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Shop with a Panther brings students together for Christmas

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County students are undoubtedly enjoying winter break, spending time with their families and relaxing with freshly opened Christmas presents just before the New Year.

And Christmas morning was extra special for some of these students thanks to the efforts of Shop with a Panther, a program that brings Union County High School students together with second-graders from the primary school.

Shop with a Panther is the Christmastime brainchild of former high school principal Ed Rohrbaugh, who passed away several years ago.

Rohrbaugh's vision was to improve the Christmas experiences of younger

children in need, while also teaching the older kids that giving back inspires hope in a brighter future.

Winter Storm Benji forced the Shop with a Panther event back one day, so instead of meeting at Walmart on Monday, Dec. 11, the 135 high schoolers and 30 second-graders went shopping on Tuesday, Dec. 12.

"Every year, different clubs at the high school sponsor second-grade students and take them shopping for their Christmas presents and presents for their family and friends," said Dixie Conger, a biology teacher and BETA Club sponsor at the high school.

Continued Conger: "It's a tradition, and I think every year we've increased the number of second-graders that

we're helping."

The task of raising money for the annual Christmas shop is a schoolwide effort, as seemingly every club at the high school joins in to make the day possible.

"We did fundraising in the fall, and we also had donations from several groups and members of the community," said Conger.

After shopping, the high school and elementary students all went back to the school gym and ate pizza, wrapped presents, played games and made crafts – it was a good day both to have and be a role model at Union County Schools.

"It's a really good experience for them," said junior Jordan Fortenberry, who chronicled the event for the high school yearbook. "They
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Union County High Schoolers Anna Owenby, Logan Seabolt and Maddie Sutton during the 2017 Shop with a Panther on Tuesday, Dec. 12. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

Foster children receive gifts through kindness of strangers



Lorena Johnson, Pam Curley, Pat Elliot and Richard Paolillo with the Foster Children's Christmas Program. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For nearly two decades, volunteers with the Towns & Union Foster Children's Enrichment Program have made it their mission to help foster kids feel special at Christmastime.

And as many hours as these volunteers put in every year, they couldn't do what they do without their community partners – individuals, groups and businesses who come together to donate, sponsor and shop for the children.

It's not hard to imagine what presents under the tree might mean to a child in foster care, one who wakes up every day confused about why they can't be with their loved ones.

Fortunately, there

are organizations like the Nam Knights of America, which assists veterans, law enforcement, firefighters and the community.

The Nam Knights is an American military veteran and law enforcement motorcycle club, and the local chapter is headed by Guy Novembre.

Novembre and his wife, Rosemarie, learned about the Foster Children's Christmas Program after reading a call for donations in the *North Georgia News*.

They liked the thought of helping foster kids at Christmas so much that they brought the idea to the rest of the Nam Knights, and everybody jumped on board to collectively buy gifts for 10 of the nearly 150 foster children who benefited from the program this year.

"We were surprised to find out there were so many foster children in Towns and Union counties," said Novembre. "This was a great experience ... I just wish there weren't so many. It's sad."

Continued Novembre: "There are just so many different things going on here, the members of the club and I were afraid that this (program) would get lost, that not all the kids would get covered. Well, we jumped in, and we'll do the same next year."

Many others contributed this year, and have in year's past, including Sharp Memorial United Methodist Church, United Community Bank of Hiawassee, Woods Grove Baptist Church, Union County 4-H, the Union County Library and Enotah CASA.

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Local couple praying for Angel to deliver a Christmas Miracle

By Charles Duncan
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MiLan Kim is distraught after having lived the last eight years on dialysis.

The process, referred to as renal replacement therapy, removes excess water, solutes and toxins from the blood of people whose kidneys have lost the ability to perform those vital functions.

Which is why MiLan, 57, of Blairsville, hopes that her dream of a Christmas Miracle comes true.

That dream consists of finding a living donor who matches her criteria for a kidney donor.

MiLan wants to live a normal life. She wants to be

able to work, travel, and not be a burden on her family. A native of South Korea, she has lived in Union County since October 2011. She moved here with her husband, Tom Thompson, to be closer to the Union County Dialysis Center.

Initially, doctors believed she would get a kidney quickly. Those beliefs didn't come to fruition.

One year of waiting turned into five, and now, they tell her she will likely have to wait more than 10 years to find a donor.

"The first time we went for reevaluation at Piedmont Hospital, the doctor said, 'Oh, you're right there, it's going to be quick (receiving a donated

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Tom Thompson and MiLan Kim. Photo/Charles Duncan

COPS Task Force LEO compensation recommendations

By Charles Duncan
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Members of a statewide task force to study the salaries and compensation of Georgia's local law enforcement officers and jailers have come up with a series of recommendations to take to the Georgia General Assembly.

Created by Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, along with State Sen. Greg Kirk, COPS, the Compensation of Police and Sheriffs Task Force study, came to life in May.

This task force, in partnership with counties, cities

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Union County Sheriff Mack Mason

Georgia commissioners visit D.C. on presidential invitation

By Shawn Jarrard
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President Donald J. Trump's administration extended an invitation to the commissioners of all 159 Georgia counties to visit Washington, D.C. in early December.

The purpose of the trip was to introduce Georgia commissioners to members of the Trump administration, in an effort to put names and faces to potential future resources.

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris

welcomed the invitation, and decided it would be a unique opportunity to coordinate a trip with his fellow sole commissioners, including neighboring Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw.

Sole commissioners are a rare breed – the majority of Georgia counties are governed by a board of commissioners, and there are only eight counties in the state with sole commissioner-style governments.

Furthermore, Georgia is the only state in the Union to retain the sole commissioner office, and though many of

Georgia's commissioners traveled to the nation's capital earlier this month, Paris and Bradshaw went with a rather small party of six sole commissioners.

The sole commissioners who traveled together to D.C. were Paris of Union County, Bradshaw of Towns County, Jason Winters of Chattooga County, Robert Brockman of Bleckley County, Shannon Whitfield of Walker County and Steve Taylor of Bartow County.

They caught the same flight up, stayed in the same

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Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, left, with five of the other seven Georgia sole commissioners, taken in U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue's office in early December.

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Battle of the States Basketball Tournament

Hosted by Towns County High School

December 27th - December 29th