

# North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, August 14, 2024

## Union General Hospital loses civil trial

### Jury awards \$47 million to plaintiff

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

A Union County jury has found Union General Hospital Inc. at fault for medical malpractice and negligent credentialing regarding a civil action brought by a former patient.

As a result of the trial, Union General is on the hook for half of the \$47 million in damages awarded by the jury to the plaintiff – that's \$23.5 million – pending an appeals process.

The plaintiff, Anna Giacomini, required a double amputation after suffering a bacterial infection that spread during her stay at Union County Nursing Home and Union General Hospital nearly nine years ago, in December 2015.

Based on a lawsuit originally filed in 2017, the civil trial began last month and was conducted in two phases between July 15 and Aug. 5 at the Union County Courthouse, with Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge James E. Cornwell presiding.

Jury members handed down their first verdict on July 30, finding that medical malpractice had occurred, and their second verdict pertaining to negligent credentialing on Aug. 5.

As part of the verdict, the jury awarded \$47 million in damages to Giacomini, "for past and future pain and suffering," court records show.

The jury apportioned the damages as follows: 5% to Union General Hospital for the medical malpractice. See *Union General Trial, Page 3A*



## Hayes comes aboard as 4-H program leader

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Katie Hayes has some big shoes to fill as the new leader of Union County 4-H, but she can't wait to settle into her new career that kicked off Aug. 1.

"I'm really excited about it," Hayes said of her position, which focuses on youth education and development for local students through the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Program.

Interviews were underway to find the right fit for the opening even before longtime 4-H leader Timothy Jennings retired earlier this summer. And when they found her, she discovered that Jennings was helpful even after his retirement, having left his successor a packet of notes.

Hayes originally hails



Katie Hayes

from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, but has traveled across the country in pursuit of education. In 2019, she graduated from Western Carolina University with a bachelor's in environmental science. From there, she went to Indiana University to master in public affairs.

Her past work experience includes an environmental consulting position, during which she worked from home, often communicating with people states away. It was helpful when she and her husband – a local of Murphy, North Carolina – moved to Union County after deciding that Blairsville was "the perfect place" for them to start a life together.

It wasn't long after they moved here that Hayes noticed the 4-H opportunity.

"When this position opened up, I had been thinking of getting more involved in the community," Hayes said. "I'd say this is probably the best way to do that."

Although no stranger to 4-H, Hayes said the program works a bit differently in Tennessee, being less "hands-on" than its Georgia iteration.

See *4-H Leader Hayes, Page 2A*

## 2024-25 school year gets off to a great start



Young bus riders loading up at the Primary School at the end of their first day back to school on Friday.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Along with believing in success for all, another popular motto of Union County Schools is "Union United," on full display when classes resumed for a brand-new school year on Friday, Aug. 9.

Despite a Cleveland

Street powerline mishap that resulted in temporary electricity loss at the Primary, Elementary and Alternative schools as well as the Central Office that morning, the rest of the day ran smoothly and proved to be a great start for the new year.

"We got here this morning and there was no power," recalled fourth-grade

teacher Rhonda Colwell, who said that students were held in the gym a few extra minutes; usually, they go to teachers at 7:30, but that morning, they faced a slight delay.

"By the time 8 o'clock rolled around, we were ready, (the students) were ready, and we didn't miss a beat," Colwell

See *First Day of School, Page 6A*

## Georgia Mountain Fair opens this weekend

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

HIWASSEE – Boasting new events and a slight change in schedule, the 73rd Annual Georgia Mountain Fair promises to be a unique experience when it returns over the next two weekends, starting with the crowning of a new Miss Georgia Mountain Fair on Thursday, Aug. 15, for \$5 admission.

Fairgrounds Manager Hilda Thomason revealed that while the always-popular carnival section of the Fair will be open for all nine days between Aug. 16 and Aug. 24, craft vendors and live entertainment will only feature on the weekends.

For the first week, vendors and live entertainment will run on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, while the second week will see these offerings continue Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

"It's just not been profitable for us to have it Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays," Thomason said, emphasizing that the carnival rides will be open every day.

Courtesy of the Hiwassee Garden Club, the historic Flower Show will also be coming back this year, showcasing a theme of "Elements and Weather



The Georgia Mountain Fair returns this week for its 73rd outing, to include all the family-friendly fun and games of the annual carnival inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

on Earth." Visitors can view the displays during the first weekend of the Fair, from Aug. 16 through Aug. 18.

The second weekend, Aug. 22-24, will feature a different kind of public display through the Photography Exhibit & Contest, which

welcomes amateur and professional photographers to submit their best pictures in the categories People, Scenery, Flora, Fauna and Abstracts.

There is no entry fee for the exhibit, which will feature cash prizes for the best photos. See *GA Mountain Fair, Page 2A*

## UCSO participates in multi-agency investigation

News Special

Deputies with the Union County Sheriff's Office assisted a recent multi-agency investigation dubbed "Operation Partnership" that resulted in the arrest of a Northwest Georgia man for the sexual exploitation of children.

On July 31, the Haralson County Sheriff's Office and its Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force Officer reached out to Union County Sheriff's Office ICAC Task Force Officer Sgt. Marc Pilote to assist them in a large-scale and complex investigation.

Sgt. Pilote, along with Sgt. Rachel Mann and Staff Sgt. Jay McCarter, sprang into action, assisting Haralson County Sheriff's Office.

With a coordinated effort, the Haralson County Sheriff's Office was able to take its suspect into custody.

"This is a perfect example how we continue to work with other agencies to make sure these criminals are



the files were in fact CSAM and collected further evidence of the individual who was downloading these images/videos.

While working on this case, HCSO Sgt. Jason Bowman received information from the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Agency that they had received a tip that this same individual had illegal firearms. The subject who was under investigation is a convicted felon.

On Thursday, Aug. 1, deputies, members of the Crime Suppression Unit and investigators intercepted and took Stephen Knight into custody on his warrants.

Simultaneously, deputies, members of the Crime Suppression Unit, the Northwest Georgia Drug Task Force, investigators and ATF served a search warrant at Knight's home, located in Buchanan, Georgia.

During that search warrant, electronic devices were taken, and two firearms. See *Operation Partnership, Page 3A*

brought to justice," UCSO said.

The investigation began on July 11 when the Haralson County Sheriff's Office received information from the Georgia Bureau of Investigations about the download of Child Sexual Abuse Material, or CSAM.

In this case, Haralson County Sheriff's Sgt. Brent Duggins, the Crimes Against Children Specialist, received over 40 cybertips on a subject that lived in Haralson County that was downloading this illegal material.

During the investigation, Sgt. Duggins verified a few of



Vol. 115 No. 34

Arrests - 10A Legals - 10B  
Church - 2B Obits - 4B  
Classifieds - 10B Sports - 8A  
Opinion - 4A

**Benefit Concert for Student Trace Hancock 8/24** See Page 6A

**Quilt of Valor Awarded to Navy Veteran** See Page 12A

**Free Adult Classes @ Union Co. Public Library** See Page 7B



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# 4-H Leader Hayes...from Page 1A

and she noted that the local version is more “structured” compared to the club meetings she attended in school.

“4-H has always been something I was aware of,” Hayes said, looking back on her own schooling. “(Future Farmers of America) was more the big player, but 4-H was something that I was drawn to specifically because of its mission.”

She views the wide variety of options available to students through 4-H as a boon to the community, because not only do those subjects allow

kids to discover themselves, but they keep students occupied and get them out of the house as well.

Just two weeks in, Hayes believes it’s too early to say for sure what her tenure will bring to the program, though she hopes to preserve local traditions such as the 4-H dances. Her biggest goal for now is to make the transition between Jennings and herself as seamless as possible.

“I really just want to make sure that everything that’s done makes sense and the kids love it, because ultimately, that’s what it comes down to,” Hayes said.

She acknowledges this new journey is going to be a learning experience for her. With some history as a teaching aide, she knows how to handle

a classroom – albeit for college students. Luckily, the same general rules apply when it comes to interacting with much younger learners.

“I want to make it a fun experience, because ultimately, people don’t care about things that are boring,” Hayes said with a laugh, adding that while standards dictate much of what goes on in the classroom, she hopes to find ways to make 4-H stand out from – and enhance – other extracurricular activities.

Self-described as adaptable, Hayes hopes to learn from other teachers and plans on working around their schedules so that kids interested in the program can still be involved in things like sports or band.

Her vision for the future doesn’t just involve navigating

the road to fitting in but also maintaining 4-H as a space that students feel welcomed.

“This is a place where all of these kids can come together and just be,” Hayes said. “That’s all that I can hope for, is that the kids feel like this is a good, happy, fun, safe learning environment.”

And she already has a head start. By working with youth programs from multiple local churches, Hayes has met several of the children she’ll be teaching, and they’ve left their mark on her; she describes them as “awesome.”

Hayes believes “it’s just such a cool experience to be with kids and learn alongside them,” and, knowing she’ll get ample opportunity to do so in her new career, she looks forward to making a name for herself among the community – and its youngest generations.

# GA Mountain Fair...from Page 1A

in each category, amounting to 31 winners in total.

Train rides and new attractions at the carnival are just a couple of the additions scheduled for this year’s return. Along with that, visitors can expect some new vendors and food options.

Down at Eller’s Holler, the kids can enjoy a petting zoo complete with goats, pigs and Highland cows, and if families arrive before 11 a.m. on Saturday, Aug. 17, they can watch the annual Georgia Mountain Fair Parade that is set to roll through Hiawassee.

Other entertainment at the beloved Fair tradition includes dog tricks, pony rides, clogging and square dancing.

Music fans can finish up their days by heading up

to the Anderson Music Hall for concerts. Gene Watson and The Bellamy Brothers will start things out on Aug. 16, followed by Tommy James and the Shondells on Aug. 17.

As part of the worship service on Sunday, Aug. 18, The Inspirations, The Martins and The Perrys will be performing.

Picking back up on Aug. 22 will be the American Pop show, featuring The Grass Roots, The Buckingham and The Box Tops.

Then, on Aug. 23, the Oak Ridge Boys will be visiting the Fairgrounds as part of their American Made Farewell Tour. Closing out the Fair on Saturday, Aug. 24, will be Crowder, a contemporary Christian band.

General admission for the Fair is \$7, but those who

purchase concert tickets in advance can also enter and enjoy everything it has to offer. As always, children 12 and under have free admission.

By ordering tickets online at [www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com](http://www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com), presale deals for unlimited carnival rides can save up to \$5 or \$40 for individual wristbands and family packs respectively. Otherwise, unlimited ride tickets are \$25, and on Saturdays after 5 p.m., \$30.

Monday, Aug. 19, is the special “\$2 Day,” where all carnival rides are \$2, and Aug. 20-21, guests can pay \$25 for two unlimited ride passes.

For more information and full event details, visit the website of the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

# Annual Photography Contest at the 73rd GA Mountain Fair



The Annual Photography Contest at the August 2024 Georgia Mountain Fair in Hiawassee, GA, begins on Thursday, August 22 at 11 AM and lasts during the remainder of this 73rd Annual Summer Fair, ending on Saturday, August 24.

The Contest is free, but over \$1500 in money-prizes are given in several categories for winning photos. Most of the exhibitors and many winners over the years have not been professionals, although professional photographers are very welcomed to participate. Leaders of the Contest

are always looking for new talent, so new exhibitors are highly welcomed.

Those who wish to exhibit their pictures are requested to sign up by Friday, August 2, by submitting a registration form, which can be obtained (with the rules) at the main office of the Fairgrounds in Hiawassee on U.S. Highway 76. Or, participants may print them from the web site: [2024georgiamountainfair/fairschedule/fairformsandapplications/photographycontestapplication](http://2024georgiamountainfair/fairschedule/fairformsandapplications/photographycontestapplication)

Judges will strictly follow the new display rules in place this year. Therefore, exhibitors must please pay close attention to the instructions found with the registration form. Setting up photos is only from 9 AM to 1 PM on Tuesday, August 20 (not Monday as in the past). Judging starts promptly at 1 PM

the same day. Participants can learn about winning photos on Thursday, August 22, when the contest is open to the public. Prize money is awarded on the final day of the contest. Judges’ names are not revealed but each one is an experienced photographer who comes to the Fair from several cities and states. Photos may not be removed early and will remain in the exhibition hall until the end of the last day of the Fair.

The photo exhibit opens to the public at 11 AM on Thursday morning, August 22. After reading the registration form and the rules, participants may have questions answered by directly contacting the contest director, Janet Cosby through email only at [janetcosby@gmail.com](mailto:janetcosby@gmail.com)

Please do not call the office at the Georgia Mountain Fair for answers to contest questions.

# 73rd Annual Georgia Mountain Fair Parade

**73rd Annual Georgia Mountain Fair Parade**  
**Categories:**  
**Best Overall \$2000**  
**Businesses:**  
 1st Place ... \$1500  
 2nd Place ... \$500  
**Organizations, Clubs, Churches, Individuals:**  
 1st Place ... \$1500  
 2nd Place ... \$500  
**School:**  
 1st Place ... \$1500  
 2nd Place ... \$500

It’s time to celebrate the 73rd year of the Georgia Mountain Fair and we want you to be part of the festivities! The Georgia Mountain Fair has many new and exciting additions for 2024. While honoring our mountain heritage we are looking forward to a bright future. Our theme for the 2024 Georgia Mountain Fair Parade is “Come for the Mountains, Stay for the Fun”. The parade will take place on Saturday, August 17, 2024 at 11 AM.

Please pre-register to ensure you are entered in the contest and that you have the best placement possible. Enclosed is the entry form for the Parade and a copy of the rules. Make your plans now; this is going to be an eventful year!

## Georgia Mountain Fair Parade Regulations

- Parade begins forming at 9:30 a.m. behind the South State Bank.
- Judging will begin promptly at 9:45 a.m: **Those who wish to be judged must arrive prior to 9:30 a.m.** If not, your float will not be judged.

**73rd Annual Georgia Mountain Fair Parade**  
**Theme: “Come for the Mountains, Stay for the Fun”**  
**Parade Entry Form**

Organization / Business / Club, Etc: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Specify Entry Type: Float \_\_\_\_\_ Vehicle \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 Contact Person: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

- 4 Ways to enter:**
- (1) In Person: Take completed entry form to the GMF office located at 1311 Music Hall Road, Hiawassee, GA
  - (2) Email: [gamtntfair@gmail.com](mailto:gamtntfair@gmail.com)
  - (3) Fax: (706) 896-4209
  - (4) Mail: Georgia Mountain Fair PO Box 444, Hiawassee, GA 30546
- August 17, 2024  
 Parade starts at 11:00 A.M.  
 All entrants are requested to pre-register  
 Arrive before 9:30 A.M.

Due to the outstanding number of vintage vehicles we have participating in our parade, it makes judging in this category impossible! However, we do GREATLY appreciate your participation. The vintage vehicles are a huge crowd pleaser.

- Floats should reflect the theme of the parade.
- Parade starting time: 10:55 a.m. - rain or shine.
- Moving and motorized vehicles of all types must be kept away from the horses.
- Position of entries in the parade will be determined by the Georgia Mountain Fair Parade Committee.
- Parade marshals will maintain a 20-foot distance between entrants for the parade announcer to identify floats and category winners.
- Alcoholic beverages will not be permitted on the parade route or on the parade grounds. Violators will be referred to law enforcement officials. Motorized vehicles must keep in pace with the parade and will not be allowed to “stay back” and then use non-parade friendly speeds to catch up.

# Union General Trial...from Page 1A

of multiple employees; 45% to Union General for the negligent credentialing of Dr. James Heaton; 45% to Heaton himself; and 5% to Dr. Janaki Narravula, court records show. Neither Heaton nor Narravula were parties to the case but were found to be "at fault" in the medical malpractice verdict, as state law allows parties to be apportioned part of the fault without having to be actual defendants in a case.

Under the Georgia Apportionment Statute, parties may have responsibility apportioned to them without being defendants so that defendants found liable are only held responsible for the percentage of the harm that each is determined to have caused.

It was unclear at press time if either of the nonparties

– Heaton or Narravula – had settled with Giacomo prior to the trial.

Narravula was a hospitalist at Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville at the time of Giacomo's initial injuries in November 2015, when she had to be admitted for wounds sustained in a donkey attack, court records show.

Heaton was director of Union County Nursing Home when Giacomo was transferred there for physical rehabilitation about a week after first being admitted in Gainesville.

Giacomi's injuries resulted in a flesh-eating bacteria infection that worsened during her weeklong stay in Union County, which included being transferred to Union General Hospital after several days in the Nursing Home.

Because Union General "did not call a surgeon to

evaluate and treat the infection," the progressing infection ultimately necessitated amputations of her left arm and leg after she was transported back to Northeast Georgia Medical in December 2015, per court documents.

Represented in the medical malpractice verdict, multiple alleged delays in proper medical evaluation and care by staff at both the Nursing Home and Union General caused Giacomo's infection to reach a "point of no return," amounting to negligence that led to her amputations.

Pertaining to Heaton, Giacomo's lawsuit said that, as Nursing Home medical director and her assigned physician during her time in Union County, he failed to evaluate her condition in a timely fashion, resulting in delayed infection intervention.

In an unrelated case, Heaton and then-Union General CEO Mike Gowder were arrested in February 2016, just two months after Giacomo's stay at the local nursing home and hospital, and the two men were later tried and found guilty of federal prescription drug crimes.

Giacomi argued that the hospital "at the very least had a reasonable suspicion" that Heaton was the subject of an investigation by the Drug Enforcement Administration when she was being treated and was therefore negligent in keeping him on as a credentialed physician.

And the jury agreed, finding in favor of Giacomo's separate negligent credentialing claim based on a "preponderance of the evidence" presented by her legal team at trial.

Former defendants Dr. Kathryn Blocker, The Southland Medical Group, LLC and Blocker Healthcare,

LLC; and Dr. Jeffrey McIntire and Gainesville Imaging Associates, P.C. were successfully dismissed from the case, leaving Union General Hospital Inc. as the sole defendant.

In the leadup to and during the trial, Union General maintained that it had not committed medical malpractice nor negligent credentialing, and CEO Kevin Bierschen said last

week he could not comment on the outcome because "the legal proceedings are still ongoing."

"We're going back to doing our job and providing good quality care in our community, like we have been," Bierschen said. "We're here to focus on our patient care and our quality outcomes."

The hospital will have a set period in the coming days to appeal the verdicts.

# Operation Partnership...from Page 1A

were found in Knight's bedroom.

The case then expanded over to Gadsden, Alabama, where Knight owned property. A search warrant was executed at that property by the ATF and Alabama Law Enforcement Agencies where multiple illegal firearms and other items were

found.

Stephen Scott Knight, 52, of Buchanan, is now facing five charges of Computer Pornography (Sexual Exploitation of Child) and one count of Possession of a Firearm by a Convicted Felon. Additional charges will be taken from other jurisdictions

and agencies involved.

"This case involved multiple jurisdictions and a lot of moving parts," Haralson County Sheriff Stacy Williams said. "It took a great amount of teamwork, and I could not be prouder of everyone that was involved in this case."

"Child cases of any type are generally some of the worst that investigators see, a child pornography case of this magnitude takes a lot of work behind the scenes."

"I appreciate Sgt. Duggins and the job he has done, and I appreciate all of the other agencies that have worked so hard to get this individual in custody and get a lot of illegal guns off of the streets."

Haralson County Sheriff's Office would like to thank the GBI Child Exploitation and Computer Crimes Unit, Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, Alabama State Patrol, Gadsden Police Department, Union County Sheriff's Office (GA) and the Northwest Georgia Drug Task Force for their steadfast assistance.

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erly and entirely dressed when you pass by the Tiler and enter your lodge room.

Proper attire is outlined in the Lodge By-Laws and Grand Lodge Code.

While it was always meant to request "Business Dress" or "Sunday Best", the proper attire for entering almost any Masonic Lodge is a "collared shirt".

A coat and tie are always welcome, however shorts, tee shirts, and open-toed shoes are never permitted.

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# First Day of School...from Page 1A



Remember to stop for school buses that are picking up and dropping off children! Failing to do so could be a costly mistake, as fines and penalties have increased this year.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

said. Union County High School serves a whopping 936 students, with the next highest population going to Union County Primary at 764. Union County Elementary had 683 in attendance, and 652 students returned to Union County Middle. Woody Gap School saw 59 kids on Day One.

New on Friday was the official rollout of the intercampus shuttle system, meant to help families with car-riding children attending multiple schools.

As discussed at previous school board meetings, parents drop off all kids at the school their youngest attends. From there, the five shuttle buses – identified by a special purple panther paw – pick up the older students and take them where they need to go.

According to Assistant Superintendent Tiffany Setzer, the plan was well-received by guardians and kids, and it looks like the new system will

be used through the rest of the year and beyond.

Anyone interested in taking advantage of the shuttle buses should stop by the front office of their youngest child's school to receive a green tag.

"We appreciate the parents and their patience, as these first few days of school with traffic are a little difficult until we get the kinks worked out," Setzer said.

Inside the classroom, things went just as well. Christy Townsend, a special education teacher at the Primary School, said the kids weren't frightened by the power outage, and instead saw it as an added bonus – they had never arrived at a school with the lights out before.

"Overall, our day was fabulous," Townsend said. "We stand together, we support each other, and that's what I saw a lot of today – teachers helping teachers, supporting teachers ... We are family, and our students, when they come in, they are

part of our family.

"So, this is the family of Union County Primary School. It couldn't have been better; I think it was a perfect day."

Setzer and Colwell agreed with the sentiment and shared that such was the case at other schools in the system. They and Townsend credit not just teachers and administration for making the transition from summer to the new school year a smooth one, but all the departments that make Union County Schools run "like a well-oiled machine."

And they recognize the role that community at large plays, whether that means local businesses bringing food to teachers or local pastors coming to pray over the schools.

"It was just nice to feel embraced not just our admin and each other, but outside, having the community come in," Townsend said. "And it's always appreciated. We appreciate everything."



School employees have diligently decorated for the start of the new year to greet students with a friendly, welcoming environment upon their return.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Citizens for a Better America meeting

Are you happy about the way things are going in Cherokee County, NC, the U.S. and the world?

Let's work together to create change, peacefully & patriotically!

We have an information packed meeting and guest speaker in store for you at the Citizens for a Better America monthly

meeting. This month's topic will be "Voter Integrity" with guest speaker David Warren (via live Zoom) from the NC Voter Integrity Team. Bring your questions. We are all concerned with this topic and making our vote count.

Thursday, August 15th at Legends Steakhouse in the private meeting room, 42

Tennessee Street, downtown Murphy, NC. Food ordering starts at 5 PM, meeting starts promptly at 6-7:30 PM.

This meeting is free & open to the public.

For more information: Website: <http://www.CitizensForABetterAmerica.com>; Email: [Contact@CitizensForABetterAmerica.com](mailto:Contact@CitizensForABetterAmerica.com); call: (828) 494-7403.

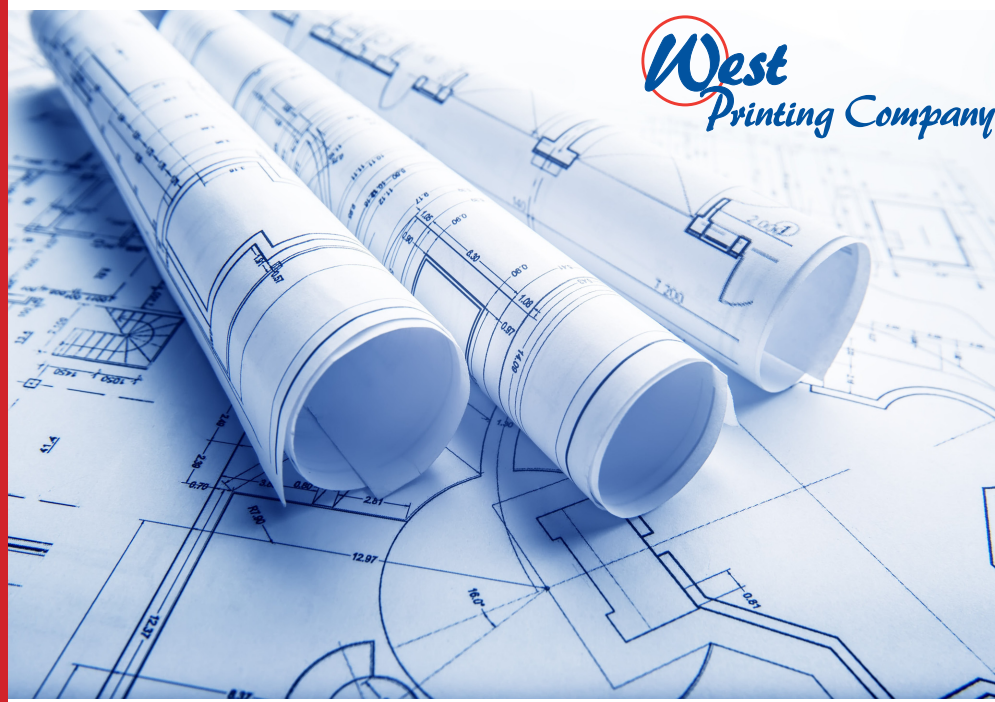
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August 24th

6 PM

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FINE ARTS CENTER  
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SHIN SPLINTS-DR. DREADHEAD  
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Follow Trace's Fight



All proceeds go to Trace's family to help with his treatments and all medical related expenses.



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