

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Lumpkin traffic stop leads to record meth bust for UCSO

By Charles Duncan
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SUCHES — A multimillion-dollar methamphetamine operation has been shut down in Suches, Union County Sheriff Mack Mason said.

Sheriff Mason said a multiagency effort including the Federal and Georgia bureaus of investigation and others led to the largest drug bust in the history of Union County.

The takedown of the multimillion-dollar meth ring began when a weekend traffic stop in Lumpkin County led to the discovery of almost 16 kilos of methamphetamine.

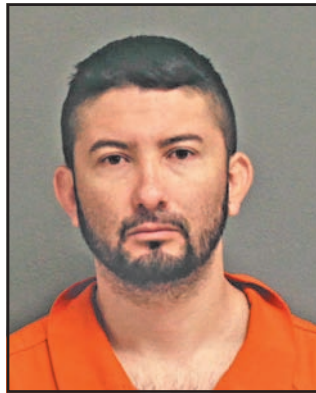
Angel Luis Rivera-Santiago, 42, of Norcross, and Victor Rafael Aponte, 30, of Dahlonega, were arrested at the scene of the traffic stop.

Their arrests led to a search warrant at 990 Flanders Road in Dahlonega, where 25-year-old Valentine Duarte-Vejar, also of Dahlonega, allegedly fled the home brandishing a firearm, authorities said.

Duarte-Vejar was taken into custody without incident, according to authorities, who added that a few grams of



Angel Luis Rivera-Santiago



Eleoncio Perez-Pineda



Jose Mario Duarte-Vejar



Valentine Duarte-Vejar



Victor Rafael Aponte

cocaine and approximately \$166,000 in cash was confiscated at the scene.

A total of three arrests led to a search warrant in Suches in rural Union County at 843 Cooper Creek Road, a brick residence just past Lake Winfield Scott, Sheriff Mason said.

It was here that multiple agencies converged on what authorities call a methamphetamine conversion laboratory, used to convert liquid methamphetamine to crystal form, authorities said.

"I would like to thank the Appalachian Regional Drug Enforcement Office for all the hard work that was put into this major drug bust," Sheriff Mason said.

Authorities discovered a handgun and 15 kilos, or 33 pounds, of crystal methamphetamine at the Suches lab, Sheriff Mason said.

In addition to the 30-plus kilos, or 70 pounds, of crystal methamphetamine discovered in both Union and Lumpkin counties valued at more than \$3.2 million, authorities disposed of approximately 300 pounds of environmental waste, which included unprocessed methamphetamine, Union County Sheriff's Capt. Chad Deyton said.

Appalachian Regional Drug Enforcement agents estimated the Suches lab was capable of producing a minimum of 25 to 50 kilos of crystal methamphetamine at a

time, Capt. Deyton said.

Rivera-Santiago, Aponte and Duarte-Vejar were each charged with trafficking methamphetamine, according to GBI.

Eleoncio Perez-Pineda, 29, and Jose Mario Duarte-Vejar, 25, were later arrested in Dahlonega and charged with conspiracy to manufacture methamphetamine, according to GBI.

The residence in Suches was not lived in, but rather was used as a processing site for the methamphetamine, Sheriff Mason said.

The Union County Sheriff's deputies, Union County Emergency Management Agency and



An interior view of a meth cookhouse discovered in Suches. The individuals involved were not local.

Hurricane Irma topples trees, causes damage in county

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Fortunately, Irma didn't injure or kill anyone when she moved through Union County the evening of Monday, Sept. 11, and morning of Tuesday, Sept. 12, though the county did experience more damage than expected.

In the wake of Irma, Union County EMA Director David Dyer and fellow first responders have been busy inside Fire Station 1, which is the home base of the county's Emergency Operations Center.

Dyer and the EMA are now working on taking stock of all damages associated with Irma, mostly due to fallen trees, broken power poles and downed lines, and some

damage to structures either from trees or wind.

Cleanup from the storm could take weeks or even months in the hardest hit areas of Union County, and total cost of damages and cleanup will not be known for some time.

The county will very likely be receiving disaster relief funds in the form of reimbursed monies from the federal and state governments in the future, which will go a long way toward easing the local burden of paying for storm damages.

President Donald J. Trump approved a major disaster declaration for Georgia on Friday, Sept. 15.

The result of the declaration is that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, will be

making available federal disaster assistance "to the state of Georgia to supplement state and local recovery efforts in the areas affected by Hurricane Irma," according to a FEMA news release.

"Federal funding is available to state and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for debris removal and emergency protective measures, including direct federal assistance, in all 159 counties," the release continued.

And on Sept. 13, Gov. Nathan Deal transferred \$3 million from the Governor's Emergency Fund to allow the Georgia Emergency and Homeland Security Agency to cover costs associated with Hurricane



Multiple trees fell on the home and property of Wilma Yates, 90, of Blairsville. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

Compassion on full display with Walk for Recovery

By Lily Avery
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Drug addiction is a very real disease that is close to home for thousands of families across America, and those who suffer with that malady not

only deserve treatment, but respect and encouragement to continue fighting.

And that is where Joanne Sales, Hope Against Heroin and countless other drug addiction support organizations in the county come in, all sharing one

common message to "addicts" and their loved ones — you do not have to go through this alone.

Sales, who is a fervent volunteer in the community with the Union County Historical Society and founder

of "Hope Against Heroin," held the first of many to come "Walk for Recovery" around Downtown Blairsville on Friday, Sept. 15.

Beginning at the Pat Haralson Memorial Civic Center, the walk was a success. See *Walk*, Page 8A

We Are Still Here to welcome tribal nations Thursday



Kathie Tiger Garrett and Jim Brown of the We Are Still Here initiative. Pictured here monitoring the installation of a statue base in Meeks Park in May. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It's finally here — on Thursday, Sept. 21, the We Are Still Here Tri-State Native American Initiative will be welcoming home the native peoples of Union County and the surrounding areas.

More than three years in the making, the historic occasion will begin at 10 a.m. in Meeks Park and is open to all who would attend.

Leaders and representatives of four tribal nations will be in attendance for the grand unveiling and dedication of a 10-foot bronze statue of a Native American stickball player by Pawnee Cherokee

sculptor Daniel Horsechief.

Those in attendance for the extraordinary gathering of tribal officials in Blairsville on Sept. 21 will be: Principal Chief James Floyd and Second Chief Louis Hicks of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation; Chief Joe Bunch of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians; Victoria Vazquez of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma; and a representative of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Also attending will be tribal officials of the Seminole, Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations of Oklahoma.

The statue to be unveiled has been named "Transcendent" See *Still Here*, Page 3A

UCHS 2017 Homecoming Court ready for big night

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County High School will crown its 2017-2018 Homecoming Queen during halftime of Friday night's football game against top-ranked Greater Atlanta Christian of Norcross.

Representing the senior class is Claudia Ledezma, Hannah Lickey, Jessica Palomo, Emily Rittenhouse and Baylee Young.

The junior class representatives are Aladdis Arnold, Allison Fair, Maddie Sutton and Carolyne Stone.

Megan Bright, Carolyne Collins and Cydney Rich are the sophomore class representatives, while Hannah Todd and Chloe Truex will represent the freshman class.

School Spirit Week will culminate on Friday afternoon with the annual Homecoming Parade through each of the campuses at Union County Schools.

Individual photographs can be viewed in this week's Sports Section.



Front Row (seated) L-R: Megan Bright, Cydney Rich, Carolyne Stone. Second Row: Chloe Truex, Allison Fair, Aladdis Arnold, Maddie Sutton, Carolyne Collins, Hannah Todd. Back Row: Claudie Ledezma, Jessica Palomo, Baylee Young, Hannah Lickey, Emily Rittenhouse.

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PANTHERS Volleyball
Sept 19 @ Fannin V & JV
Sept 21 @ Gilmer V & JV
FOOTBALL
Sept 22 vs. GAC
7:30 PM HOMECOMING

Misty Mountain Quilt Guild
presents
Quiltfest 2017
September 22nd & 23rd

Puttin' on the Dog
Benefiting the
Town & Union County
Humane Society
September 23rd
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