

Opinion

A community forum for viewpoints from around the world to your backyard

The Clinch County News

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TALL TALES

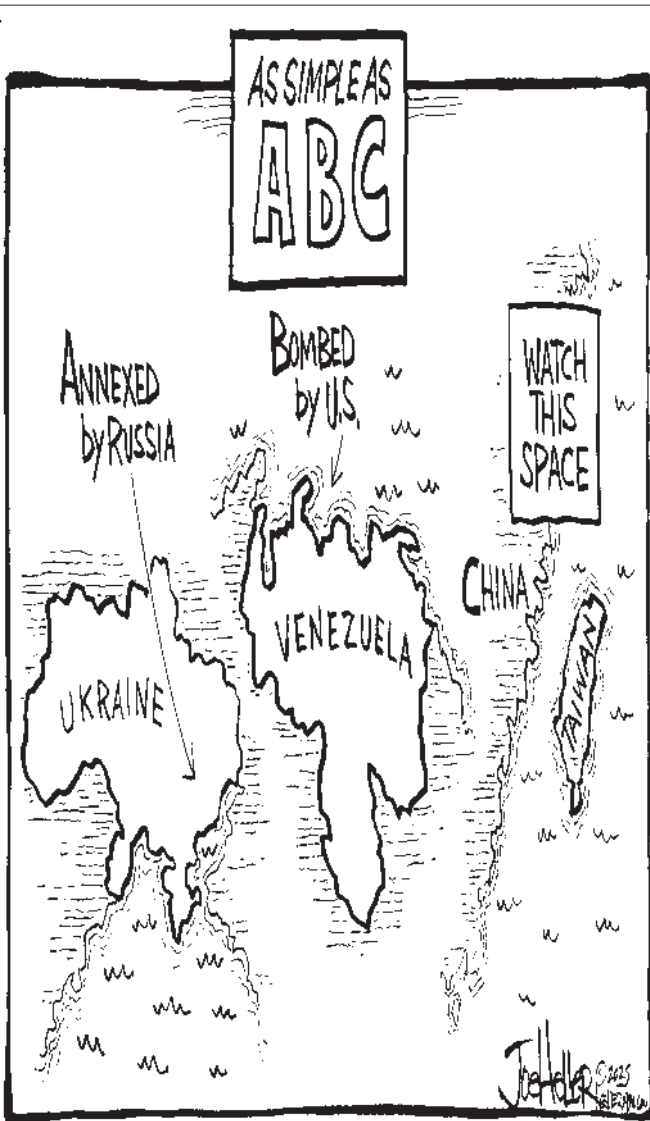
By Lem Griffis

I don't get to deer hunt any more. I lost my dog. He was around a black dog with a white ring around his tail. He was the fastest running dog I ever saw.

One day he was chasing a deer and was running so fast he was almost flying. The deer jumped over a snake. When my dog got to the snake, he was running so fast and stopped so quick that the white ring from his tail slipped up around his neck and choked my poor dog to death.

Truthfully yours,
Lem Griffis

Our letters to the editor are intended to be a free and open forum for local and area citizens to comment on items of general public interest. If you wish to write a letter to us, please type it or write legibly, double-spacing preferred. Letters are subject to editing for length, good taste and newspaper style. Subjects of a personal nature are generally not acceptable. Endorsements of political candidates are also not acceptable during a campaign. All letters must be signed but names may be withheld under certain dire circumstances. Please include a daytime phone number and address. You can also e-mail us a letter at clinnews@windstream.net, or visit our website at www.theclinchcountynews.com.



Hot Wheels instead of Hot Dogs

I was on the couch, chewing on a straw, watching TV many moons ago, when my youngest son approached my throne.

"Arggh argghzhin rumblph," he said.

He obviously had something in his mouth that was prompting even more garbled gibberish than usual.

"Son, what's in your mouth?"

He opened his mouth, where I witnessed a huge, mangled eraser atop his tongue.

"Son, don't ever put erasers, or anything else that isn't food, in your mouth," I commanded, straw betwixt my incisors. He spit out the offensive item in the trash and merrily went his way.

This, unfortunately, wasn't an isolated incident. It's been going on for years. During our years of child-rearing, we've found all forms of non-edible items in our children's mouths — gem clips rather than gem squash; cutlery

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instead of cucumber; Hot Wheels instead of hot dogs.

I tend to blame any of our children's shortcomings on my wife, but I can't lie (which is a lie). Truth is, this one is on me.

I have a long and detailed history of eating, chewing and sometimes choking on inedible objects.

At 3, I ate dirt with my grandparents' dachshund. From what I remember, it wasn't that bad.

At 5, I swallowed a quarter. My parents took me to the doctor, where an X-ray was taken. I still have that X-ray — my wee skeleton with a shiny quarter dead in the middle of my rib cage, so clear you can almost read "In God We Trust."

At one point during my youth, I had swallowed a quarter and a dime in the same week — the only time I was actually worth 35 cents in my life.

In fourth grade, I grew tired of coin-swallowing and decided to chew on a giant button for some reason. I swallowed the button and an alert substitute teacher — Mrs. Stevens, God bless her — saw me gasping for air on the playground. She utilized the Heimlich maneuver and the giant button came flying out. I haven't chewed on a giant button since, no matter how tempting.

I also used to eat and chew on paper, which, I reasoned, was high in fiber and low on calories. This habit of chewing

on unchewable items isn't limited to the males of the Robbins clan.

A number of years ago, over 20 in fact, we were at a high school basketball game and my wife noticed our daughter, then 3 or 4, was chewing something.

"What are you chewing?"

Our daughter opened her mouth to reveal a wad of gum — in all of the colors of the rainbow.

"Gum," she gleefully exclaimed.

"Where'd you get that gum?"

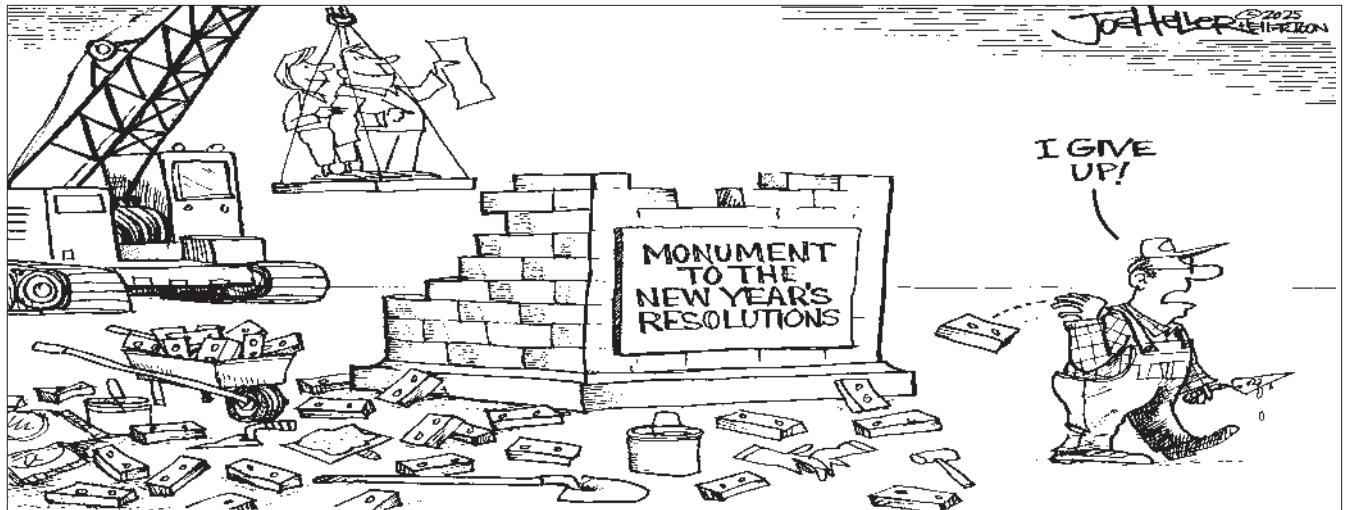
Our daughter pointed under the bleacher seat in front of her.

"I got it from under there," she said, my wife's jaw dropping in horror. "There's more if you want some."

They immediately went to the bathroom, probably to wash her mouth out with soap. I immediately went into convulsions of hilarity.

Heredity and what-not.

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Illness, Work and Care in Clinch County

Being away from Clinch County for decades does not negate the connection I have with it. I was born and raised there — in DuPont, Georgia — and as a former child with a disability, I often return to my experiences at home and in school and how they shaped my core values and my adult life.

People could see that I had limitations. At different times, I did not participate in recess, later used crutches and a wheelchair, missed classes — even an entire grade — and sometimes ate lunch alone because it saved time for others who helped push me between classes. But most people did not know what my diagnosis was at the time. They simply knew that I could not walk like others and that I was often in pain.

Bus drivers physically carried me onto the bus because we did not yet have one with a lift. Cousins took turns pushing me from the house to the bus. What people saw were the limitations — not the medical explanation behind them.

One of my fondest moments in school was when Coach Ed (Jerry Edwards) gave me no slack and told me I had to run five laps around the football field like everyone else. With swollen knees, I did the best version of running I could and finished the laps. By the time I graduated from high school, I had undergone at least ten surgeries on my hips, knees, and right hand. I missed my entire junior year and was taught at home through the hospi-

tal homebound program. Every now and then, a few classmates stopped by to see me.

As an adult, I often think about youth with disabilities in Clinch County — how they grow into adulthood, how their families manage, and what opportunities are realistically available to them.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 23.3% of people in Clinch County live below the poverty line, a rate significantly higher than the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). About 28.4% of children in the county live in poverty, and nearly 12% of residents under age 65 live with a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.). For the same population, almost 18% of residents under age 65 lack health insurance (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

Those numbers are not abstract. They describe neighbors, families, and working people.

As an adult, I have spent years self-employed and working as a contractor serving Veterans and Servicemembers with and without disabilities, both in the United States and globally. During that time, I spent years without healthcare coverage — until I needed it.

I have had Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis since childhood, which meant that at one point I had what insurance companies used to call a "pre-existing condition." Even though I worked, I could not obtain coverage. My body disqualified me, while my income dis-

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qualified me from state or federal assistance programs.

Two years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. I faced a decision no one should ever have to make: Pay rent or pay for surgery. I did not have insurance at that time. I split the funds I had, and later the hospital helped me. Eventually, I was able to purchase health insurance through the Affordable Care Act, even with my pre-existing condition. For me, some insurance was better than none.

Without it, I would not have started—or completed—twelve rounds of chemotherapy. I was no longer being punished for being sick as a child. Full stop.

That matters deeply in a place like Clinch County, where I learned strong work ethics and neighborly values. Rural communities face fewer healthcare providers, longer travel distances for care, and fewer choices when coverage is lost.

This reality also affects Veterans and their families. Many people in Clinch County know military service firsthand. Not all qualify for full VA healthcare, and many rely on a combination of VA services and private insurance—especially in rural areas.

I am writing this because I am an advocate for people with disabilities — and that means I am an advocate for you. All of us will be impacted by disability at some

point in our lives (directly or indirectly), whether through congenital conditions, accidents, illness, aging, or service in war. Disability is not limited to a few.

It may be easy to believe that policy changes will hurt "others," but not us. Healthcare does not work that way. Illness covers all demographics. Insurance underwriting does not care how hard you worked or how responsibly you lived. Therefore, healthcare is not abstract. It is rent. It is surgery. It is chemotherapy. It is whether a manageable condition becomes a life-altering crisis, but empathy should not require catastrophe.

With that in mind, if there is interest, I would welcome continued conversation — a community space to listen, share experiences, and support one another as neighbors: Clinch County's Circle of Community Conversations (A Google doc form). Just to talk honestly and care for one another.

Dr. Shonda McLaughlin is a DuPont, Georgia native, author, Fulbright Scholar, and founder of the Vocational Rehab Academy. She works in disability advocacy and vocational rehabilitation and currently serves Veterans and Servicemembers with and without disabilities. She remains deeply connected to Clinch County and its people.