose; it wasn't a moment they asked for; it wasn't a moment they wanted to live in; but

they chose to live in it through love," he said. "They proved their love to us in the only way they knew how, and that is by sacrifice. And sacrifice sums up what love is."

"These men and women chose to love our freedom. They chose to love humanity. They chose to love our country. So, in every moment of your life, you have to respond, and in that response, I challenge you to choose love."

Jarrard closed his address by asking Roberts to seek motivation from historic figures such as Thomas Edison and King Solomon. He pointed out how Edison learned from his mistakes while developing the lightbulb, and he referenced Solomon's candid acknowledgment of his own failures in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

At Woody Gap, Roberts achieved numerous accomplishments, including being named Valedictorian, earning the Shining Star Award, participating in Dual Enrollment, making the Honor Roll, serving on the Student Council, acting as President of the SADD Club, and contributing to the Future Farmers of America and Yearbook staff.

Roberts has received more than \$11,200 in local scholarships, in addition to the HOPE Scholarship, federal grants, and other local awards. Moving forward, she will be pursuing a psychology degree at the University of North Georgia.

Blairsville Kiwanis Club BUG Awards Make a Splash

The Blairsville Kiwanis Club celebrates academic improvement by presenting their Bring Up Grade (BUG) awards to 4th grade students at Union County Elementary School. BUG is a Kiwanis program that recognizes students who bring up one or more grades from one grading period to the next and students who earn all A's.

"Throughout the school year each qualified fourth grader receives a ribbon to recognize their efforts and to inspire them to do their best. In addition, at the end of the school year one BUG student is randomly chosen to receive a special prize", said Kathie McMillan, Kiwanis Club Secretary. This year's winner was Brantlee Trask from Ms. Rhonda Colwell's class. Brantlee received a family pass to Meeks Park Pool.

The pool is open from May 26 to August 3. Pool passes may be purchased at the Union County Recreation Department or at Meeks Park



Charlie Krick, Brantlee Trask, Kathie McMillan

Pool. Swimming lessons and water aerobics classes are also being offered. For more information go to <https://www.unioncountyga.gov/facilities/facility/details/swimming-pool-9>

Blairsville Kiwanis Club meets on the first and third

Mondays of the month at Bank OZK at noon. Visit us on one of our meetings, volunteer for one of our events, or become a Kiwanis member. Helping kids grow and succeed is at the heart of everything we do.

Website: <https://www.blairvillekiwanis.club/>

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Please meet the new 2025/2026 Board of Directors for The FFA Alumni & Supporters Club. This group also known as the "Booster Club" for The Union County Schools FFA & Agriculture Education Program. President: Stephanie Conner, Vice President: Tony Watkins, Secretary: Monica Deaver, Treasurer: Amanda Garrett
Their next meeting is Monday, June 2nd at 6 PM at The Agriscience Center - 22 Lovell Drive - Blairsville, GA. All who want to support our local FFA/AG program here in Union County are welcome & encouraged to attend.

Class of 2025...from Page 1A

emphasizing that growth is a lifelong journey, and success is not a destination, but a path. Something can be gleaned from the challenge as much as the goal.

“Life is hard, so embrace it. The world that you’re stepping into is bigger, louder and far less predictable than we’ve known – and yes, it’s going to be challenging,” West gently reminded his classmates. “Some of the most meaningful moments in life will come from discomfort, challenge and uncertainty.”

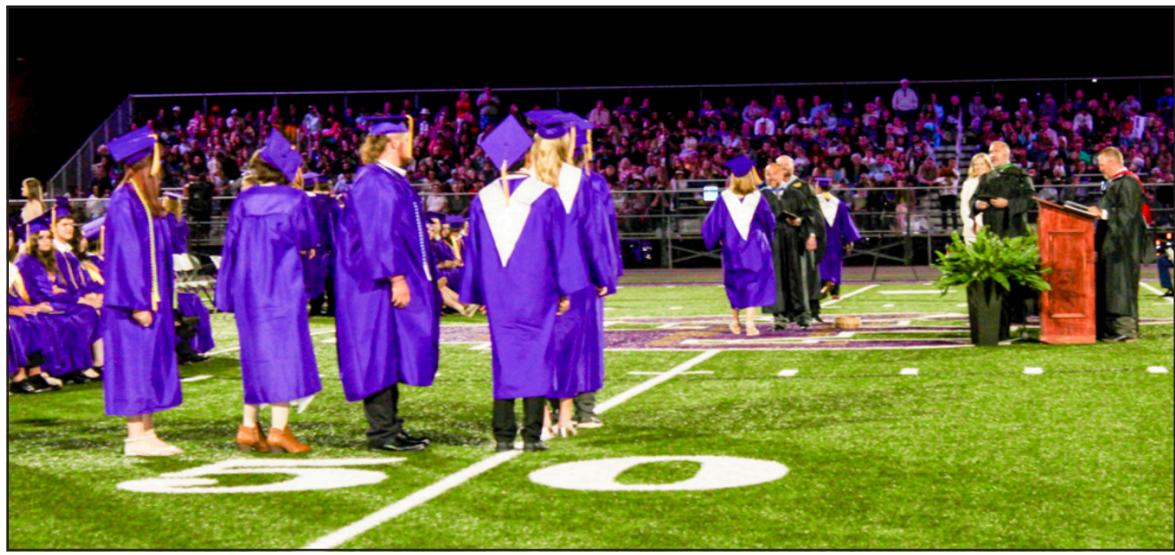
Valedictorian Mikala Souther carried a similar message, maintaining that failure is a necessary part of learning – and, on a larger scale, life. She also voiced her pride in her class and thanked all the people who helped her

along the journey to where she is today.

“Tonight, I want to ask each of you, ‘What is your why?’” Souther challenged. “As we step into this next chapter – college, careers and unknown roads – I hope that you carry that reason close to your heart. Let it guide you. Let it ground you. Let it remind you in the hardest of times why you started in the first place.”

Davis and Wesley Garrett presented the Class of 2025 with their diplomas before the turning of the tassels ceremony headed by Coach Mandy Hunter and the presentation of the class courtesy of Superintendent John Hill, officially marking the group as graduates of Union County High.

“Graduates, remember this,” instructed Davis. “No



Graduation is a treasured moment in every student’s life, when years of hard work pay off with a huge sendoff via commencement exercises.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

matter where you go, no matter what you do, you carry with

you the spirit of Union County. You are strong, you are capable, and you are ready.”

From there, Ariel McCarter, Ava Arthur and Hensley Adams sang the school’s alma mater, and Eliyah Ochoa offered some words in closing:

“Maybe being ready isn’t about having all of the answers, but instead, it’s about having to move forward, even into the unknown, and this is

the moment where we will do just that ... As our plans take us across the state, nation or even the world, I hope we look back and remember the outstanding impression that Union County Schools left in our lives.”

Afterward, the lights went out save for the brilliant purple backing of the new stadium lamps, and the Class of 2025 once again reminisced through everything they’d

been through together with a slideshow set to the class song, Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide.”

Fireworks lit up the sky just before the audience was allowed on the field to embrace, high five, pose for pictures or exchange thanks and praise. From there, folks slowly began to filter out, but the fact remained that this year’s graduates have promising futures ahead of them.



Families and friends were proud of their graduates on Friday, with everyone joining together in celebration after the Senior Class video and fireworks display.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

What’s New At Mountain Regional Arts & Crafts Guild

If you’ve been wondering what our guild has been doing since the closing of our gallery, ArtWorks in Hiawassee, here’s an update on our activities.

We will welcome you at the Hiawassee Garden Club meeting house, located at 34 River Street in Hiawassee for the Northeast Georgia Arts Tour on June 6, 7, and 8, from 10 AM to 5 PM.

We’ll have samples of our members art as well as dem-

onstrations of needle felting, acrylic painting, big stitch hand quilting, beading, spinning and weaving. And refreshments too!

Mountain Fling, our annual spring arts and crafts fair will be held at a new location this year. Towns County Recreation and conference Center will host this indoor show on June 21, from 9 AM to 4 PM and June 22 from 10 AM to 4 PM. It is located at 150 FosterPark Road, Young Harris, GA. We will have over 50 ven-

dors there to help you empty your wallets and exercise your credit cards!

Always check our website, mountainartscrafts.org, regularly for news about upcoming classes for adults and children.

Mountain Regional Arts and Crafts Guild is a 501-3C charitable organization. We meet monthly on the second Tuesday at 4 PM in the Fellowship Hall of Calvary Alliance Church, in Chatuge Harbor, across the road from Towns County Schools. If you are interested in promoting the arts in our area, please join us at one of our meetings!

Memorial Day ...from Page 1A

highlighted Korean War veterans, and a tractor pulling a trailer of them – including Grand Marshal Jack McCorkle alongside Frank Merritt, Roger Pilcher and others – brought attention to their service.

Chuck Honaker and Rob Mawyer emceed the parade, with Mawyer illustrating the importance of veteran visibility, particularly for the Korean War era.

“We lost 36,516 brave souls (during the Korean War),” said Mawyer over the loudspeaker, with Honaker describing the difference between Veterans Day and Memorial Day.

“Veterans Day honors all veterans who have served, whereas today, on Memorial Day, we’re honoring those who have given the ultimate sacrifice, and we’re all blessed and honored by their service,” Honaker announced.

Sheriff Shawn Dyer, the Union County High School Band, and the Georgia Chapter of the Blue Knights International Law Enforcement Motorcycle Club made up the beginning of the parade along with Blairsville Mayor Buddy Moore, County Commissioner Harold Collins and more.

Vintage and modern vehicles enjoyed a ride through downtown Blairsville, including members of the Blairsville Cruisers and a ceremonial military Jeep circa

1942 produced for use in World War II. Meanwhile, modern Jeeps decorated in flags and red, white and blue wreaths drove forth with their rubber duckies at the helm.

The Sons of the American Revolution and the Daughters of the American Revolution came dressed in their 1776 best atop their float, and the North Georgia Honor Guard’s float gave a reminder of what the day was about with its sentinels posted around a flag-draped coffin.

Starting around 10:30 a.m. and wrapping up in a little under 20 minutes, Honaker suggested viewers meet up at the Union County War Memorial Park at noon sharp for the annual Memorial Day ceremony.

Ingrid Engle read aloud the poem “Dedication Day,” and Alton “Doc” Coleman delivered the invocation. Along with the traditional posting of the colors, each branch’s flag was raised, with the UCHS Band playing the accompanying themes.

This year’s keynote speaker was Arthur “Art” McCann III, described as “a soldier’s soldier” by American Legion Post 121 Cmdr. Mike Merritt. McCann’s own parents served in the Korean War, and he himself is an accomplished Army veteran belonging to the Ranger Hall of Fame.

McCann started out by

giving some insight into the Korean War, mapping out its history, America’s involvement and how the echoes of the war are still felt today, despite the conflict earning the moniker of “The Forgotten War.”

Speaking of that title, McCann also explained how it came to be associated with the Korean War. The shadow of World War II loomed over the lives of American citizens, and war was never officially declared with North Korea on the part of the United States.

As mentioned during the parade, more than 36,000 soldiers lost their lives in the Korean War, and more than 100,000 were wounded. Seventeen women, all of them nurses, were also killed.

Two brave men were from Union County. One of them, Vernon Burns, was returned home for burial. Claude Stephens, like Jack McCorkle, participated in the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir, and lost his life there. His remains have not yet been found.

“It’s important to remember that approximately one million servicemen who served during the Korean War are alive today. Most are in their 90s. They fought proudly in a harsh environment for a people they never met and a country they never knew,” McCann stated.

The dire message



In Saturday’s parade, the North Georgia Honor Guard provided a compelling visual of a flag-draped coffin to showcase the reason behind Memorial Day. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

wrapping up his speech was one that united soldiers from all eras. Often, the combat follows those who return home. Those suffering from conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder are invited to reach out to their fellow veterans and community organizations to find the help they need to readjust and thrive.

More than a few attendees grew emotional at the haunting melody of “Amazing Grace” on bagpipes, the rifle volley, and the “Taps” call that drew a hush from the crowd before

the ending of the near-sacred service. Keith Bragg left them with even more to think about after performing his new song, “Flags and Flowers.”

Jack Dugger was not part of the ceremony, but he was in attendance and is a veteran. Wearing a custom-made vest, he remembers graduating high school with the man whose portrait graces the right breast – Bobby Jones.

Dugger and Jones were friends and both served in Vietnam. Jones, a surgeon, played a vital role in saving the

lives of the injured and getting them back home. After his plane crashed into a mountain, his remains were never found, leaving him as one of Georgia’s 50 missing servicemen from the Vietnam War.

Jones’ sister, Dugger notes, has mementos of him hanging all around her house, and Dugger has visited her in North Carolina to reminisce about his buddy. Together, they keep his memory alive, as all veterans – and indeed, the community at large – strive to do on Memorial Day.



Retired Army Ranger Art McCann served as the keynote speaker of the Memorial Day Ceremony May 24, reminding people of the “Forgotten War” that took tens of thousands of American lives in Korea. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Local Boy Scouts honored the fallen by presenting the Memorial Wreath inside Union County War Memorial Park during the Memorial Day Service on Saturday. Photo by Lowell Nicholson