

Highlands Newspaper

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Thurs., Jan. 15, 2026

NC gets 'F' in public education funding

Received a 50 for funding level and last in country for funding effort

By Kim Lewicki

Years ago, the state of North Carolina was a beacon regarding public education but today it's a much different story all

due to a decrease in state funding and federal mandates.

"North Carolina once ranked much higher in education, and that history demon-

strates what is possible when public education is treated as a long-term investment rather than a short-term expense,"

• See **FUNDING** page 4

Holbrooks, Cook face off at Sheriff Forum

A candidates forum for Macon County sheriff, hosted Saturday by the Macon County Republican Party, drew a large crowd and at times became contentious as incumbent Sheriff Brent Holbrooks and challenger Bob Cook outlined their backgrounds and qualifications ahead of the Republican primary.

The forum opened with remarks from party chair Patti Trick, who introduced moderator Keith Blaine, chairman of the Jackson County Republican Party. Trick said the party intentionally selected a moderator from outside Macon County to ensure neutrality.

Blaine then outlined the rules and format of the forum, emphasizing decorum and equal treatment of the candidates.

• See **SHERIFF** page 11

8th grade MS bball players recognized



From left: 8th-grade girl basketball players Alajandra Colmenares, Penelope McRae and Corena Dearth were recognized after Monday night's game at Highlands School.

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Swatting incidents likely to continue here and across the country

By HPD Lt. Tim Broughton and Kim Lewicki

The Highlands Police Department responded to more swatting hoaxes in Highlands on the evening of Wed., January 7 and again the evening of Fri., January 9.

On Wednesday, at approximately 7 p.m., Macon County Dispatch received multiple calls reporting threats against the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Highlands Fire and Rescue, and two specific town employees, including Police Chief Andrea Holland.

Officers from the Highlands Police Department and the Macon County Sheriff's Office responded, secured the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation (where no services or activities were being held at the time), and stationed officers at Highlands Fire and Rescue Dept. Officers

were also dispatched to check on the residences of the individuals who were targeted.

On Friday, at approximately 6 p.m., Macon County dispatch received calls again reporting a threat against the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, with the caller claiming he was parked nearby.

Law enforcement diverted traffic from the area and determined that it, too, was a hoax.

Further investigation determined that both these calls were consistent with previous bomb threat incidents of Dec. 11 and Dec. 23. The caller(s) used tools to mask the caller's location and employed fake or "throwaway" phone numbers. Once officers confirmed there was no immediate threat to the individuals or locations involved, the incidents were determined to be a hoax.

• See **SWATTING** page 5



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• THE PLATEAU'S POSITION •

•MAYOR ON DUTY•

On tonight's Town Board agenda

January's Town Board meeting is tonight, Thursday, January 15, at the Highlands Community Building next to the ball field. The first meeting will be the workshop session beginning at 6 pm, followed by the monthly board meeting at 7 pm. Both sessions will be available to view remotely on the town website's YouTube channel.

The workshop session will be a discussion of security issues and concerns for the Highlands Food and Wine Festival. Chief Holland will start the session with a report of security concerns, especially at the Main Event, where Main Street is closed for the Main Event from 4th to 5th streets. A discussion and comment period on the concerns and ideas will follow.

At the monthly board meeting at 7 pm, several items are on the agenda. Leading off is a presentation by Louis Davis of UTEC concerning proposed amendments from Duke Energy concerning the town's wholesale electricity contract.

Progress Energy and Duke Energy of



**Highlands Mayor
Patrick Taylor**

the Carolinas are merging their two companies, which both fall under the umbrella of the Duke power system. This merger has been in the works for a while and will eventually be approved sometime in the coming months. For this merger to take place, approval from state and federal agencies must be obtained.

The amendment to our contract is required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). The Town Manager and I have met with a Duke representative to discuss the contract amendment. My big question was whether this amendment would cost Highlands more money. The representative for Duke said no, that we would even get some reimbursement because of the amendment.

We expect Mr. Davis of UTEC to confirm that the town will receive assistance from this amendment during his presentation to the board tonight. Ironically, this amendment occurs near the end of our wholesale contract with Duke. By 2029, the town will have to enter a new contract with either Duke or another provider. Our consulting company will conduct a shopping experience for us to secure the best possible contract.

The board will also hold a discussion concerning the appointment of a new commissioner. The appointment of a new member of the Town Board would be for two years which is the remaining term of Commissioner Dotson who resigned from the board as of December 31.

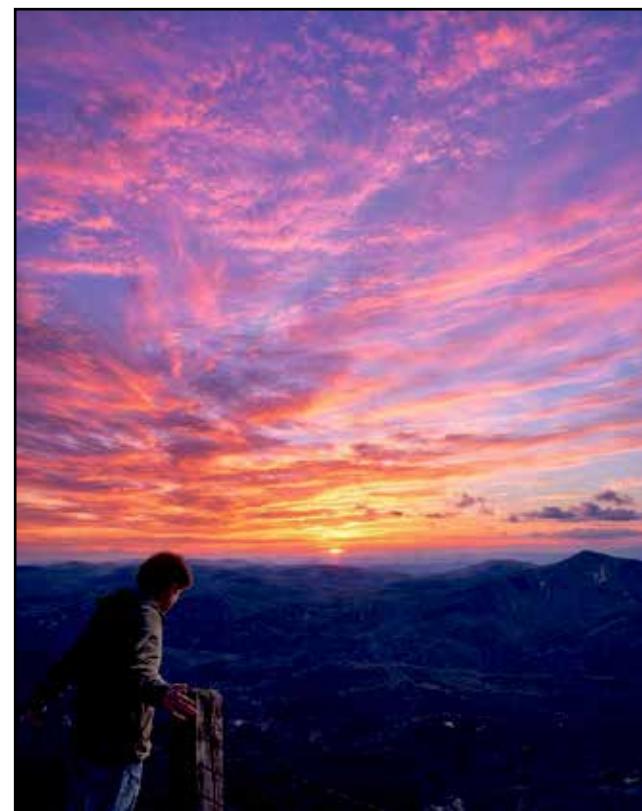
The board will also hear an update from a non-profit consortium on their emergency support plan. This plan was developed in response to concerns raised by Hurricane Helene.

Bill Futral will be making a request for a rezoning request for a property on Dillard Road. The parcel is near Dusty's and across from the shopping center on Dillard Road. The board will also make appointments to the Highlands Tourist Development Committee and the Macon County Economic Development Commission.

Hope to see everyone at the meetings tonight, or on YouTube.

Also, the entire agenda packet for every board meeting is available to the public. Simply contact Town Hall at (828) 526-2118 and ask to speak with Gibby Shaheen, the Town Clerk. Gibby will place you on the sunshine email list that receives agenda packets.

•SNAPSHOT•



The dawning of 2026 atop Whiteside Mountain

Do you have a heartfelt, funny, interesting, or beautiful photo you would like to share in our "Snapshot" section? Email it to highlandseditor@aol.com or text it to 828-200-1371, with a brief description and a name. No anonymous photos will be accepted.

Photo by Bliss Walker

•WEATHER•

Thu, 15-Jan	Fri, 16-Jan	Sat, 17-Jan	Sun, 18-Jan
23°F 14°F	39°F 30°F	39°F 17°F	28°F 17°F
Windy and very cold RealFeel® High: 6° Low: -6°	Partly sunny and not as cold RealFeel® High: 30° Low: 17°	Breezy with clouds and sun RealFeel® High: 30° Low: 15°	Sunny, but colder RealFeel® High: 23° Low: 10°

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There is a 500-word limit. We reserve the right to reject or edit letters-to-the-editor. No anonymous letters will be accepted. Views expressed are not necessarily those of Highlands Newspaper.

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\$10 per photo.

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LOT 3



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Offered for \$3,200,000.

Build it Your Way in Desirable Brushy Face



This gentle 2.05-acre in-town lot is tucked within the prestigious Brushy Face community, just minutes from the shops, dining, and amenities of downtown Highlands. The homesite has already been thoughtfully prepared, with a cleared building site and roughed-in driveway for easy access. A 4-bedroom septic system is in place, and connections to town water and high-speed internet are available, streamlining the building process. Enveloped by native flora and fauna, with a charming stream meandering through the property.

Offered for \$245,000



Nestled in one of Highlands' most coveted in-town communities, this expansive 2.20+ acre in Brushy Face offers the perfect canvas for your mountain dream home. Gently rolling topography, paired with native rhododendron, plants and lush flora, creates a private and serene setting just minutes from downtown. The home site has already been thoughtfully prepared—with selective clearing and a 5-bedroom septic system installed! Town water and high-speed fiber optic internet are available, providing modern convenience without sacrificing mountain charm. The seller has house plans available and is willing to share them with the next fortunate owner.
Offered for \$399,000

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...FUNDING continued from page 1

said Macon County Schools Superintendent Josh Lynch. "Reversing the current trend will require sustained commitment, thoughtful policy decisions, and a shared understanding that strong public schools are foundational to the state's economic health and quality of life."

NC's public-school funding started a significant decline around 2008-2009, with inflation-adjusted per-student funding dropping sharply after the Great Recession, continuing under subsequent legislative actions that reduced state revenue and investment, leading to lower funding efforts and a greater reliance on local funds by the 2020s.

Pre-2000s: The state's share of the General Fund for education had already been slowly decreasing since 1970.

Around 2008-2009: Funding cuts began in earnest, predating the state's GOP takeover in 2011 but continuing under Republican leadership, with steep reductions in K-12 and higher education spending.

2011-2012 & After: The end of federal emergency aid and major tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy exacerbated the cuts, causing real per-student funding to fall significantly.

2003-2025: Inflation-adjusted per-student funding for the Department of Public Instruction fell by 13% by 2025 compared to 2003 levels, showing a long-term downward trend.

According to the Education Law Center's recent "Making the Grade" report, North Carolina's "fall from grace" in public education stems from years of chronic under-funding, leading to low rankings nationally in per-pupil spending and funding efforts as a percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while exacerbating teacher shortages with low pay and burnout.

"The report highlights a long-standing issue in North Carolina," said Superintendent Lynch. "Education funding has not kept pace with the state's economic growth or the rising costs of operating public schools."

Lynch said districts like Macon County Schools have limited flexibility at the local level, so meaningful improvement will require renewed and sustained investment at the state level, along with stable federal support.

"Local efficiency is important, but it cannot resolve a systemic funding gap," he said.

In addition, funding private school vouchers has caused state funding to be

diverted from public schools despite ongoing court orders to fully fund public schools.

This disinvestment has coincided with declining public-school enrollment as families seek school choice, creating challenges for district budgets and resource allocation.

Critics cite years of deliberate legislative choices prioritizing private school expansion over robust public-school investment as the primary driver of this decline.

The 1994 *Leandro vs. the State of NC* was about fulfilling the constitutional promise of equal educational opportunity for every child in North Carolina, regardless of their zip code or family income.

In 1994, five low-wealth school districts (Hoke, Halifax, Robeson, Vance, Cumberland) sued the state, highlighting that local property taxes, though considered high, couldn't generate enough revenue for equal education, violating the state's constitutional duty.

Judges have ordered the state to fund parts of the plan, but the Republican-controlled legislature has resisted, arguing courts can't mandate spending, leading to prolonged legal conflict over separation of powers.

The case remains active, with courts debating the legislature's obligation to fully fund the remedial plan, impacting millions of students and highlighting deep inequalities in NC's public education system.

According to the "Making the Grade" report, without adequate funding, school systems struggle to recruit and retain high-quality educators; have limited resources for students – especially those with high needs – and threatens North Carolina's standing as a business-friendly state by undermining the workforce's education.

Consequently, now North Carolina ranks at or near the bottom in education funding categories despite being one of the wealthiest states in the country.

The report ranks states on funding level, the spending per student, and funding effort, and how much North Carolina is investing relative to the state's economy. North Carolina is currently ranked at or near the bottom in both categories.

North Carolina received an 'F' for both categories, receiving 50 for funding level and last for funding effort.

• See **FUNDING** page 7

•HS SPORTS RECAP•

Varsity hoops shine while swim team makes waves in Asheville

It was a marathon week for Highlands High School athletics, featuring a grueling stretch of conference play on the hardwood and a historic showing in the pool. While the Middle School squads faced tough sledding on the road, the High School programs showed why they are the teams to beat in the region.

Varsity Girls: Defensive Masterclass & Overtime Drama

The Lady Highlanders (9-4, 2-0) had a rollercoaster week that showcased their grit. They opened with a 36-23 victory over Summit, orchestrated by a “stingy” second-half defense that allowed just 5 total points after the break to erase an 8-point halftime deficit. Jordyn Borino and Hunter Conner led the charge with 13 points each, while Conner dominated the glass with 9 rebounds and 6 blocks.

Thursday brought a heartbreaker against Robbinsville. Despite falling behind by 15 early, Highlands roared back to force overtime. While the Lady Knights ultimately escaped with a 45-41 win, the individual performances were legendary. Jordyn Borino poured in 22 points, and Hunter Conner recorded a monster stat line: 12 points and a career-high 16 blocked shots.

The girls bounced back Friday, routing conference rival Blue Ridge 53-29.

- Anabelle Hays notched a career-high double-double (14 pts, 14 reb).
- Charlotte Westendorf added 12 points and 8 rebounds.
- Hunter Conner continued her interior dominance with 13 rebounds.

Varsity Boys: High-Octane Offense

The Highlander boys went 2-1 on the week, highlighted by a balanced attack and dominant rebounding.

Opponent Result Top Performer

Key Stats

Summit: W 57-41 Isaiah Vilardo 16 pts, 10 reb

Robbinsville: L 55-65

Paolo McRae 16 pts, 8 reb

Blue Ridge: W 62-45

...SWATTING continued from page 1

The morning of Thursday, Jan. 8, FBI and NCSBI investigators met with the Highlands Police Department to discuss the ongoing cases.

Ongoing investigations and research has revealed that similar incidents are currently occurring in cities and towns across



Brett Lamb
Highlands School
Athletic Director

Paolo McRae 21 pts

The Friday win over Blue Ridge saw Bryan Jarquin chip in 15 points and Jayven Alvarado add 9, proving the Highlanders have depth to match their star power.

Swimming: Small Team, Big Splash

The Highlands Varsity Swim Team traveled to the Asheville JCC on Wednesday for an 8-team invitational. Despite having only four members, the Highlanders finished 3rd overall against much larger 5A and 6A schools.

Aniah McKim (3-time Academic All-American) led the way, winning both the 50 Freestyle and 100 Breaststroke to score 32 points and earn an automatic qualification for Regionals in Charlotte.

Ian Batista (2nd in 200 IM) and Ivan Shchelgachov (4th in 200 Free) also posted stellar times, while Trinity Fernandez-Fouts finished 7th out of 8 entire girls’ teams by herself!

All four swimmers have now qualified for Regionals with consideration times.

Junior Varsity & Middle School Round-up

up

- JV Boys: Split their week, edging out Summit 32-29 behind 10-point efforts from Jake Smith and Jonathan Carpenter. They later fell to a powerhouse Robbinsville squad 70-16.

- Middle School: A tough week on the road at Towns County, with the girls falling 26-12 and the boys dropping a close 48-39 battle.

Upcoming Schedule

Thursday, Jan 15

- MS Basketball: vs Summit (Home)

Friday, Jan 16

- HS Basketball: vs Nantahala (YOUTH RECOGNITION NIGHT)

- Swim Meet: @ Rabun Gap

Note to Fans: Come out Friday night to support our future Highlanders during Youth Recognition Night

• See SWATTING page 6



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When more isn't more: Choosing focus over scale

As we move into a new year, the business conversation everywhere seems to center on growth. Bigger teams. More locations. More visibility. More volume. More, more, more.

And while growth can absolutely be healthy, it's worth pausing to ask a harder question: growth toward what end, exactly?

In service-based industries like ours (especially in higher-end and luxury real estate) bigger does not automatically mean better. In fact, unchecked expansion often creates the very problems it's meant to solve: diluted standards, inconsistent client experiences, bloated overhead, and a culture that prioritizes appearances over accountability.

Over the past year that I've been with Landmark, I've spent a lot of time thinking about what responsible leadership actually looks like in this market. And the conclusion I keep coming back to is this: sometimes the most strategic form of growth is intentional restraint.

Running a brokerage isn't about main-

taining optics or keeping everyone comfortable. It's about stewardship: of clients' trust, of agents' livelihoods, and of the long-term health of the business itself. That responsibility requires making decisions that aren't always popular in the short term but are necessary for stability and excellence in the long term.

For me, that has meant getting very clear about standards.

I believe a real estate brokerage should be made up of professionals who treat our business as a career, not a hobby; people who are present, accountable, and experienced; people I would trust without hesitation to handle the purchase or sale of my own home, a close friend's home, or a high-value referral with my name attached.

That single filter changes everything. It influences how many brokers a com-

pany truly needs, how many offices it can responsibly support, and how resources should be allocated. It also forces an honest evaluation of what's working, what isn't, and what no longer aligns with the vision of the business.

Streamlining is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign of clarity in both mission and vision.

From the outside, change like this can be uncomfortable to watch. It's often misinterpreted as instability by those who equate scale with success or who benefited from the way things used to be. But thoughtful contraction, done proactively, not reactively, is one of the clearest indicators of disciplined leadership.

Clients don't benefit from a company having the most agents or the most signage. They benefit from consistency, competence, and trust. They benefit from knowing that when they call, they'll speak with a real estate professional who knows the market inside-and-out, communicates clearly, and treats their transaction with the seriousness it deserves.

In luxury real estate especially, discretion and execution matter far more than noise.

Our focus moving forward is not on

being the biggest brokerage on the Plateau. It's on building the most reliable one. A team that is intentionally small, highly skilled, and intensely professional. A team where every seat is earned and every agent understands the responsibility that comes with representing clients at the highest levels of the market. A team that is collaborative at its core and that works together to get the best outcomes for our clients.

That kind of clarity creates confidence internally and externally. It allows systems to work better, collaboration to be stronger, and clients to feel genuinely supported rather than passed along.

Leadership isn't about avoiding hard conversations or delaying necessary change. It's about making thoughtful decisions early, before circumstances force your hand. It's about choosing long-term strength over short-term comfort.

As we head into this new year, I'm proud of the direction Landmark is taking, not because it's flashy, but because it's intentional. In a market built on trust, experience, and relationships, precision matters. And doing less, when done deliberately, can be the most strategic move of all.

• Lauren Dahl is the General Manager and Broker-in-Charge at Landmark Realty Group and Landmark Vacations where she supports an elite team of brokers. She can be reached at 828-279-4700 or via email at lauren@landmarkrg.com.

...SWATTING continued from page 5

Since all this began, Flowers said agents from three teams have been assigned to the cases: Bomb Squad Team, Tech Team and the Criminal Apprehension Team.

"We don't know if these calls are from the same person; we are trying to see if there is any connection to a larger national group," he said. "It could be one lone person targeting Highlands, but until we know, we can't rule out that it's not part of a country-wide group."

Investigators say in many of the cases across the country and in Highlands, live-stream cameras were present in the affected areas. Hoax callers are aware that they can watch live-stream footage to observe law enforcement responses to these false calls, they said.

Authorities say even when they cannot directly observe a response, these individuals still seek attention through community

reaction, publicity, and reports of law enforcement activity on social media sites.

"We are getting closer, but no one is in custody," said Flowers. "Several agents are working diligently on the case. But with today's technology, tracing VPN calls is difficult."

A "VPN call" means using a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to secure and privatize internet-based calls (VoIP), like those on WhatsApp, Zoom, or Signal, by encrypting voice data and hiding IP addresses, bypassing network blocks, and protecting callers from eavesdropping and tracking. A person activates a VPN app, connects to a server, then uses regular calling apps, adding a layer of security and anonymity to voice communication.

One method used by hoax callers to conceal their identities involves using computers, phones, or other internet-

• See **SWATTING** page 9



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...FUNDING continued from page 4

Statistics verify that average per-pupil funding levels continue to vary greatly among states.

There is a funding gap of more than \$17,000 between the highest (New York) and lowest (Idaho) funded states, even after accounting for regional cost differences.

Seventeen states had at least a modestly progressive distribution of state and local funding relative to student poverty, but with 11 fewer progressive states than in 2022, which represents the first reversal of progress after a five-year trend toward increasing progressivity among states.

Furthermore, states are making markedly different efforts to fund their public schools, where effort is defined as state and local revenue percentage of the state's GDP.

The highest effort state (Vermont) makes more than double the effort to fund schools as the lowest effort state (North Carolina).

Across the nation, while most states saw positive year-over-year growth in both education revenue and GDP, economic growth outpaced investments in public education, resulting in declining effort in most states.

Though federal dollars are a small proportion of overall education revenue, those dollars do contribute to a more equitable distribution of funds relative to poverty in nearly every state.

Current federal upheaval is threatening public schools that are bracing for an FY '26 federal budget that could dramatically alter the financial support that states receive from the federal government.

Threats against states and individual school districts whose policies are at odds with the administration's priorities are already being realized. For example, more than \$30 million in special education grants were terminated in September of 2025, affecting 14 states.

In each case, the notices cited district language that referenced diversity, equity, inclusion, and racism. The current administration canceled dozens of contracts within the U.S. Department of Education's research branch, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), halting projects in various stages of completion, many of which should have been protected by congressional mandates.

According to the report, though

Trump's executive order to dismantle the Department of Education is challenged in court, mass layoffs have undermined the ability of the department to execute its core mission — to promote student achievement and ensure equal access to educational opportunity.

The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Office of Civil Rights, the Office of English Language Acquisition, and the Office of Special Education Programs have all been af-

fected by layoffs that impede their ability to perform basic functions and leave the country's most vulnerable students at risk, say authorities.

Superintendent Lynch said remedying the situation will require action at multiple levels.

"At the state level, it means a renewed commitment to adequately funding public education in alignment with the state's economic capacity, increasing per-pupil expenditures, and addressing inequities be-

tween districts."

He said continued attention to court-mandated obligations related to providing a sound basic education is also critical.

Macon County Representative Karl Gillespie said he wasn't familiar with the report and wanted to research it before answering questions.

Senator Kevin Corbin was contacted for comments but he was unable to respond by press time.

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• LETTERS •

A history of our immigration laws

Dear Editor,

The Immigration Act of 1990 was the last time significant changes were made to legal immigration and is considered outdated for today's challenges. In 2013 a bipartisan bill passed the Senate with a strong majority, including provisions for border security, E-Verify, and a pathway to citizenship, but failed to get a House vote due to lack of support from House Republicans. It is my opinion that Republicans were against E-Verify as they wanted businesses to be able to continue to hire cheaper labor. If it had passed, businesses would have been required to check legal status before hiring people. Various other bills, like the American Dream and Promise Act (2019, 2021) and bipartisan border security packages (2024), have passed one chamber but failed to advance in the other. The latest bill, written by a Republican in 2024, did not pass because Donald Trump told the House Republicans to not vote for it. My opinion is that he knew his only path to the Presidency was to use Biden's failed policies on immigration. I do believe that our elected officials in both parties have let us down.

As a result of the failure to pass sensible laws, millions of illegals have been able to remain in the U.S. for years working, paying taxes and raising families. They are not rapists and murderers. I believe our country owes it to them to have a process however long, that allows this group to remain here. I have never heard any economist say we do not need immigrants for our economy to continue to grow. Do you really think we have enough citizens to do all jobs that are currently being filled by illegal immigrants. Really! Or maybe those white South Africans who are the only refugees President Trump wants

• OBITUARY •

Jack Louis Sapolsky

Jack Louis Sapolsky, M.D. passed away peacefully on Friday, December 19, 2025.



After moving permanently to Highlands, NC, Dr. Sapolsky enjoyed his retirement years in the mountains with his husband, Richard, and their beloved dogs. His lifelong love of classical music led him to be an avid supporter of the Highlands-Cashiers Chamber Music Festival which he served as both board member and president of the board, successfully

leading the organization through some of its most challenging and difficult times in the wake of the 2008 global financial collapse.

For years Jack and Richard have been ardent supporters of the festival and grateful, enthusiastic participants in the community life of Highlands. Jack will always be remembered for his hearty laugh, his kindness, and – perhaps above all – his generosity. Jack was a passionate lover of animals, particularly dogs, and will be especially missed by his two devoted Labradoodles, Daisy and Emma.

There will be no formal funeral service but a celebration of life will occur at a later date.

Memorials may be made to Highlands-Cashiers Chamber Music Festival at 507 Chestnut Street, Highlands, NC 28741.

Online condolences can be left at www.bryantgrantfuneralhome.com Bryant-Grant Funeral Home & Crematory is honored to serve the Sapolsky family.

...SWATTING continued from page 6

connected devices that have been infected with malware or viruses, authorities said.

These infections allow a hacker, or malicious actor to exploit the device's login information, location data, or IP address without the owner's knowledge. The compromised devices are then used to create fake accounts or phone numbers to place swatting calls. When law enforcement attempts to trace the source of the activity, it often leads back to the infected device rather than the actual individual responsible.

According to Highlands Police

Chief Andrea Holland, the hoax calls are expected to continue but the department will stay vigilant.

"We urge everyone to remain cautious in their online activities and to be mindful of what they click or open on phones and computers. Never click links or open attachments from anyone (including things apparently sent by friends or family) without first verifying that the sender intended to share the item," said Chief Holland.

Installing reputable antivirus software and keeping it up to date can help protect devices from becoming compromised, she said.

...LETTERS continued from page 8

will clean our hotel rooms and harvest our food.

So, what do we have today. Masked ICE men storming our communities. The Wall St. Journal has stated that many new hires are not qualified for the job and then are inadequately trained. That was so obvious in the way the ICE agents dealt with Renee Good. Perhaps she should have gotten out of the car when the agent was trying to open her door. However, it is clear from the video that she was murdered. So now I speak to the women in our community. What would you do if you were exercising your 1st amendment rights and masked men with guns surrounded your car. I suspect like me you would have been frightened to get out of your car. She

was clearly turning her wheels away from hitting the ICE agent as she was leaving the scene. There is no way she was ramming him. Donald Trump, Kristi Noem and J.D. Vance are liars. Don't believe me, watch the video.

This is America, not Russia with their KGB or '30s Germany with their Gestapo or are we with our secret police called ICE? For more information on our immigration history, go to Wikipedia. Then tell me Donald Trump's policies are the right ones for a republic that claims to be predominately Christian. Surely there is a better way!

Linda Arnold
Highlands

Thank you for raising awareness for 'Why Us Kids'

Dear Editor,

Thank you very much for Highlands Newspaper's coverage of the "Why Us Kids" December 4 Bingo sponsored by the Rotary Club of Highlands. Because of you, Gracie is one step closer to her goal of bringing trauma counselors back into schools, especially elementary schools.

We are thrilled to tell you the event raised \$10,700 for Gracie's awareness efforts. She looks forward to her bi-annual Youth Rally and continued work to raise awareness of the importance of mental health among North Carolina legislators.

This letter comes with our personal

• See LETTERS page 14



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SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING

Man's spiritual state



Pastor Sam Forrester

Whiteside Presbyterian Church,
Cashiers

Paul addresses in Ephesians 2:1 the spiritual estate of all men. "And you He made alive, Who were dead in trespasses and sins." This is one of the defining passages of Scripture. It is so, because it shows all men in the same condition before God. In Genesis 2:17 God told Adam, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." We understand from Paul in Ephesians and Romans, Adam ate and died, immediately, not a physical death but a spiritual death. The time between his spiritual death and his physical death was a time of grace. God had a plan. He would redeem some out of this spiritual death to be his people. Romans 6:23 says "The wages of sin is death." Adam began drawing his wages with his spiritual death. He passed that first payment on to all who followed him by ordinary generation.

How do we know men who follow Adam are still spiritually dead? Romans 8:6 "For to be carnally minded is death." Every man who refuses to hear the gospel and believe on Jesus is spiritually dead, his mind is sinful and his heart is hard and unresponsive.

Paul tells the Ephesians, "you were dead in trespasses and sins." He can say this because everyone who does not believe in Jesus Christ is dead. Proverbs 21:16 says, "A man who wanders from the way of understanding will rest in the assembly of the dead." Adam led all from the path of understanding, therefore, all died. This is the legacy of all men. It is important that you understand this to properly understand the rest of the gospel message. Jesus was sent into the world to rescue some of these sinful men from this spiritual death. What is a rescue when the person being rescued is not really in any danger? The rescue of men from this state of spiritual death is indeed a heroic rescue because it brings them back from a hopeless situation. Paul says in Ephesians 2:4-5. "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loves us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)".

How do we know the situation of man is hopeless. Paul says they were dead, "in trespasses and sins." Trespasses are those things that have drawn you away from the straight and narrow path. Sins are those things which are inclinations of thoughts, words, and deeds. Those attempts at things which miss the mark. The mark would be, those things that were given at creation, to glorify God. So, both sins of omission and commission are included in these trespasses and sins.

One of the things that causes some people a problem with this idea of spiritual death is the fact that simply because a man is spiritually dead does not mean he cannot at times do things that seem good in the eyes of other men. Most theologians will admit that even unregenerate men can do some good in the eyes of other men. John Cal-

• See SPIRITUALLY page 11

• PLACES TO WORSHIP •

BLUE VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Oliver Rice. Pastor 706-782-3965

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11 a.m.

Sunday night services every 2nd & 4th Sunday at 7 p.m.

BUCK CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH

828-269-3546 • Rev. Jamie Passmore. Pastor

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11 a.m.

CASHIERS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rev. Aryn Williams-Reubel. Pastor 828-743-5298

Sundays: School at 9:30; Worship 10:30 a.m.

GRACE CHAPEL ON HIGH HOLLY

9615 Dillard Rd Scaly Mountain, N.C.

Pastor Steve Kerhoulas. <http://www.Graceonhighholly.com>

Sunday School 9:45; Worship 11 a.m.; Prayer Service Wed 5:30 p.m.

Men's and Women's Bible Study throughout the week

CHRIST ANGLICAN CHURCH

The Rev'd Dr. Marc Robertson & Rev. Nick McGee

464 U.S. Hwy. 64E, Cashiers, NC

CAC@christanglicancashiers.org • 828-743-1701

Sunday: Adult Christian Ed, 9:15 a.m.; Holy Eucharist, 10:30 a.m.

Fellowship 11:45 a.m.; Wed: Bible Study/Contemplative Prayer, 5 p.m.

CHRIST CHURCH OF THE VALLEY. CASHIERS

Pastor Jacob Tedder • jacob@cashiers.church • 743-5470

www.cashiers.church

Sun. 10:45 a.m.; Wed Study 5:15 p.m. supper and childcare.

CLEAR CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Jim Kinard

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11 a.m.

1st & 3rd Sunday night Service: 7 p.m.

Wednesdays - Supper at 6 p.m.

COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH

www.cbchighlands.com • 526-4685

3645 Cashiers Rd. Highlands, NC • Sr. Pastor Gary Hewins

Sun: Service 10:45 a.m., Children's 10:30 a.m.

Wed.: Youth 5:30-7 p.m.; Women's Bible Study: Mon. 4:30 p.m., Tues.

10 a.m.; Men's Bible Study: Wed. & Thurs. 7 a.m. @ Zookeeper

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Rev. W. Bentley Manning, Rector • 526-2968

5th and Main streets • www.incarnationwnc.org

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am in Sanctuary, Wed: Healing Eucharist 12 p.m. in Chapel,

Morning Prayer: Mon-Thurs 8:30 a.m. in Chapel

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HIGHLANDS

828-526-4153 • www.fbchighlands.org

Dr. Mark Ford, Pastor • 220 Main Street, Highlands

Sun.: Worship 10:45 a.m.; Sun.: Bible Study 9:30 a.m.

Wed.: Men's Bible Study 8:30 a.m.; Women's 10:30 a.m.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Emily Wilmarth, pastor; Rev. Kelley Connelly Asso. Pastor

828-526-3175 • fpchighlands.org

Sun.: Adult Ed: 10 a.m.; Worship 11 a.m.; Tues: Men's Group 10 a.m.

Wed: Bell Choir 4 p.m. Chancel Choir: 5:30 p.m.

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(Off Franklin/Highlands Rd)

Sunday School: 10 a.m. Worship Service: 11 a.m.

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Sunday: School 9:45 a.m. Worship 11 a.m. & 7 p.m. Bible Study 6 p.m.

Wed. Kidsquest 6 p.m.; Worship 7 p.m.

HIGHLANDS ASSEMBLY OF GOD

Randy Reed. Pastor 828-421-9172 • 165 S. Sixth Street

Wed. Bible Study: 6 p.m.; Sundays: Worship: 11 a.m.

HIGHLANDS CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Dan Robinson • 11339 Buck Creek Road

The Highlands Central Baptist Church is temporarily sharing the facilities of the Shortoff Baptist Church.

Sunday Worship is at 9 a.m. & 6 p.m. Wednesday Worship is 6 p.m.

HIGHLANDS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rev. Dr. Randy Lucas. Pastor 526-3376

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Rev. Ken Langsdorf

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Pastor Zane Talley

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Wed: Bible Study and Youth Mtg: 7 p.m.

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Weds: Youth Group 6 p.m.; Bible Study 6:30 p.m.

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Rev. Marty Kilby

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Wednesdays: Prayer Mtg: 7 p.m.

SCALY MOUNTAIN CHURCH OF GOD

290 Buck Knob Road; Pastor Donald G. Bates • 526-3212

Sun.: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 10:45 a.m.; Worship: 6 p.m.

SHORTOFF BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Rev. Richard Salmonson

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7 p.m. (Spanish); Wed., 9:30 a.m. (English)

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Sunday School: 10 a.m. Worship Service: 11 a.m.

• POLICE & FIRE REPORTS •

Highlands Police entries from Dec. 16. Only the names of persons arrested, issued a summons/citation, issued a Class-3 misdemeanor or those of public officials have been used.

Dec. 16

- At 1 p.m., officers received a call about harassing and trespassing at a residence on Hickory Hill Road.

Dec. 21

- Erika Christina Vann, 28, of Dillard, GA, was arrested for DUI,

fleeing and eluding and resisting arrest. She was issued a \$800 secured bond. Her trial date is Jan. 14.

Accidents

Dec. 24

- Vehicle-1 was traveling south on South 3rd Street. Vehicle-2 was

stopped at stop sign at intersection of South 3rd Street and NC-28, preparing to make a right turn. Vehicle-1 failed to stop, striking Vehicle-2 in left, rear corner; resulting in damage to both vehicles. Both vehicles came to rest in the roadway.

Jan. 2

- Unit 1 and Unit 2 were traveling West on Horse Cove Rd. near 5th St. Unit 2 slowed and started making a left turn into the parking spots on Horse Cove Rd. Unit 1 hit the left rear of Unit 2.

The Highlands Fire & Rescue log from Jan. 6

Jan. 6

- At 9:55 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on Rocky Hill Road.

- At 3:20 p.m., the dept. responded to a call of a LP gas leak at a residence on US 64 west (Franklin Road).

- At 3:22 p.m., the dept. provided traffic control on US 64 west (Franklin Road).

- At 4:08 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a location on Main Street.

Jan. 7

- At 12:06 p.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on

Cottonwood Drive.

- At 10:47 p.m., the dept. responded to a call about a smoke odor at a residence on Forest Trail.

Jan. 8

- At 11:19 a.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a location on Oak Street.

- At 1:35 p.m., the dept. investigated the cause of smoke at a residence on Brushy Face Road.

- At 5:32 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a location on Carolina Way.

Jan. 9

- At 4:42 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence at Lake Villa Court.

- At 6:01 p.m., the dept. assisted Highlands Police Department at Main and 5th streets.

Jan. 10

- At 4:18 p.m., the dept. provided public assistance at a location on N. 4th Street.

- At 10:49 p.m., the dept. responded to a call of a downed tree on NC 106 (Dillard Road).

Jan. 11

- At 11:37 a.m., the dept. responded to a call of smoke at a residence on Hudson Road.

...SPIRITUALLY continued from page 10

vin wrote concerning some men that they had, "uniformly conducted themselves in a most virtuous manner through the whole course of their lives" (Institutes of Christian Religion, Vol. I, P. 263, translated by John Allen). A thinking, observant man cannot deny this. Scripture clearly teaches it. It is said of King Joash in II Chronicles 24:2 that "Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest." After Jehoiada died he turned and did his own thing, even killing Jehoiada's son, so he wouldn't have to listen to God's Word. Jesus said in Luke 6:33, "And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that." Unregenerate men can respond in a crisis to help others, they do so because they can see themselves in a similar situation and see they may one day need help too. Most all men, can and

do, at times, show some spark of compassion and goodness toward others, but you must not confuse this with spiritual good. If a work is not a work of true faith, then it does not come from a heart that sees the other person as having been created in the image of God. Many in this world have learned that total selfishness is not an acceptable path to follow. They control their selfishness in some areas. You need to understand, total depravity does not mean a person is as sinful as he could ever get.

It means that every area of his life has been touched by sin. This is what Paul means when he says, you are dead in your transgressions and sins. You cannot know anything spiritual until you have been made spiritually alive. Natural man, the spiritually dead man, cannot know or comprehend anything spiritual. I Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the

Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." What can a dead man do? Nothing, absolutely nothing, the spiritually dead man cannot understand the things of God for he has no spirit with which to receive and process the information, therefore, it sounds like foolishness to him. He will not accept the teaching of the Scripture. He cannot, for it is spiritually discerned and he does not have a living spirit. The only hope he has is the gospel of Jesus Christ. If he will open his ears and listen and his heart and believe, he can be made alive in Jesus and begin to serve his Creator through faith in Jesus Christ. His state, then, becomes one of spiritual life. "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him" (John 3:36).

...SHERIFF continued from page 1

"Our candidates have already agreed to the rules, but I want everyone here to know what they are," Blaine said. "Each candidate gets three minutes to answer the question and they also have one minute for rebuttal. Whoever goes first can do the rebuttal because they can rebut what comes second."

He stressed that only one candidate would speak at a time and that personal attacks would not be permitted. "There is no personal or inflammatory language — from our candidates or questions from the audience," Blaine said. "Questions from the audience must be respectful and relevant to the sheriff's role."

Despite those instructions, the forum became tense at several points, with support-

ers of Cook repeatedly blurting out insults and personal attacks directed at Holbrooks while he was speaking. The interruptions prompted reminders from the moderator for the audience to remain respectful and allow each candidate to finish their remarks.

Before questions began, Blaine read prepared biographies for both candidates.

Holbrooks, who was elected sheriff in 2022, began his law enforcement career in 1999 with the Macon County Sheriff's Office after earning his certificate from Southwestern Community College. He previously served on road patrol, later earning promotion to corporal and lieutenant overseeing civil process and courthouse security. His experience also includes more than 15 years as a SWAT team

leader and undercover work with a multi-agency narcotics unit across western North Carolina. Holbrooks' family has served in law enforcement for three generations, including his father, former Sheriff Homer Holbrook, who served 16 years in the role.

Following his introduction, Holbrooks offered a brief opening statement.

"First and foremost, thank you to the GOP for hosting this event and everyone in attendance this afternoon," Holbrooks said. "Folks, as I sit here this afternoon before you, I'm proud of what we have built. The accomplishments and improvements achieved under our leadership are nothing short of amazing. Together we've made Macon County safer, stronger, and I'm

• See SHERIFF page 14

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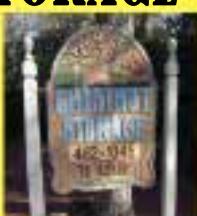
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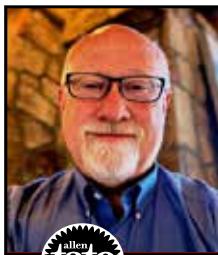
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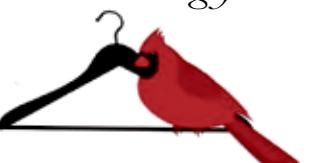
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• HIGHLANDS AREA EVENTS •

POOL SCHEDULE

• Lap Swim: Mon.-Fri. 6am-9:45am, and Saturday 10am-11pm - 6 lanes. Water Aerobics: 18 y+ Mon.-Fri. 10-11am with Karen Chambers. Adult Swim: 18y+ Mon.-Thurs. 11am-3:30pm, Friday 11am-1:30pm. Public Swim: Mon. thru Thurs. 3:30-7pm, Saturday 11am-6pm and Sunday 1-6pm

PICKLE BALL

• At the Recreation Dept. every Monday - Friday 10am-1pm indoors for the winter (notice the days and time has changed),

MOUNTAIN FINDINGS

Winter Hours: Friday & Saturdays. Open: 10 am - 1 pm. Spruce Street. www.mountainfindings.org

ICE SKATING IN PARK

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LUTHER KING DAY

• Thurs., 3:30-8p; Fri. 3:30-10p; Sat. 1-10p, Sun. 1-5p Hours will be extending during Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations. \$8 with or without skates.

ALL WEEK

• Scaly Mountain/Highlands/Cashiers Alcoholics Anonymous "Open Meetings" are for anyone who thinks they may have a drinking problem or for anyone interested in the A.A. recovery program. Open meetings are held at Scaly Mountain @ Grace Chapel, 9915 Dillard Rd., Scaly Mountain each Tues at 5:30 pm and Highlands @ the 1st Presbyterian Church, 471 Main St., on Monday at 5:30p.m. and on Wednesday & Fridays @ 12:00 noon. Open in-person meetings are also held

...LETTERS continued from page 9

thanks for reducing the stigma associated with mental illness and helping us to increase positive mental health through prevention before intervention is necessary.

Thank you also for Bud Katz's awesome "Here's the

in Cashiers @ the Albert Carlton Cashiers Community Library, 249 Frank Allen Rd. on Sunday at 5pm, on Tuesday @ 7 pm, on Friday at 5 pm and on Saturday at 9 am. For more information please visit our website www.aawnc80.org or to speak with a member of A.A. 24/7 call our HELP Line 828 349-4357

Thurs., Jan. 8

At PAC, National Theatre Live: A Streetcar Named Desire at 5 p.m. For tickets, call 828-526-9047.

Fri., Jan. 16

At PAC's MLT, the movie Rental Family, 2 and 5:30 p.m. For tickets, call 828-526-9047.

Sat., Jan. 17

At PAC's MLT, the movie Rental Family, 2 and 5:30 p.m. For tickets, call 828-526-9047.

Sun., Jan. 18

At PAC's MLT, the movie Rental Family, 2 (with captions) and 5:30 p.m. For tickets, call 828-526-9047.

Sat., Jan. 17

• At Highlands Mercantile on Main Street, Eyebrow Lifting and Shaping Event. 11a to 2p.. RSVP: 828-482-0818 Limited appointments available. Call today to reserve your spot!

Sun. Jan. 25

• Grand Reopening of Don Leon's. 1-4pm. Come meet Don-Juan and Ivanet (Eva) There will be free food and music. IT will be a time to celebrate our retirement and their new ownership.

Fri. & Sat., Feb. 13-14

• PAC Outreach Theater Camp -- How to Audition Join us for a two-day theater camp designed for young performers ages 7-18. 10a to 3p. For tickets, call 828-526-9047.

Thing" column in the January 1st edition. We have thanked him, too!

Gracie Parker, Jim "Opa" Parker and Elke "Oma" Kennedy Franklin

...SHERIFF continued from page 11

committed to continuing that work as your sheriff."

Cook, a longtime Macon County resident, was introduced next. He is a Navy veteran who served 20 years, retiring as a chief petty officer, and later spent more than two decades in law enforcement with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office in Florida. Cook said his experience spanned patrol, community policing, narcotics, property crimes, and extensive undercover work focused on violent crime organizations. He moved to Macon County in 2015 and later worked at Southwestern Community College as an in-service training coordinator and certified North Carolina instructor.

In his opening remarks, Cook thanked attendees for coming out on a rainy afternoon.

He went on to describe his background, saying, "I stayed in the United States Navy till 1992. I did 20 years. I retired as a chief petty officer. A chief petty officer is the one that makes things happen for the United States Navy."

Describing his law enforcement career, Cook said, "My biggest accomplishment in law enforcement — and I did 14 years undercover narcotics — I specialized in opiates, violent crime organizations. If they killed somebody and they couldn't get them on murder, they would give me the case."

Cook concluded his opening by explaining his decision to run. "I have failed at retirement more than once," he said. "I feel very strongly about having to do this. I believe I have a lot that I can offer, and I hope that you'll listen to me."

As the forum continued into candidate questions, advance-submitted questions, and questions from the audience, the atmosphere periodically escalated, particularly during Holbrooks' responses, when interruptions and shouted remarks from the audience broke the forum's stated rules. Blaine re-

minded attendees that the purpose of the event was to hear directly from the candidates, not from the crowd.

During the forum, differences in experience, priorities, and qualifications between the two candidates became more pronounced as questions turned to leadership, training, and operational philosophy.

Bob Cook acknowledged that during his law enforcement career in Florida he was the subject of six internal investigations related to alleged misconduct. He told attendees that none resulted in criminal charges, but also confirmed that he was never promoted during his time in Florida law enforcement. Cook further stated that he has not completed training or certifications specific to the role of sheriff in North Carolina. He said his preparation for the position is based on general law enforcement experience, previous training, and management skills he developed during his 20 years in the U.S. Navy.

When asked how he would prioritize funding if resources were unlimited, Cook said he would focus on improving conditions at the Macon County jail. He stated that taxpayer dollars should be used to make the facility more comfortable for inmates, including providing higher-quality food.

Holbrooks, by contrast, emphasized his 26 years of continuous law enforcement experience in Macon County and said he holds numerous certifications related to the sheriff's role. Addressing how he would allocate funding if unconstrained by budget limits, Holbrooks said his priority would be expanding efforts to combat narcotics trafficking and drug-related crime, describing it as a direct investment in public safety countywide.

Holbrooks also addressed questions related to internal conflicts and allegations of nepotism within the Sheriff's Office. He said personal relationships should be separated from pro-

fessional responsibilities and handled within the confines of the law.

He acknowledged that family members currently work within the agency but said those situations were reviewed and approved by the Macon County Board of Commissioners and handled through established processes.

"I'm not trying to avoid it," Holbrooks said. "Yes, there are family members who work here now, and that issue was addressed. The commissioners made that decision. I was given their approval, and everything was handled appropriately."

Cook criticized Holbrooks for not knowing the law prior to taking office and said that he believes a Sheriff should know all the laws and shouldn't have to look them up or research them.

In closing remarks, Cook said he views the role as a serious responsibility and not one to be taken lightly, describing his motivation as a desire to serve the community, support veterans, and help residents through outreach and assistance. He thanked those in attendance and asked voters to join him in what he described as a new beginning for the Sheriff's Office.

Sheriff Brent Holbrooks used his closing remarks to call for unity and civility, criticizing what he described as name-calling, blame, and personal attacks during the campaign. He questioned the purpose of such behavior and urged voters to focus on moving Macon County forward. Holbrooks cited faith-based values including love, mercy, compassion, grace, and forgiveness, saying those principles should guide both leadership and public discourse. He encouraged voters to support continued stability and progress within the Sheriff's Office and thanked attendees for their time, closing by wishing the community well as the primary election approaches.

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