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"This program is about the kids, it's about a Merry Christmas," he said. "It's a tradition here since 2001 and Sheriff Mack Mason wants to make sure that tradition continues during his administration."

"You can't stop a program like this, it's too important to the community," George said.

One of the biggest boosts to the program is the commitment by the Blairsville Cruisers, who work year-round to make Christmas happen in the Blairsville-Union County community.

"The Cruisers are an integral part of this event for the Union County Sheriff's Office. They do so much in the community, and making a difference in the lives of children is a huge part of their mission," George said.



Toys line the halls at the Union County Sheriff's Office as they prepared to distribute toys to approximately 100 children in Union County on Monday. Photo/Charles Duncan

Chorus program thrills capacity crowd

By Colleen Collens
North Georgia News
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A capacity crowd was witness to the Annual Union County Christmas Choral Concert at First Baptist Church in Blairsville.

In all, 247 students in grades 6-12 comprised the two choruses that performed for almost two hours as part of the Christmas Program.

Union County Schools Superintendent Gary Steppe was thrilled with the performance.

"The students in these programs were having fun and the performances were of high quality," Steppe said. "The training and love for music our students are acquiring will be something they will enjoy for a lifetime."

The Middle School Chorus led by Laura Purser opened the show.

UCMS' Chorus has a total of 117 students. The 6th, 7th, and 8th Grade Chorus groups each performed three selections, with the UCMS Chorus singing two songs together at the end of their part of the program.

The UCMS Chorus sang a mix of secular music such as *Jingle Bell Rock* and non-secular music such as *Who Would Imagine a King*. All three groups, as well as the combined UCMS Chorus, performed wonderfully.

Soloists for the UCMS Chorus included Emma Collins, Skylar Miller, Lyric Shumaker, Jarred Ivey, and Faith Smith. Leilani Schroeder accompanied the Chorus on the piano, along with Choral Director Alicia Covington, on "Christmas Chopsticks."

Terrell Hooper, a 2004 Union County High School graduate, returned to Union County to accompany the UCMS Chorus on the piano. He also served as guest conductor on *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*.

Purser was ecstatic about the performance.

"I'm so proud," she said. "They have worked so hard, right up until the last minute. I couldn't be happier."

The 130-member Union County High School Chorus then filled the choir loft. The 25-member UCHS Chamber Choir, led by Covington, performed the first selection. This group sang *All is Well* a Capella at the front of the stage. It was a beautiful start to the second portion of the program.

The full UCHS Chorus then sang together for the remainder of the program, which included the following secular and non-secular selections: *Mary Did You Know*, *O Holy Night*, *A Song of Santa Holiday Mash-up*, and *Silent Night, Holy Night*.



The 247-member Union County Chorus, both high school, and middle school, perform at First Baptist Church of Blairsville. Photo/Joe Collins

The first verse of *Silent Night, Holy Night* was sung in German, with Jana Baasner translating the first verse in German at the beginning of the song. The UCHS Chorus performed magnificently, as evidenced by an appreciative audience.

UCHS soloists included Amy Cheek, Joseph Holley-Beaver, Rachel Todd, Kaylee Seabolt, Brittany Holbrooks, Robert Welch, Stephanie Stanton, Kelley Lockaby, Donovan Anguelo, Kolbe Nix, and Cody Short. Rachel Todd accompanied the Chorus on the piano on *Silent Night, Holy Night*.

At the conclusion of the UCHS portion of the program, the UCMS Chorus joined the UCHS Chorus on stage, filling it to capacity, with a total of 247 Chorus students. Covington then invited any Union County High School Chorus alumni who were in the audience to come on stage to sing the final song with the combined Choruses. In all, 24 Chorus alumni from 2007-2012 answered the call to sing *Carol of the Bells*. It was, in a word, outstanding.

Covington was proud of her Chorus students.

"I am extremely proud of all of our students, 6th grade through 12th. Mrs. Purser has done an outstanding job taking over the Middle School program and I feel they have grown musically," Covington said. "My High School students have been an amazing group of young people to work with. Each year I am able to push their musical abilities even more, and they always do a

fantastic job. I am so blessed to teach the students I have and have taught - as well as to work in a school system that is supportive of the arts."

Steppe was emphatic about the talent in the Chorus program.

"Last year, when Mr. (Kerry) Rittenhouse announced his retirement as Band Director, we took that opportunity to look at our Middle and High School Music programs to evaluate what we could do to support their mission of providing a quality music program for our students," Steppe said. "At that time Mrs. Covington was the instructor for both the Middle School and High School. Although she was doing a great job, there were too many students and she only had a finite amount of time."

"She was just spread so thin and even though she was an excellent instructor, the situation just didn't allow for fully developing the potential we realized was there," Steppe said. "After discussions with her and others in our music program, we made the decision to search for a quality part-time instructor."

"We were fortunate to find Mrs. Laura Purser who does our Middle School program and this allowed Mrs. Covington to concentrate on our High School program," Steppe said. "Now we have two quality instructors, with time to develop the potential at each level. This Christmas performance showcased the quality we were hoping for. As the programs continue to improve, I can hardly wait to see our next concert."

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actual budgets.

"The budgets for the Sheriff's Office and Jail historically are all over budget," Paris said. "What we've done this year, is put those budgets more in line with what has been spent in the past."

"That should make a difference and keep those two in line with their annual actual spending," Paris said. "Public Safety is hard to budget for, with the rise and fall of fuel prices and overtime that these departments have to work."

"We're trying to more accurately reflect what they actually spend, and I think we've done a good job with that for 2014," Paris said.

Paris said he's proud that the county has been able to keep the budget's growth intact.

"We've been able to keep our budget in check, and continue to drop the millage rate some over the past four years," Paris said. "We've cut taxes four years in a row. Even if it's just been slight cuts, a cut is a cut, and in this economy, it means something."

"We're only collecting about \$20,000 more in property taxes than we did six years ago," Paris said. "I think it's a testament to the county employees, how much work they get done and it's a testament to the public, who supported our SPLOST. We'd be between a rock and hard place without SPLOST."