

Tour of Trees another success for chamber



Linda Lawrence, Tobie Chandler and Yvette Estevez-Hansen enjoyed the festive Tour of Trees at the Union County Community Center in December

By Shawn Jarrard
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For the entire month of December, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce celebrated the holiday season with its annual Tour of Trees.

"The Tour of Trees is something that we started four years ago," said outgoing Chamber President Cindy Williams. "Like many of our programs, it has grown over the years, and this year we had about 20 trees and 13 wreaths.

"We have local chamber member business sponsors that decorate the trees and the wreaths, and then they're on display for the entire month of December. It really makes the Union County Community Center a gorgeous place during the holidays, and the visitors who come, whether they're expecting to see it or not, everybody just absolutely loves the festive environment there."

The trees take up residence on both the first and second floors of the Community Center, and each tree is personalized by its business or sponsor.

"What we do is, the money that's raised goes toward the Holly Jolly Christmas event that we do the second weekend in December," said Williams. "That's a free community event for everybody to come in. We do kids' activities, we have musical performances, Santa is available for pictures.

"Everything there is available for free, so that's something that the chamber does to give back to the community and make that available. So the money that comes in from the Tour of Trees goes into that event."

Both the Holly Jolly Christmas event and the Tour of Trees got big help from sponsors this year, in particular presenting sponsors Union General Hospital and the Union General Wellness Center.

"This year for the first time ever, we did a silent auction as part of our Holly Jolly Christmas, and we raised almost \$850 to go to the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy in Union County,"

said Williams. "That was a nice extra benefit for this year."

Williams estimates that 500 people attended Holly Jolly Christmas, and those who visited the Community Center just to see the two-floor Tour of Trees run closer to a thousand guests.

"Each tree looks totally different," said Williams. "A lot of times, a business will use a theme that goes along with their industry type, but sometimes they don't. The fun thing is, every year, the trees and the wreaths look different, because people will do different things each time. It's just very festive, and it's completely open to the public.

"The Community Center is always open to the public, but even this particular event, there's no fee to come through or anything. So we put the word out there, and we have signage out there that says come by and just take a look."

Leading up to Holly Jolly Christmas each year, the Tour of Trees surveys visitors in order to come to a very important conclusion—which tree will get the People's Choice Award?

"You can come in at any time during the first couple of weeks of December, take a ballot, go around, and you vote for your favorite large tree, tabletop tree and wreath," said Williams. "The winners this year of the People's Choice Award were, for the large tree, United Community Bank; for the tabletop tree, it was The Sawmill Place; and for the wreath, it was LPL Financial.

As far as what made the winners stand out from the rest, Williams has a few ideas.

"I would say that, if you look, the winners really used a lot of creativity in their approaches, and they're all very unique in terms of even just color schemes, and the materials they used were very interesting," said Williams. "Creativity and uniqueness were definitely two of the qualities that you found among them."

Williams is proud of

the chamber's involvement in donating money to the Ferst Foundation.

She was part of the original committee to bring the Ferst Foundation to Union County, and though it took a couple of years to get off the ground, the foundation has been going strong for the past two years in signing up children in Union County to receive free books.

"What the organization does is it provides free books to children from birth to age 5, once a month, to their home," said Williams. "So all a grandparent or parent or guardian has to do, they can go online to ferstfoundation.org and register their child.

"There are also forms provided at the chamber and various places to register a child, and again, it can be at any point from birth to age 5, and they'll receive an age appropriate book with an activity sheet in the mail to them directly."

Small tree sponsors were: The Sawmill Place, Service Plumbing & Septic, Waffle House, University of North Georgia, Union County Ferst Foundation, Blairsville Scottish Festival & Highland Games, Smokey Mountain Shoppers Guide, Lucretia Collins Re/Max Town & Country, Food City, Comfort Inn, Capsaicin eXtreme Marketing and Spa & Deck Creations.

Large tree sponsors were: Union General Hospital, Inc./Union General Wellness Center, Appalachian Home Health Care, Arts N Antiques Etc, United Community Bank, Jeff Davis State Farm, Sunflower Antiques & Interiors and The Mountain Life Team.

Wreaths sponsors were: Blairsville Realty, Glow-A Hair & Nail Salon, North Georgia Technical College, Origami Owl -The Lauras/Sharon Penner, Jerac's Unity Alpacos, Chick-fil-A, Victoria's Center, Unity of Blairsville, LPL Financial, Veteran's Group Organizations American Legion Unit 121, Union County Commissioner's Office, Habitat for Humanity and Jenny Rebecca's.

Colt Ford rocks Anderson Music Hall



Colt Ford
By Mason Mitcham
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On Saturday, Jan. 2, Country Music artist Colt Ford came to Hiwassee.

For many, the concert was a belated New Year's party as fans at Anderson Music Hall got loud and rowdy.

"No. 1 fans" Cynthia Kerr and Michelle Abercrombie explained that they loved Colt Ford because he represents what "country" was all about.

"From Dirt Road Anthem to Dancing While Intoxicated. It goes from country to rap. It's real. It goes from the norm of country to down and dirty," said Abercrombie.

"He is country and Georgia from the roots," Kerr said.

Ford, however, remains humble. At the meet and greet backstage before the show, he was more than happy to take pictures, talk to awed children, or sign memorabilia for soldiers overseas.

"I don't know any other way to do it. I don't understand

an artist not signing an autograph or taking a picture. If not for the fans, what would you even be doing? They're the reason we exist. You can keep awards. That's great if you win some. That may be cool. But I play music for them and for me. To me, meeting all those people, saying hello and hearing stories, somebody's a soldier, or the little kids," he said.

"To me, I love people though. If you don't love the fans, I just don't understand what you're doing. I don't understand why you're making music or anything. If you want to do that, just stay at home or work in a cubicle or somewhere. Do something else. But it's all about them and always will be for me," he said.

It's no exaggeration to say that Ford sports a unique musical style that can be polarizing to fans of Country Music. But according to him, it's a simple matter of taste.

"Recitation records been around forever. People are going to call it what they want to. Everybody wants to put a label on something and say all this stuff. But really, at the end of the day, it's fairly simple. Do you like the song or do you not like the song? Is it a good song or not a good song? That's really what it boils down to," he said.

He said that he considers himself to be upholding traditions that started far before he was born. Charlie Daniels is one of Ford's role models.

"He's one of my heroes. Matter of fact, this hat I'm wearing, he gave it to me. He's told me, 'I think you're picking up where I left off, Colt.' You

listen to a lot of his songs, he's everything that I want to be. Not just as an artist but as a person, as a man. He does what he says, he supports his country, he gives back, he does charity stuff, he's not afraid to stand up for the flag and what he believes in and that's everything I want to be. He's 70 years old and still kicking," said Ford.

Those qualities, to Ford, are what Country Music is really about. That's what he strives to put into lyrics.

"To me, it's about the lyrical content of the song. If you hear my stuff and think that it ain't, then I'm not sure what you think country is," he said.

Even in the face of massive success, Ford is adamant that he stays true to his roots.

"Certainly you get recognized and all that kind of stuff. I've been blessed by the fans to be able to make a better life for my family and do some things that I could never afford to do. But I don't live in a gigantic million-dollar house with a gate and a Mercedes. My son just turned 16 and he's driving a Jeep and that's what he'll drive till he tears it up. I don't get into that fancy stuff. I don't have private planes and buses. You'll see me at Walmart and you'll see me at Waffle House and you can come up and say hello," he said.

"Certainly more people recognize you but that don't ever bother me. And most country fans are respectful of that anyway. It's kind of how they are so it never bothers me to take a picture. If not for them, I wouldn't be here," he said.

Possum...from Page 1



Senior center members pose for a picture as the possum drops, ringing in an early celebration of the New Year

handmade by Judy Brown, who volunteers her time and crafts to benefit the senior center.

The drop occurred on Thursday, Dec. 31, just after noon and during the center's New Year's Eve celebration and luncheon for the two dozen members present.

Fortunately, the PETA organization, or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, will have no reason to call Hill or McGlamery over the use of a cuddly fake possum.

The New Year's Eve Party featured colorful New Year's hats and loud, joyful noisemakers that all found use to great effect, sometimes all at once.

As with any proper New Year's meal, senior center members ate a lunch consisting of ham, greens, black-eyed peas, cornbread and ambrosia, following by ice cream for dessert.

"This is our New Year's Eve Party, and I started having this several years ago," said Hill, who has been with the senior center for a decade. "We haven't had the Possum Drop, though, until this year. Judy Brown, she makes all these little miniature animals for us and gives them to us.

"She donates them for us to sell, because we have to make up money for our food programs, so everything we have (to sell), the ladies here

make or somebody else makes and donates, and we sell it and put the money into the food program."

Brown made her little animals – possums included – to sell in the annual Christmas Bazaar fundraiser sponsored by the senior center, and they sold out before the bazaar even started.

"People couldn't believe possums would sell," said Hill. "She made me a big fat one and said, 'You said you wanted to have a possum drop but you didn't have a possum, so now you've got one.'"

The senior center is a day activity center for senior citizens of Union County, and residents must be at least 60 years old to join, though any and all residents are welcome to stop in to ask about volunteering or to see how they can become involved.

Activities include art classes, sewing, quilting, bingo, crafts, field trips, cool holiday parties, picnics, exercise classes, line dancing, shopping excursions and more, and even if a member doesn't have a car, they can get a ride through the center's transportation program.

Members also get a meal Monday through Friday, at 11:30 a.m., and the senior center hosts a Meals on Wheels program, which is currently in need of drivers for those who

are volunteers at heart.

Barbara and Richard DeRoxtro joined the senior center about a year and a half ago. The couple teaches an art class at the center, and they also teach art classes at the First United Methodist Church as part of the church's OASIS curriculum.

The DeRoxtros love the Union County Senior Center and the friends that they have made, including Hill and McGlamery. They also think the center is underutilized and often misunderstood.

"Some people come up to the door with, maybe their grandmother, and say hey, here's a place you can come, and the grandmother thinks, 'Nursing home – I'm not going in a nursing home,'" said Barbara DeRoxtro. "This is not that. You can have Silver Sneakers (an exercise class) and have yoga classes, and you can have bingo once a week.

"They have all sorts of different classes all the time here, and as long as you live in Union County and are over 60 years old, everything is free, including your lunch. You can't beat it."

The senior center is located at 95 Senior Center Drive in Blairsville, and is accessed through the entrance of North Georgia Technical College from Highway 515.

New Year...from Page 1



Uptown Band kept guests dancing well into the night at Brasstown Valley Resort

'Salute to the Troops.' We've tried to recognize each of the branches of service with some of the decorations."

Brasstown Valley went beyond the call of duty with this year's decorations, implementing not only patriotic colors, but camouflage and lots of gold, and utilized seemingly every room off of the main ballroom.

Each of the rooms was themed, much like the ballroom, and one room, called the M*A*S*H Martini Bar, even held a real Army issue sleeping cot and other decorations.

Those who decide to ring in the New Year at Brasstown Valley do so because of its unique offerings as a New Year's destination – from the fine dining to the dancing, to the supreme musical live shows, this year featuring jazzy, multigenerational inspired Uptown Band from Atlanta, to the balloon drop at midnight.

"I think the themes are fun, guests are looking forward to what themes we do," said Burton. "We've done a Speakeasy theme, we did a Casino Royale theme, we did an Academy Award theme, we did a Fire and Ice theme. So the guests look forward to seeing what we do each year, which is something different."

Burton describes the Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa overnight experience as "a full-blown, New Year's gala party," which entails breakfast and football to kick off New Year's morning.

"The neat thing, too, is that there are a number of



Jessica Berry, Joshua and Kristy Wallace ring in the New Year together at Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa Annual New Year's Eve Gala

people that don't necessarily look for a full-blown New Year's gala with a band for New Year's Eve, so we also have our dining room open with a nice menu for guests to come and families to come and have dinner, and that is also at about 200 guests," said Burton.

Between the gala and the more intimate dining experience, Brasstown Valley offers something for everyone to enjoy for New Year's celebrations.

After attending last year, Joshua and Kristy Wallace of Blairsville knew they would be back to Brasstown Valley to ring in 2016.

"It's just so much fun," said Kristy Wallace. "They change the theme every year so it's always a new party, and we just had such a good time last year that we wanted to come back. We do the package, so we do the room and breakfast the next morning and everything.

Just the whole night is a lot of fun. The band plays all night, then they have the balloon drop at midnight."

For Joshua and Kristy, who have two boys, 2015 was a great year, and the high school sweethearts look forward to celebrating their 14-year wedding anniversary.

"We always look forward to moving on and growing and being another year together," said Kristy. "Every year is growing and loving each other."

The Wallaces attended the gala with friends, and Jessica Berry, who runs Total Recovery of Blairsville, said she is extremely optimistic about the New Year, for a healthy family, healthy kids, and another great year like 2015.

"Every year is better than the last," said Berry. "To make 2016 better than 2015 – that's my resolution every year."