

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2, 2025

THE NEWS OBSERVER

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News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison

Dr. Chris Bell, right, directed the trauma team treating the teenage victim of a car crash during the Safe Driving Summit at Fannin County High School. Bell, MD, FACS, is with University Surgical Associates with Erlanger Medical Center. Those making up the team included Whitley McDaris, fourth from right, Emergency Department manager at Blue Ridge Medical Center, and Emily Parker, RN, CCRN, from Erlanger Medical Center who was the patient.

“Philip is dead”

Students hear real life warning

BY GLENN HARBISON  
glenn@thenewsobserver.com

There was only a phone number on the post-it note stuck on the front door that warm Sunday morning in June 2014. That phone number led to another number and the news no family wants to hear. Son and brother, Philip Lutzenkirchen, 28 days short of his 23rd birthday, was dead. Tears flowed, knees hit the floor, and one sister’s scream was so loud

a neighbor came to see what could have happened. The Troup County, Georgia, had delivered the solemn message, “Philip is dead.” The family’s life changed forever, and from that change grew a determination no other family should have to suffer the same. Mike Lutzenkirchen and the Lutzie 43 Foundation brought the message, “don’t let this happen to your family,” to Fannin County High School Tuesday, March 25.

Every student heard what can happen from drunk and distracted driving. If they were listening closely, they heard the devastating emotion still coming from Mike’s voice more than ten years later. The story began the night before when a drunk driving crash killed Philip. He was a passenger in a Chevrolet Tahoe with three other friends. Mike told how a large group had

See **WARNING**, A8➤

Pedestrian struck in Mineral Bluff

BY GLENN HARBISON  
glenn@thenewsobserver.com

An 85-year-old man was taken to Erlanger Medical Center in Chattanooga after being struck by a pickup truck in downtown Mineral Bluff. Benjamin Cole, of Lake-wood Highway, was struck at approximately 8:40 a.m. Friday, March 28, on State Route 60 near Clement Street. According to the crash report filed by Georgia State Patrol Trooper Dylan Roberts, witnesses at the scene said the victim ran across the highway chasing two chickens without looking to see if traffic had stopped. The report said Cole was walking south on the north-bound side of the roadway.

Johnathan Daniel Dyer, 40, of Hancock Road in Blue Ridge, was traveling north in a Ford Ranger pickup truck. Cole, “attempted to cross State Route 60 behind other traffic without making sure the roadway was clear. As a result the pedestrian entered (the Ranger’s) lane of travel,” the report said. Dyer told the trooper he did not see the pedestrian run into the road, and tried to stop once he did see him. A vehicle ahead of Dyer had swerved to miss the chickens. Cole was taken by Fannin County EMS to the Riverstone landing zone and from there airlifted by Life Force helicopter to Erlanger Medical Center. No charges were filed, according to the report.

Standridge resigns, Thomas named

BY GLENN HARBISON  
glenn@thenewsobserver.com

Copperhill has a new member of the city’s Board of Aldermen following the resignation of William L. “Bill” Standridge. Standridge submitted his letter of resignation March 25 citing health reasons. “It is with heavy heart that I submit my resignation...While this decision

was not an easy one, I must prioritize my well-being,” Standridge wrote. The long time public servant has served the city collectively for 42-plus years. He was elected to a new four-year term in the last election, taking office with a completely new governing body. “Serving the residents of Copperhill...has been one of the greatest honors of my life. I am grateful for the trust and support I have received,” Standridge wrote.

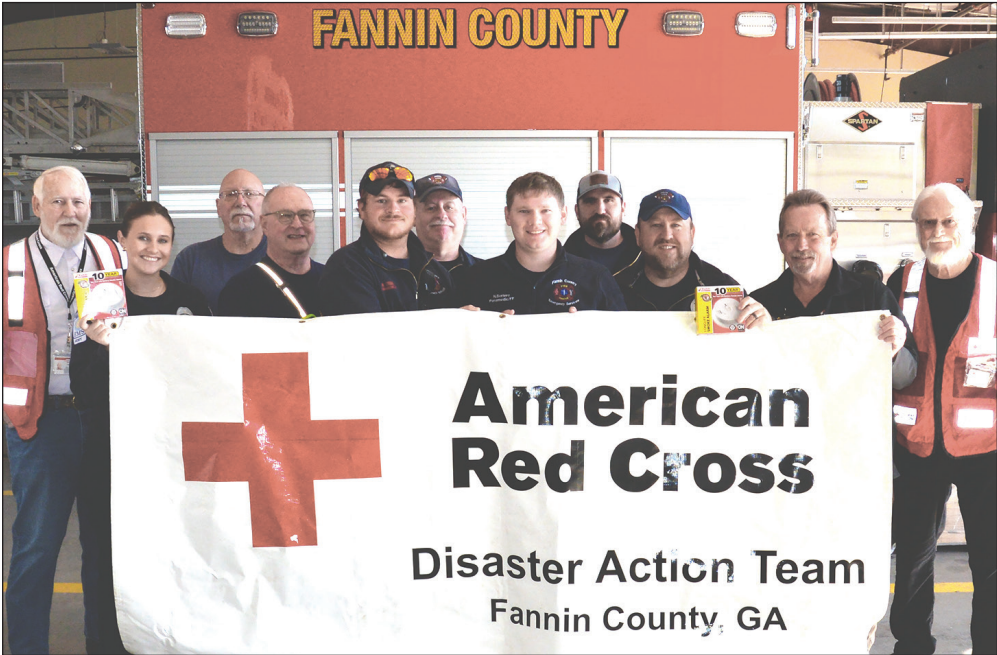
Mayor Greg Barker, who is also Standridge’s neighbor, referred to Standridge as “A great man, he’s given a lot to the city.” Jeff Thomas was then unanimously approved by the aldermen to fill Standridge’s term. Vice Mayor Jake Reuse called Thomas “a man of high character,” in nominating him for the post. The actions came in a special meeting of the aldermen Friday, March 28. In other action at that meeting, the board approved Joshua Boring as a Wastewater Treatment operator plant trainee. Barker said Boring is “going to be a great asset to the city.”

Free smoke alarms offered to residents

BY GLENN HARBISON  
glenn@thenewsobserver.com

There is no reason that every home in Fannin County should not have a working smoke alarm. That’s the goal of the Fannin County Fire Department and American Red Cross as members kick off a program to provide smoke alarms free of charge. Representatives of the two groups announced the program last week. Fannin County Fire Chief Larry Thomas said

the smoke alarms are free, and teams from the two organizations will come and install them for those who need that service. “The smoke detectors are free to anyone unable to purchase one,” as is the installation, Thomas said. Installation appointments will be made over the telephone. For more information, call Thomas at 706-632-4711. To make an appointment, call Thomas, Carl Freman at 251-689-4512, or visit redcross.org/georgia.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison

The Fannin County Fire Department and American Red Cross are joining forces to make sure residents have smoke alarms. Announcing the program are, from left, Carl Freman, Morgan Craine, Rob Ross, Victor Wagon, Mason Cruse, Jim Edelstein, Nelson Soriero, Lee Saunders, Ryan McDaris, Larry Thomas, and Gene Spier.



CONTACT THE NEWS OBSERVER  
706-632-2019  
Fax: 706-632-2577  
news@thenewsobserver.com

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# Warning: “Don’t let this happen to your family”

➤ Continued from front page

gathered on a South Georgia farm for the weekend. One in the group had decided he had to go to the store for dip. On the way back, the driver went through a stop sign at 77 miles per hour. There was no road on the other side, only a small bank that sent the vehicle end over end, 450 feet through the



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison Emma Coffey, left, and Sarah Brawley watch closely as a trauma team treats a teenage girl seriously injured in a car crash. The scene was part of the Safe Driving Summit at Fannin County High School sponsored by the Lutzie 43 Foundation and Georgia Department of Transportation.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison Emma Weaver, left, and Avery Collis listen as law enforcement officers explain their roles regarding enforcement of traffic laws.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison Thankfully, it wasn’t real. Emily Parker, RN, CCRN, from Erlanger Medical Center played the role of a teenage girl seriously injured in a car crash. Wheeled into the “trauma room” at Fannin County High School, students received a first hand view of a life-threatening situation.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison Jay Kenniff learns why drivers should be so careful around 18-wheelers from David Young of FedEx Freight. Kenniff is looking to see what is visible through the rear view mirror, and the blind spots other drivers should respect.

air. Philip’s blood alcohol content was .377. He was a passenger in the back seat. The last picture Mike saw of his son is engraved in his memory: a stick figure on the police report with DOA above his head. “I don’t want your parents to ever have a post-it note on your front door,” he told Fannin County students after reliving the

tragedy. He told how Lutzie 43 was there to “help you become better, safer, smarter young drivers,” which is all about making the right choices. The foundation promotes “45 seconds to complete the safe driving checklist: clear head, clear hands, clear eyes, click it,” when getting in a vehicle. “Wear your seatbelt,” Mike repeated over and over to students. He also told students that passengers in a vehicle are just as important

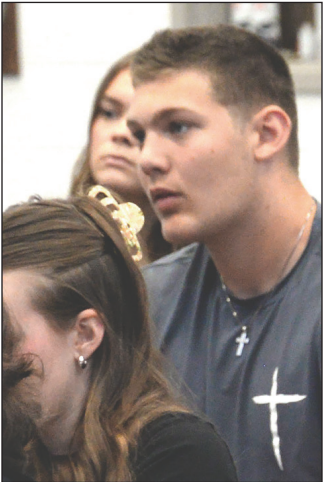
as the driver, and they too make choices. Mike told how Philip had always been a leader, always responsible. He was not mad at his son, but could not understand why Philip had not been a leader – everyone’s keys should have been put away when the weekend began. Figures presented by the Georgia Department of Transportation, host of the event, reflected how important the message is for Fannin County. Out of 159 counties in Georgia,

Fannin ranks 46th in total crashes involving 15- to 19-year olds, ahead of even Fulton County. Fannin also ranks 66th in serious injury crashes involving the same age group. Emily Dunn, GDOT board member, introduced the presentation by saying the Lutzenkirchen family had taken “a very painful experience and turned it into something good,” as she encouraged students at the beginning of the event to learn from what they would hear.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison

Watching what happens when someone suffers life-threatening injuries held the attention of Anna-leigh Cheatham.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison

Odin Rea-Gutierrez watches intently as a trauma scene plays out as part of the Safe Driving Summit.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison Easton Matnis, Nate O’Neal and Corbin Head, from left, hear the penalties they would face if they were driving and someone died in a car crash they caused.



News Observer photo/Glenn Harbison Fannin County High School students learned “this is what it really looks like” after someone is treated in the trauma unit of a hospital The almost life size picture showed the mess created, caused by the intense effort that takes place to save a life.

3rd Annual

Kimsey Ridge Gospel Sing

April 5, 2025

6:00 PM

Featuring the Community Choir and Special Guests:

Partin Family

First Day Music

Ware & Jones Family

Caylor Family

Free Admission

2018 Hwy 68 Copperhill, TN

For Information: 706-851-4330

Raven Welch Harris



OUR OPINION

Hope and pray  
it never happens

Maybe they were moved by the emotion in his voice as Mike Lutzenkirchen talked about how his son, Philip, died just before his 23rd birthday. Possibly it was hearing how long, and with whom, they would spend their time in jail if convicted of killing someone while driving drunk. Perhaps the screams of the teenager being wheeled into a trauma room, her life hanging by a thread, that got their attention.

Whichever part of the Safe Driving Summit got the attention of Fannin County High School students, let’s hope they got the message, “Don’t let this happen to your family.”

That message was presented to the students by the Lutzie 43 Foundation, the Georgia Department of Transportation, the Georgia State Patrol, the Georgia Motor Carrier Compliance division, the Fannin County Sheriff’s Office, the Blue Ridge and McCaysville police departments, and several medical professionals last week.

The emotional event began with father and husband Mike telling the Lutzenkirchen story.

Philip was an Auburn football star and the beloved son and brother of a very close knit family. A post-it note on a Sunday morning led to two phone calls that changed the family forever. The Troup County, Georgia, coroner delivered the news that Philip had been killed the night before in a drunk driving crash. He was the passenger in a vehicle that went end over end doing 77 miles per hour.

That was in June 2014. Mike Lutzenkirchen has repeated the horrific story countless times to thousands of people. Last Tuesday, in front of the FCHS student body, his voice still broke with the pain and emotion brought by that Sunday morning almost 11 years ago.

Young drivers – all drivers – need to hear what can happen when bad decisions are made. They need to know drunk and distracted driving kills, whether them, someone they love, or someone they have never met. They need to hear the effects, effects that never go away, on the families.

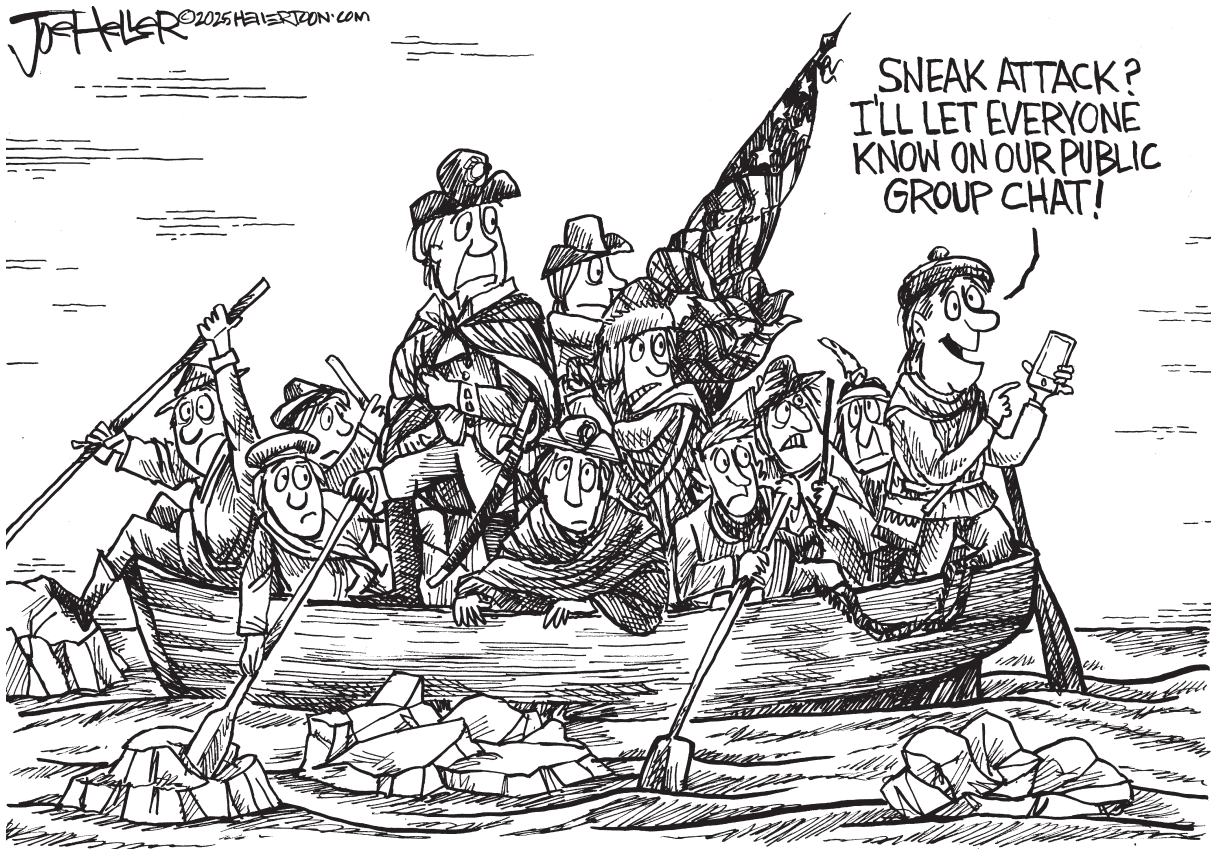
Teenagers especially need to hear they are not invincible, that they will not live forever.

Fannin County students heard those messages in the Lutzenkirchen story.

The same teenagers are among some of the most likely in all of Georgia to be involved in a crash. Out of the state’s 159 counties, Fannin ranks 46th in total crashes among 15- to 19-year-old drivers. The county ranks 66th in serious injury crashes among the same age group. The odds are against Fannin County’s young drivers.

Fannin County students heard the dangers and the consequences of driving drunk, riding with a drunk driver, or driving distracted.

Let’s hope they listened. Let’s hope and pray what happened to the Lutzenkirchen family never happens to your family.



Kindness can bring people  
back or send them away

Things change. That statement is simple enough, but do we really pay attention to its truth?

We do, here at your local newspaper. And no time is any more intense than right now.

We have just finished the preparation work for our annual edition of Info Please, the magazine we publish once a year in conjunction with the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce and CVB.

Within the magazine’s pages are calendars, events, meeting notices; countless items that include people, places, dates, and times.

Because we are accustomed to multiple changes as we go through the year, we check each item that will be included in Info Please.

One way we do this is by calling the information number listed the previous year. The approach is simple, we ask if there are any changes and go over what was published before.

Dates usually change since many events stay on a certain Saturday or weekend. Times will occasionally vary by an hour or two. Other items just roll on like normal.

So the questions are simple enough and the answers are easy enough.

There is another reason for this personal checkup. It gives our



GLENN  
HARBISON  
■  
Publisher/  
Editor

staff a chance to connect with someone, maybe someone they have never talked with before. It also gives that someone the chance to connect personally with us.

“Personally” is my preference. This old school way can made things so much more simple.

Well, such a connection was exactly what I had in mind this year when I handed our newest staff writer, Enola, the task of double checking information. Altogether, she had 44 stories to complete – at least 44 people to talk with that would deepen her community knowledge.

Out of those, 41 were helpful the way we expect our mountain community to act.

But there were two, and there reactions will stay etched in her mind, that were rude with answers akin to “we’ve always done it that way. No, it hasn’t changed. Why are you bothering me?”

Another just didn’t bother to get back as had been promised.

This was Enola’s first welcome to the community, and while overwhelmingly warm, not the 100 percent of open arms for which I hoped.

This story is the opposite of one I heard from a friend last week. She had ordered a trio of food trays for an evening meeting. As luck would have it, one was not correct. The chicken tender order was messed up.

What did she encounter? She told how the “girl” who waited on her had been so honest, so apologetic and worked so hard to make things “right.” My friend wasn’t mad. Far from it. A store manager, and very likely someone else higher up the ‘food chain,’ will be getting a phone call from her bragging on the store’s great employee and great customer service.

If my friend had been greeted with rudeness, you can bet there would have been a different kind of phone call.

She’ll be back at that retailer, and likely for more food.

Kindness goes a long way toward building relationships. People will look elsewhere when it’s absent.

Glenn Harbison is publisher/editor of The News Observer. He can be reached at 706-632-2019 or by email at glenn@thenewsobserver.com.

Encouragement can provide  
hope in dark situations

While watching a morning TV program, Kevin Hines was featured. His story was different, and it was bothersome. I took notes with the intention of sharing this story someday – today is that day. Kevin Hines’s story is one of survival and resilience. In September 2000, 19-year-old Hines tried to end his life by jumping off San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. This situation provides an important lesson to be understood and learned.

On his walk to the bridge that morning to end his life, Hines had given himself a test, if one person showed him kindness, if one person asked him if he was okay, he would not do it. He had walked through the city for hours, passing strangers, silently pleading for someone to see him, to really see him. No one did.

Hines gripped the cold steel railing of the Golden Gate Bridge, his heart hammering against his ribs. The wind roared in his ears, whipping through his jacket as if urging him forward. Below, the waters of the San Francisco Bay churned, dark and indifferent. He had made his deci-



GENE  
CRAWFORD  
■  
Guest  
Columnist

sion, or so he thought. As he stood there, tears blurred his vision. He had convinced himself that no one cared that his pain was too great, that this was the only way to silence the voices of despair echoing in his mind.

Hines jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, falling at a speed of 75 miles per hour, similar to being hit by a car at that speed. The moment his fingers left the railing, he felt instant regret. “I thought it was too late, I said to myself, ‘What have I done, I don’t want to die,’” says Hines. “I realized I made the greatest mistake of my life.” Hines fell about 220 feet in just four seconds. He crashed feet first into the waters below. Most survivors regretted jumping the second they left the bridge.

When he resurfaced, he was trying to stay afloat, thinking he was going to drown. As he was bobbing up and down in the water, he was saying ‘I don’t want

to die, God, I made a mistake.”

A sea lion, Hines says, kept pushing him above the water’s surface. The Coast Guard arrived minutes later, pulling him from the water. As they lifted him onto the boat, he sobbed, not from pain, but from the realization that he had survived. That, just maybe, his life was not meant to end that day. The Coast Guard immediately took Hines to the hospital.

He fractured multiple vertebrae in his spine, nearly severing his spinal cord. The impact caused significant rib fractures and lacerations and internal injuries. His organs suffered trauma from the force of hitting the water. Doctors surgically treated Hines’ physical injuries, and after four weeks, he commenced psychiatric care at St. Francis Hospital in San Francisco. This marked the beginning of seven in-patient stays to address his depression, paranoia, and hallucinations.

Since 1937, more than 1,800 people ended their lives by jumping from this iconic bridge. Hines is one of only 35 people who have survived.

After his survival, Kevin

See CRAWFORD, A5➤

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR  
WELCOMED

Letters to the editor of The News Observer are encouraged.

All writers must follow our policy:

- Letters must include the writer’s full name, street address and daytime telephone number for verification. Writer’s name and city of residence will be published. Names cannot be withheld.
- Letters should be 500 words or fewer.
- Letters are subject to editing for grammar, clarity and appropriate content.
- This newspaper considers contents of letters sent to the editor to become the property of the newspaper for purposes of publication. We may edit, shorten or discard, in our sole discretion.
- Letters criticizing businesses are not published.
- Letters must be received by 5 p.m. Thursday to be considered for the following week’s newspaper.

Send letters to: The News Observer, P.O. Box 989, Blue Ridge, Georgia, 30513; fax to: 706-632-2577; or e-mail to: news@thenewsobserver.com.

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THE NEWS OBSERVER



Glenn Harbison  
Publisher/Editor



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