

# Chikin...from Page 1A

ber President Cindy Williams in words of thanks to the Liberators. "I probably cannot convey my excitement, but I doubt I have to, because I think all of you are feeling the same thing this morning."

Opening the restaurant was a multi-day affair, kicking off with a Premiere Night celebration on Monday, Aug. 24, in which civic and business leaders from around the community were invited to attend a night of menu sampling, trivia and raffle prizes.

"I think it is marvelous," said Blairsville City Councilwoman Martha Cone at the premiere night. "We've waited six years, but it's been more like 60 years we've waited for this."

The Union County High School Jazz Band with Director Will Stafford performed Monday night and Wednes-



day, entertaining Chick-fil-A customers through the evening of the grand opening, and the UCHS Senior Chamber Choir, under direction of Alicia Covington, sang the national anthem at the ribbon cutting, along with a parodied version of The Beatles' "Yesterday" called "I'm in Love

with Chick-fil-A."

Patricia Decker of Blairsville was first in line for the First 100, a competition that started at 6 a.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 25, and lasted until 6 a.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 26.

"I didn't even have to set my alarm, I was so excit-

ed," said Decker, who joined the 99 other successful participants in the free food giveaway, which totaled more than \$32,000. "It was fabulous - I was totally excited, because I've been waiting six years to do this."

Decker was prepared for the event, having just returned from a Yellowstone backpacking trip with her husband - she kept her tent and camping gear packed in the car, ready for the overnight stay.

UCHS senior Cristian Garcia joined his friends to camp out in the Chick-fil-A parking lot, and was tired at the end of the long night but happier for the experience.

"We did homework and pretty much slept," said Garcia. "It was a good experience."

Right at 6 a.m. on Wednesday, the First 100 Chick-fil-A customers walked into the restaurant single file,

out of the 55-degree morning air, to a warm reception of clanging pots and pans, a parade cheered on by employees who had helped to feed the guests during the event.

Throughout the opening festivities last week, Chick-fil-A collected books for the Union County Ferst Foundation, a group advocating for childhood literacy.

Liberatore comes to Blairsville from his previous location in Myrtle Beach, SC,

returning to his home state where he graduated from the University of Georgia and worked previously for Chick-fil-A in Athens and corporate headquarters.

His new restaurant has brought 81 jobs to the area, the vast majority of which have been filled by local residents. Daniel's brother, Chris Liberatore, held a grand opening for Cleveland's Chick-fil-A restaurant on the same day last week.

# Believe It...from Page 1A

ing up with the "Each Season, Something New" tagline.

The latest branding effort came out of a recommendation from an economic development study of Blairsville and Union County conducted by Atlanta-based consulting firm The Pendleton Group in 2014, which led to the leadership in the county contacting the Carl Vinson Institute.

Work on the branding process commenced late last year, as institute representatives began touring various sites and businesses around the county for research purposes, as well as looking around the region to see what was already being done as far as community branding.

The institute also solicited help from the community itself, garnering more than 300 online responses to a survey directed toward discovering what stakeholders found endearing about Blairsville and Union County, and the institute used focus groups and population statistics to analyze distinct demographics within the county.

"Our job was to help

pull out of you, the community, what was unique about you that you could promise to those whom you might want to have come visit, live, invest, whatever that might be - how might we find your uniqueness and help you to tell that story," said Stacy Jones, associate director of the Carl Vinson Institute, in the meeting.

Jones, with assistance from fellow institute representatives Mara Register and Shannon Ferguson, presented their branding process, with an emphasis on allocating community resources, assessing area competition, collating and interpreting public input and, finally, undergoing brand discovery.

Repeatedly, Jones and her associates stressed the importance of local resources, from the recent second year in a row Top 5 CCRPI ranking for Union County Schools to the four-lane Georgia 515 and space for growth in both industrial and small businesses - not to mention the majestic beauty of the North Georgia Mountains and tourism.

A graphic designer

with the institute rode along with Commissioner Paris and Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley, and took community input to heart when creating the logo unveiled that Tuesday in an attempt to access what makes Blairsville and Union County unique in the North Georgia Mountains.

"Arriving in Blairsville always makes one stop and say, 'I can't believe this,'" said Jones during the branding unveil. "Ice climbing, the Appalachian Trail, an airport in the valley, near a big casino, new businesses opening every week - like a Chick-fil-A tomorrow - unparalleled views, moonshine and grits, high-speed fiber optic cable, growlers and wine, farmers market, trails, a Georgia Top 5 school system, an award-winning hospital, a preserved and growing downtown, golf, farm to table, lakes, streams, headquarters for a large bank, friendly people.

"Well, it is not unbelievable," Jones continued. "In fact, all you have to do is believe it. All this can be your story as you grow a business, plant your family, expand your opportunity and improve your

life. Blairsville-Union County - Believe It."

Jones and her team prepared advertisement mock-ups featuring area businesses utilizing the new branding, demonstrating how any story within the community can showcase a dream come true in Union County.

Toward the end of the meeting, Commissioner Paris, Mayor Conley, Chamber President Cindy Williams and Union County Development Authority Director Mitch Griggs stood front and center of those gathered, wearing new polo shirts bearing the "Believe It" tagline.

Stakeholders in attendance were encouraged to take selfies using a giant Polaroid-style picture frame with the logo and tagline, underscoring a push toward social media and the importance of furthering the brand beyond the community by using the hashtag #BelieveIt when posting Blairsville and Union County related events online.

The "Believe It" branding was well received in the meeting, garnering applause and congratulations from those in attendance.

# County...from Page 1A

fund balance, as a lot of times that's used to kind of - it's not an exact representation, but as a reserve, so to speak, for the county," said Pilgrim. "You'll note there for fiscal year 2014, the unassigned fund balance of the General Fund was \$3,181,639, or 25.5 percent of expenditures.

"If you took that and just multiplied that, or that percentage, multiply that percentage by the total annual expenditures, that would say you had about 3.1 months. In other words, if activities ended on Dec. 31 and you didn't get another dollar, then you could operate for about

three months on what you have in reserves. That's healthy."

The Unassigned Fund Balance was up by \$117,845 in 2014 from 2013, yet another indication that the county's finances are in good order.

"We did have an unmodified opinion on the audit this year," said Pilgrim. "Nothing came to our attention during the audit that would prohibit us from issuing a clean opinion."

In other business, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris held the first reading of a newly drafted Fireworks Ordinance in light of the recently passed state law

allowing fireworks on certain days of celebration throughout the year.

"A few counties got together and have come up with regulations that we think will give us a head start - even though the law has already passed, it will give us a head start on trying to do what we can to make it safer and better for our citizens," said Commissioner Paris.

The proposed Union County Fireworks Ordinance will emphasize safety, require strict adherence to national, state and local fire prevention and safety regulations and

guidelines, and will restrict the selling, use and/or possession of fireworks in certain areas of the county unless a special use permit is obtained - which will keep personal fireworks from being used in Meeks Park, for example.

A public hearing will be held two weeks following the August county meeting concerning the ordinance, where residents can discuss the ins and outs of the new law with Commissioner Paris, and the ordinance will be adopted at the next county meeting pending public comment from the hearing.

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