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permanent legal guardian, and six were adopted," said D'Angelo. "The remaining children are still in foster care, and we'll continue to fight to get them a home as quickly as we can. These are the children that come from our community, and they need your support.

"And you can help the children and CASA in several ways. You can become a CASA volunteer, you can help us by being an ambassador putting on events like this, or you can make a donation."

The luminaries around the square were placed in honor of, memory of, or just in thanks of individuals important to those donating, and each luminary brought in a donation to go toward CASA volunteers helping children in need.

During the ceremony, Rev. Travis Adams of Mountain Presbyterian Church in Blairsville, led the invocation, and both Pat Malone and Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris read from lists of those whose names were added to luminaries in honor or memory of them.

A particularly moving part of the ceremony was when the commissioner and D'Angelo made everyone aware of the ages and number of days that 29 children of Union County have spent in the court system awaiting permanent homes – one 2-year-old girl has spent nearly 900 days in the system, close to her entire life.

"It's incredible and sad to think about that, and to fully understand why there is this need for this community to

come together and help make this program more successful as all these volunteers and workers work very hard to make this a successful program going forward," said Commissioner Paris. "I thank the CASA volunteers for their dedication to the children of Union County."

In closing, D'Angelo shared how people can become involved in helping to look after the best interests of children in need within the county.

"Here in Union County, we have seen a significant increase year over year in the number of children coming into care," said D'Angelo. "I plead with you to try to give us some help and support. One, be a CASA volunteer. We will train you, we will give you 40 hours of training, 10 of which is in the courtroom so that you're prepared to be able to help and defend these

children.

"Another way is just become a friend of CASA. Help us put on events. We are very dependent upon donations and fundraising to do our work, and so help in that area would be greatly appreciated. Another is to just make a donation, and yet a very important one – please spread the word about CASA, about the work we do, and that we have children in this community that need a home, need stability, need permanency, and you can be a part of that."

The luminaries stayed lit for two hours following the close of the ceremony, and were picked up by Enotah CASA volunteers.

Major donors to the Lighting of the Luminaries ceremony were Cochran Funeral Home, Kathryn Farmer – Realtor, Mike's Seafood, Monet's Restaurant and G&G Bakery.

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Thunder, who has performed many times in Anderson Music Hall and is an Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame Inductee himself.

"He said, 'I think that you're very deserving of it, because you've been booking talent for so many, many years, and I just think that you need to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.' And I said, 'What an honor – thank you for nominating me,'" said Thomason.

Once nominated, Thomason underwent a rigorous vetting process by Hall of Fame Founder Phyllis A. Cole, who studied Thomason's many accomplishments.

"I had to send in my information about what I've done here at the Georgia Mountain Fair, and details about the music that we've booked, the acts we've booked, and how many years we've been in business," said Thomason.

After going through that information, Cole called Thomason to ask how many tickets she would be needing for the event, and Thomason invited her family and several friends who have been longtime volunteers and supporters of the Fairgrounds.

Cole founded the Hall of Fame with her husband, John L. "Johnny" Carson, who passed away in 2010.

"When Johnny and I

formed the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame in 1981 for the purpose of honoring persons and organizations for their outstanding contributions and achievements in the music industry, we created different categories that would set us apart from any other Hall of Fame," wrote Cole in a letter to Inductees and guests. "Regardless of your category, you are a member of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame, and no one is more important than the others – we are all family."

"This year, we are honoring 44 greats in the Country, Bluegrass, Gospel and Western Music industries," the letter continued. "They range from radio stars, TV stars,

teachers, musicians, singers, songwriters, promoters, booking agents and artists on the national, state and local levels."

The evening of Nov. 28 was filled with music and performances that lasted the whole night through, followed by a dance that went well into the late hours that Saturday.

Now that she's a Hall of Famer, Thomason joins the likes of Ray Stevens, Rhubarb Jones and many, many more who have done so much for Country Music in Georgia.

In 1981, the same year as the founding of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame, Thomason began working at the Fairgrounds as a secretary, before working her way up to office manager and then general manager.

And in that time,

Thomason has seen and booked a lot of talent at the Fairgrounds, including Alan Jackson, George Strait, Kenny Chesney, Toby Keith, Reba McEntire, Conway Twitty and more.

Thomason is no stranger to accolades, having received the James H. Drew "Fairman of the Year" award in 2002 from the Georgia Association of Agricultural Fairs, as well as having been a past recipient of the Towns County Citizen of the Year award, among others.

So being inducted into the Hall of Fame is a fair highlight to a long career devoted to entertaining and bringing in dollars to the region.

"I'm thankful – this is a huge honor, and I'm appreciative of it, very much so," said Thomason.

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appreciation were several family members of those who graduated, letting everyone gathered know how proud they were of their mother, father, sister, brother, son or daughter who had completed the program.

Several of the six graduates also credited drug court with having saved their lives, and the feeling around the room was one of hope and encouragement toward brighter days for all involved, especially those still in the program.

Cathy Cox-Brakefield, who retired at the end of October as the assistant district attorney of the Enotah Court Circuit, and who saw each and every one of the participants enter the program, spoke to graduates out of the Bible and out of her many years of experience.

Cox-Brakefield let participants know that moving on without institutional controls following graduation would present challenges every day, but that planning something every day would help participants to start a new season in their lives.

Dawn Mullinax of Cornerstones Counseling also offered words to graduating participants, congratulating them for overcoming their addictions and embracing their recoveries.

"Each one of you has proven to your community that recovery is possible, and you lead by example," said Mullinax. "You are an inspiration to the staff of drug court, to the people who are looking forward to graduating from this program, and to members of the community who have not yet made the solid decision to get clean and to live sober and free from addiction.

"Your continued journey of recovery will not be without challenges, so your support system that you have used to navigate through this program and through this system will continue to be one of your strongest tools. So we encourage to use that support system always. You add value to this community, and your community is here to offer you continued support always."

Following graduation, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris shook the hands of each graduate before they moved on to the refreshments table, where food prepared by Fellowship of the Hills Church awaited all in attendance.

"The last graduation was amazing – you had one graduate, and he really had time to get up and talk and explain to everybody," said Commissioner Paris. "This time you had six people, and they all stood up here like they had done public speaking all their lives, and you could tell in their heart that they are sincere, and they feel like they



made that big step.

"I feel perfectly confident that they're going to be able to stay straight and stay on the right path, because two years is a long time to do anything. And just to know that we've got a program like this in effect now, and we've got so many good people working with it, it's encouraging. We now

know that drug addiction can happen to anybody, anywhere, at any time, and it's almost impossible to get rid of on your own. You've got to have help, and this is a great way that they've come up with to help. I'm proud of all of them."

The North Enotah Drug Court serves both Union and Towns counties.