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INDEPENDENCE DAY

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# North Georgia News

75¢

2 Sections 24 Pages      Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County      www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County      Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909      Wednesday, July 2, 2025

## Duck Derby tix on sale now at BPD, UCSO

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**North Georgia News**  
**editor@nganews.com**

Tickets for the Seventh Annual Shop With A Cop Duck Derby fundraiser went on sale Tuesday, July 1, and people can pick them up right now by stopping into the Blairsville Police Department or the Union County Sheriff's Office. Residents can ask officers about tickets, too!

As always, 100% of fundraiser proceeds will go toward the Shop With A Cop for Christmas Program in December. A good way to think of the effort is, for each ticket people buy, really, they're buying a Christmas present for a local child.

At just \$10 apiece, tickets will remain on sale up until the start of the race on Saturday, Aug. 30, which is when Blairsville PD, UCSO and other volunteers will drop as many rubber ducks as tickets sell – last year it was 3,200

– into Butternut Creek at the Union County Farmers Market. The Christmas program turns 25 this year, and Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter is hopeful that community members will continue to contribute as in past years to the Duck Derby, the only organized fundraiser for Blairsville Shop With A Cop.

Baxter is thankful that derby support has grown so much over time, directly corresponding with growth for Shop With A Cop as well, which is most welcome since the program incurs greater costs every Christmas due to stubborn annual inflation.

Just last year, the program enabled dozens of volunteers – represented by area law enforcement, churches, civic groups and simply individuals with big hearts – to take 150 well-deserving children shopping to fill the space beneath Christmas trees for 79 local families.

This is actually one of the biggest Shop With A Cop programs in the state, all thanks to the generous contributions people make both year-round and at derby time.

"It's gotten bigger and bigger every year," Baxter said of the derby. "It's because of the businesses and the civic groups and just our community who supports us to make this thing happen."

"This is not about us; it's about helping our community, and our community being all-in on supporting what we do with this fundraiser."

And while the Duck Derby is ultimately all about the kids, there's always something in it for ticket purchasers. Each year, local businesses jump at the chance to donate prizes for such a worthy cause, which in 2024 translated to 151 prizes being awarded.

The Top 3 race placers earn cash, and the next 100-plus

*See Duck Derby, Page 2A*



Union County Sheriff Shawn Dyer, Blairsville Police Lt. Gary Hooper, Municipal Court Clerk Avery Jackson and Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter at BPD Headquarters. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## UCSO seeking to identify Dollar General burglars

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**North Georgia News**  
**editor@nganews.com**

Two people on foot broke into the Dollar General Store on Ivylog Road in the early morning hours of Monday, June 23, and the Union County Sheriff's Office is asking the public for help identifying them.

Investigators have released images from a store security camera showing the wanted individuals wearing face coverings with hoodies pulled up. The suspects are currently believed to be a young male and female in the age range of teenagers to early 20s, said UCSO Capt. Doug Brackett.

Unfortunately, their faces are not clearly visible in the footage, but UCSO is hopeful that someone will recognize something about the pair that leads to an arrest.

"If you recognize the clothing or know of any information, please contact the Union County Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066," UCSO posted to Facebook June 24.

The break-in occurred between 2:30 and 3 a.m., after the store had been closed for hours and when most residents were asleep at home. For whatever reason – hunger, cigarettes, items to sell for drug money – two people walked up to the storefront with a wood-handle hammer.

Capt. Brackett said they stood at the front door for a little while, swapping the hammer back and forth. As seen in the security footage, the male finally settled on what he was going to do, taking multiple practice swings before shattering the door glass in a single blow.

The alarm began to sound as they entered, spooking



UCSO investigators believe someone in the community can help them identify the two people who broke into the Ivylog Dollar General last week. Pictured here, the man who used a hammer on the door.

them from finishing what they started – the pair had a large reusable shopping bag with trees printed on it, possibly a Christmas design – and they took off running up Ivylog Road, east in the direction of Moccasin Road.

Investigators are unsure if the couple had a vehicle parked nearby but believe they could be residents living nearby who walked from their home, Brackett said.

Regardless of not having taken any merchandise, when caught, the duo will be facing burglary and criminal damage to property charges, Brackett said, noting that getting them off the street is important not only for the sake of justice

in this case but prevention of future criminal offenses.

"Just because they didn't get anything from the store, they still committed a burglary – they went there with the intentions of stealing and committing this burglary," Brackett said. "It's just as serious to us as if they got \$10,000 worth of inventory out of the store."

Sgt. Rachel Mann is actively working the case, and she said the property damage is estimated at over \$1,000. After patrol deputies cleared the scene, Mann and Brackett traveled to the store to conduct interviews and canvas the area, to include door-knocking in

*See Burglary Suspects, Page 6A*

## Celebrate Fourth of July at Meeks Park & Suches

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**North Georgia News**  
**editor@nganews.com**

Thousands of residents from around the region will be flocking to Union County this weekend to wish America a very Happy 249th Birthday, with standout Independence Day celebrations planned for Meeks Park, Suches and Lake Nottely.

The Annual Red, White & Blairsville Fourth of July Fireworks inside Meeks Park Friday will be the main event

in town, free to attend and organized as always by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

Chamber President Steve Rowe hopes families will come out early to take advantage of the best parking spots and a full day of fun at Meeks, complete with bounce houses, cornhole, kickball, food trucks, local church-sponsored food/activities and more.

The bounteous fireworks display will spark off after dark, typically around 9:20 p.m. and lasting roughly 25-30 minutes, and guests often show up hours in advance – some as early as 9 a.m. – to do some barbecuing, play family games and generally enjoy the patriotic holiday outdoors.

Parking will be available throughout Meeks Park as well as across Georgia 515 at the North Georgia Technical College Blairsville Campus, where guests will also find several food trucks with crowd favorites: boiled peanuts, cotton

*See Independence Day, Page 3A*

## WWII Vet Flo Gerrard celebrates 100th birthday



The American Legion Post 121 and Auxiliary had a blast wishing Flo Gerrard a Happy 100th Birthday on June 24, with family and friends. Photo by Shelly Knight

**By Shelly Knight**  
**North Georgia News**  
**Staff Writer**

World War II Veteran Florence "Flo" Gerrard turned 100 years old on Tuesday, June 24, and the American Legion

Ira Weaver Post 121 and many others joined her at Stonehenge Senior Living to celebrate not only her birthday but also her selfless service to the nation.

In turning 100, Gerrard has joined an elite group of individuals, as there are only 37,000 centenarians in the United States today – about 0.01% of the population.

Imagine living through World War II, the Korean

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**Early Submission Deadline for July Fourth Week is Thursday, July 3, at 4 p.m.**

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# NGTC FBLA Members earn Top Honors at 2025 Nationals



(L-R): Michael Ramirez; Daisy Paramo; Kiley Snelgrove; Angela Banks, NGTC FBLA adviser; Mona Williams, NGTC FBLA adviser; Adrionna Spencer; Renee Petenbrink; and Karen Hicks.

North Georgia Technical College (NGTC) Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) members recently earned top honors during the 2025 FBLA Collegiate National Leadership Conference held in Dallas, Texas. The NGTC FBLA Chapter received two national awards as well as the National Hollis and Kitty Guy Gold Seal Chapter Award of Merit.

Renee Petenbrink of Toccoa, GA, Kiley Snelgrove of Lavonia, GA, and Adrionna Spencer of Blairsville, GA claimed sixth place in the State of the Chapter presentations, while Snelgrove also earned tenth place in the Computer Applications competition.

Mona Williams was recognized as Georgia FBLA Collegiate Executive Director, and the Georgia FBLA Collegiate Chapter won first place for Alzheimer’s Fundraising.

During the 2025 FBLA Collegiate State Leadership Conference held in Atlanta earlier this year, the NGTC FBLA Chapter received a total of 18 individual, team, or chapter awards with all seven students qualifying for nationals.

Karen Hicks of Blue Ridge, GA claimed first place in the Emerging Business Issues competition, while Snelgrove and Petenbrink placed second in Business Commu-

nications and Foundations of Accounting, respectively.

Third place winners included Petenbrink in the Business Presentation competition; Snelgrove in Computer Applications; Spencer in the Future Business Executive competition; Zoe Fitzgerald of Blairsville, GA in Organizational Behavior and Leadership and Parliamentary Procedure; Michael Ramirez of Alto, GA in the Project Management Competition; and Petenbrink, Snelgrove, and Spencer in State of the Chapter presentations.

Daisy Paramo of Alto, GA placed fourth in Parliamentary Procedure and fifth in Foundations of Accounting, while Hicks placed fifth in Foundations of Communication. Ramirez also placed sixth in Foundations of Entrepreneurship.

The NGTC FBLA Chapter also received the Platinum Chapter Award of Merit and first place for Alzheimer’s Fundraising. Hicks received the Who’s Who in Georgia FBLA Collegiate Award, while Snelgrove received the Wings of Excellence Award.

NGTC FBLA advisers are Mona Williams, business technology instructor, and Angela Banks, business technology instructor.

“On behalf of North Georgia Technical College, we are incredibly proud of

our outstanding students and dedicated advisers who represented the college at the FBLA Collegiate National Leadership Conference,” said Stephanie Benson, NGTC vice president of academic affairs. “Attending nationals is a remarkable achievement, and we celebrate their success and the positive impact they continue to have on our campus and community.”

“We are very proud of our students for their hard work and dedication not only as individuals but also as a team,” said Mona Williams, NGTC FBLA adviser and business technology instructor. “These students stepped outside their comfort zones and competed nationally against some of the brightest future business leaders in the country. While each of them excel in different areas, it is evident that they are all team players and take pride in their performances. We look forward to watching them grow and succeed in the business world.”

FBLA is the largest business career and technical student organization in the world, with more than 230,000 members. For more information regarding North Georgia Technical College programs, admission, or student organizations, visit northgatech.edu or call 706-754-7700.

## American Radio Relay League’s Annual Field Day 2025 at Meeks



North Georgia Tri-State Amateur Radio Club, Inc. Field Day participants

The North Georgia Tri-State Amateur Radio Club, Inc. participated along with more than 40,000 other hams in North America in the American Radio Relay League’s annual Field Day. We set up our antennas and transmitting stations at Meeks Park to demonstrate ham radio’s science, skill and service to our communi-

ties and our nation. It combines public service, emergency preparedness, community outreach and technical skills all in one event.

To learn more about Amateur Radio, our Club or to find out how you can get licensed please visit our website at [www.w4ngt.com](http://www.w4ngt.com) for more information.

## Duck Derby...from Page 1A

winning ducks bring anything from gift certificates to nice items and even gift baskets. The last duck to cross the finish line, aka the “Lame Duck,” comes with a gas grill prize courtesy of Home Depot in Blairsville.

From an agency perspective, Baxter sees the derby and beneficiary Christmas program as efforts by the larger local law enforcement family, including the Union County Sheriff’s Office, School Police Department, state agencies that work here and volunteers from neighboring jurisdictions.

“Any of us can attest that Shop With A Cop is the best thing that we do all year,” Baxter said. “Since we started this program 25 years ago, we’ve taken close to 3,000 kids Christmas shopping. We’re pretty proud of that.”

Sheriff Shawn Dyer concurs. As the former assistant chief at Blairsville PD, Dyer has played an integral role in shepherding Shop With A Cop over the years, be it through program coordination or getting out the word on fundraising.

“I’ll continue to support it forever because I’ve seen what it does for the families of those kids to be able to get a Christmas when, a lot of times, they may not get anything,” Sheriff Dyer said.

New in 2025, Blairsville PD is accepting donations and ticket purchases via Venmo using a QR code, making online payments a cinch. The department asks that people buying tickets through Venmo provide a name and phone number at time of purchase to keep track of who gets the tickets.

And the derby is currently accepting additional prize donations: “If you’re a local business and would like to donate a prize for this race, contact our office at the Blairsville Police Department, and we’ll make arrangements to meet with you and pick up

### Georgia Southern 2025 Dean’s List

Georgia Southern University recently recognized approximately 3,800 students for excellence in academics on the Spring 2025 Dean’s List. To be eligible for the Dean’s List, a student must have at least a 3.5 grade point average and carry a minimum of 12 hours for the semester.

Local students include: Bridget Gardner; Lillian Dowdy; Margaret Delatte; Genesis Woody; Liam Smith; and Kaitlyn Rogers all of Blairsville; and Stephanie Kirk of Morganton.

your donation.”

Blairsville PD is open weekdays between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. at 96 Blue Ridge Street and can be reached at 706-835-1692. The Sheriff’s Office is located at 378 Beasley Street in Blairsville.

### Mississippi State 2025 Dean’s List

Students named to the Deans’ List at Mississippi State must have achieved a grade-point average between 3.5 and 3.79, based on a 4.0 scale, while completing at least 12 semester hours of coursework with no incomplete grades or grades lower than a C.

The following local students attained this honor: Connor Nottingham, of Morganton, GA; and Marissa Hasnani, of Suches, GA.



# Independence Day...from Page 1A

candy, pork rinds, kettle corn and lemonade.

Importantly, there are no fireworks allowed at North Georgia Tech, so attendees are asked to keep those at home.

The cost of fireworks goes up about 5% each year, Rowe said, and fortunately, a bevy of generous sponsors plus the Union County Commissioner's Office have contributed financially in 2025 to help make the decades-old tradition possible for locals and visitors alike.

Community members can help support the free-to-the-public fireworks show, too, by purchasing the new Fourth of July T-shirts with a hand-drawn design by the chamber's own Gracie Nix, and by participating in the "Where the Mountains and Memories Meet" raffle valued at over \$3,000.

Each \$10 raffle ticket provides a chance to win the whole raffle package centered on tailgating and summer fun. The winner will be announced just before the fireworks show, and people do not need to be present to win.

Tickets and T-shirts can be purchased at the Chamber of Commerce and United Community Bank, and the chamber will have people walking around with tickets in the run-up to the fireworks.

"The Fourth of July is a celebration of our nation's independence," Rowe said. "You look at everything that's going on in the world, and you look at the struggle that other counties have – I know this sounds kind of geekish or whatever, but I'm proud to be an American.

"To me, celebrating the Fourth of July is celebrating our history and how we got to where we are. It's the community coming together, from the grandparents to the kids; it's picnics during the day and fireworks at night.

"And we definitely celebrate the veterans every chance we get, including on Independence Day, because they're the ones that have put their lives on the line to give us the freedoms we've got."

Folks looking for a more intimate Fourth of July experience can attend the annual fireworks by the Suches Fire Department. The fireworks will shoot off at dark on Friday, with festivities to begin around



**Fourth of July Fireworks are a patriotic tradition here in Union County.**

Photo by Mark Smith/2018

5 p.m. at Woody Gap School and food/drinks available for purchase.

"This event is made possible by the generous support of sponsors to cover the costs of fireworks," the Suches Fire Department has noted in the past. "This allows us to avoid using operating funds of the department, which go towards protecting and serving our community."

People who would like to offset the costs of the fireworks display, hosted annually by the firefighters of Suches, can send donations to P.O. Box 84, Suches, GA 30572. There will also be firefighters walking around with boots to collect donations for attendees who wish to give.

Independence Day celebrations will continue this weekend with the ever-popular Nottely Boat Parade. Held at the Nottely Marina, the parade features a contest with trophies, and boat decoration themes range from patriotic to whatever people dream up with their imaginations.

The parade will take place on Saturday, July 5, starting at 11 a.m., with trophies and awards to be handed out at noon.

"Join us for the decades long Lake Nottely tradition!" the Marina invites. "Decorate whatever vessel you have and join the Fourth of July

celebration as only Lake Nottely does the best! Pontoon, jet ski, canoe, amphib car... whatever floats you on down!"

"Just join in on the fun and enjoy participating! Free, fun event for the whole family and no registration. Our lake folks just show up full of spirit each and every year!"

2025 trophies include three "Should've Been A Trophy" Awards, a "Classic Boat Award," the "Fun Bunch Award," "Most Patriotic Award," plus special trophies for First, Second and Third Places.

"Carpooling/boat pooling is highly recommended," the Marina said. "Parking and anchoring space is limited. Please stay outside the no-wake zone near buoys without obstructing navigation of others (leave room for boats to pass by as needed).

"All boat operators and guests must obey all laws and regulations. Please, no swimming on or around boats during the parade. No swimming from or around docks.

"The marina crew looks forward to sharing another wonderful Fourth of July weekend with you all!"

To see other local Independence Day events, check out the chamber calendar at <https://www.visitblairsvillega.com/>.

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# Burglary Suspects...from Page 1A



The Sheriff’s Office said the cost to repair the door after the Ivylog Dollar General was burglarized is estimated at over \$1,000.

nearby neighborhoods. Already, they have generated multiple leads, though none have panned out. Brackett said that any information, no matter how trivial it might seem, could lead to a break in the case, and UCSO is committed to investigating every single tip that comes in.

The Sheriff’s Office is hoping someone spotted either a couple walking or a car parked in the Ivylog area around the time of the break-in and can provide a description; that a neighbor of the individuals might recognize their clothing from the images; that a family member can identify one or both individuals; or that someone came across discarded gloves, masks or clothes that could narrow down the search area.

“Somebody knows these folks,” Brackett said. “Even though they had masks on and gloves, somebody will recognize the clothing they’re wearing, recognize them by their height, the way they carry themselves.

“So, we’re asking for the public to help, and they can call the Sheriff’s Office with any tips or information they’ve got. We’ll keep all tips anonymous, and we’ll check every tip out; even if it seems silly to them, still call in.

“And we’re asking anybody in the area, if they’ve got cameras at their house that show the road or any roads that are off of Ivylog, please check them back during that time and see if they see anything; if anybody catches anything on their cameras, please call and tell us.”



Do you recognize anything about this man and/or the bag he is carrying?



UCSO believes the individuals who broke into the Dollar General are a young man and woman.



# Flo Turns 100...from Page 1A



**Legion Auxiliary members prepared a special birthday card – 100 of them! – to celebrate with Flo Gerrard’s centenarian status last week.**  
Photo by Shelly Knight

War, the Vietnam War, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the first steps on the moon, the fall of the Soviet Union, the invention of the internet, COVID, and now the possibility of peace in the Middle East.

Nancy Kunz, President of the American Legion Auxiliary Unit 121 in Blairsville, hosted the party.

“Flo is one of our members,” Kunz said. “She and her husband have a great past, always contributing to the military. They started the North Georgia Honor Guard. She is an amazing woman.

“We come and visit her and all the veterans here at Stonehenge each month. We thought there would be no better way to capture all of the good wishes than to come today and celebrate her birthday.”

Many attendees came to pay their respects, including at least 35 family members, and Gerrard remarked that the occasion was “overwhelming.”

“It’s too much; my heart is still beating, but it’s beating awfully fast,” said Gerrard, whose favorite birthday gift was a statuette of retired Braves third baseman Chipper Jones. “Baseball is my favorite game. I’ve watched it for over 35 years. I saw his first game and this last game.”

Speaking about her military past, Gerrard recounted her time in the Women’s Army Corps as a nurse caring for amputee patients down at McCloskey General Hospital in Waco, Texas. She joined when she was 19 and served on a ward with over 100 casualties.

“I took care of the amputees and taught them how to take care of themselves,” Gerrard said. “I taught them how to swim without an arm or leg.

“When I left the Army, I stayed home to be a wife and a mother. I raised three lovely girls. My favorite things in this life were raising my children and my world travels.”

Born Florence Margaret Ness, she was the daughter of Norwegian parents and spent much of her childhood in North Dakota. When she was 9, her parents sent Flo and her brother Bob to live with their grandparents in Proctor, Minnesota. Her father, a travelling preacher, wanted Flo to have stability in her schooling.

One of her fondest memories occurred when the Queen of England made a trip to Canada in 1939 and Flo

was chosen by her Girl Scout Troop to present the queen with flowers. She also had the honor of holding the King’s coat, which was loaded with all sorts of medals.

Flo met her first husband Frank Ford while attending church in Chicago. He began wooing her immediately and they married. Since Frank was being deployed to Europe, they decided the best thing for Flo to do was to join up, prompting her service in the Women’s Army Corps.

The WAC was established to allow women to serve their country in non-combat roles within the U.S. Army. Over 150,000 women did just that, and their service freed up the men for combat.

Flo and Frank were very active in the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and supported the Disabled American Veterans in Blairsville. Then in 1981, they started the North Georgia Honor Guard here.

The Honor Guard is comprised of volunteers from all service branches who provide Military Honors at funerals. Flo and Frank’s involvement eventually led to the building of the Holly Hill Cemetery on their land, the final resting place of many veterans. When Frank died in 1995, he and Flo had been married for 51 years.

“I’ve never been sorry that I joined the WACs, though my husband and I were separated for the first three years of our marriage,” Gerrard said. “The lessons I learned in the Army have helped me all through my life. I encourage any young woman to join the military.”

In the 30 years since her husband’s passing, Florence has traveled to 36 countries. She remarried and then became a widow once again, but that has not stopped her from living a rich and fulfilling life.

What are her secrets? She’s been an avid swimmer her entire life; she has never smoked; and she eats healthy food, organic when possible. And she has a sip of whiskey every night before bed: “My doctor prescribed that over 60 years ago!”

Flo has spent her life in service to others due to her “greatest wish” being to help other people, “and that’s why I say, from the bottom of my heart, if you have money and don’t use it for good, there’s no use having it.”

“I just want to say to people that have money – you can’t take it to Heaven. You

should help people while you can,” she added.

To mark the 100th anniversary of her birth, the American Legion presented Flo with a banner containing 100 signed birthday cards commemorating an amazing woman and her amazing life.