

Deputy kills shotgun-wielding man

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The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation has taken over the investigation of a deputy-involved shooting

on Monday morning that left a Franklin man dead.

According to Macon County Sheriff's Office reports, deputies were called to a home on Pheasant Drive just before midnight on

Sunday to a report that a resident could not exit his driveway because his neighbor had nailed boards down across the road to block it.

MCSO deputy Anthony Momphard spoke with the

911 caller before making his way to a residence occupied by Michael Scott Knibbs.

"While conducting the investigation, (Momphard) was confronted by an armed suspect," Macon County

Sheriff Robert Holland said. "The deputy gave repeated commands to drop the weapon. The suspect took aggressive action toward the deputy, prompting the deputy to discharge his weapon in self-

defense, which struck and killed the suspect."

According to sheriff's office reports, Knibbs brandished a shotgun toward the

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Trafficking arrests are 'first of many'

Operation JAWbreaker targets Atlanta-Macon narcotics connection

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Arrests and additional charges continue to roll in stemming from a Macon County Sheriff's Office drug enforcement effort named "Operation JAWbreaker."

On Thursday, April 28, deputies from the sheriff's office along with officers from Franklin Police Department, N.C. State Bureau of Investigation, Georgia State Bureau of Investigation, Rabun County (Georgia) Sheriff's Office and U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency served warrants and made multiple drug-related arrests.

"This has been an ongoing investigation for more than a year between multiple agencies," Macon County Sheriff Robert Holland said. "During the course of that investigation we were able to identify approximately 25 people who we believe are involved in the drug trade in our area. The arrests on Thursday are the first of many."

According to MCSO reports, three of the main cogs in the alleged local drug distribution machine were placed behind bars on Thursday. James Steele, of Franklin, Wade Ennis, of Highlands, and Arthur Potts, of Highlands, were each arrested for their alleged role in what is being called a "continuing criminal enterprise."

Steele and Ennis were both arrested in Macon County. Potts was arrested in Habersham County, Georgia. The operation name "JAWbreaker" was formed from an acronym of the three primary suspects' first names (James, Arthur and Wade).

"Just as with Operation Thunderstruck in 2016, these suspects

See **JAWBREAKER** on page 2A

Close call: Bus goes up in flames



Photo submitted

A Macon County Schools activity bus went up in flames Saturday on I-40. No one was injured.

Staff acted quickly: 'There's smoke, everybody get off!'

Carter Giegerich
reporter@thefranklinpress.com

A close call on the road home from Asheville ended with a Macon County Schools activity bus completely engulfed in flames but no injuries to the 12 Franklin High School students and three adults onboard, thanks to a quick reaction by the Upward Bound staff supervising the trip.

On Saturday afternoon, the activity bus carrying a group of Upward Bound students home from a service project at MANNA

Food Bank had a blowout on Interstate 40, forcing Southwestern Community College's Upward Bound Academic Advisor Erica Muse to pull the bus to the side of the roadway, where she began to usher the students and staff out of the vehicle.

"We heard a loud pop, and Erica quickly took the bus to the emergency lane, and another staff member, Cheryl Renfro, hopped off to check what was going on," said Annette Kesgen, the Upward Bound program director. "She saw smoke, so she came to the door

and said 'there's smoke, everybody get off!'"

The students grabbed their bags and moved away from the smoking bus before the flames began to overtake the vehicle, heading up an embankment and into the nearby trees.

"A tire blew - we believe it was an inside back tire - and she was in the process of getting off the road and onto the shoulder when there was some smoke," said MCS Transportation Director Todd Gibbs. "She immediately got all the kids and adults and staff on

the bus up onto the bank, and most of the kids moved up near a nearby overpass."

The smoke began to build, Gibbs said, and a passing driver stopped to attempt to control the fire with a fire extinguisher. The blaze continued to grow, though, and eventually enveloped the entire bus, blanketing the area with thick plumes of smoke.

A neighboring property owner spotted the fire and met the group in the woods, helping them over

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Students get down and dirty with Muddy Sneakers



Photo/Carter Giegerich

Muddy Sneakers field instructor Carlton Burke helps MVI students set up a field experiment before heading into the woods at the Tessentee Bottomlands Preserve.

Carter Giegerich
reporter@thefranklinpress.com

The fifth-grade classes at Mountain View Intermediate have been getting muddy all year, thanks to the school's partnership with Muddy Sneakers, a Brevard-based outdoor education group.

Over the course of six sessions with Muddy Sneakers, the classes at MVI have been getting hands-on experience with a range of different scientific fields they've been studying, applying what they've learned in the classroom to the natural world in Macon County.

"On every expedition,

there's a focus on a science unit that ties into the North Carolina Essential Standards for Science," said Deborah Davis, interim Western North Carolina program director for Muddy Sneakers. "That's what they learn in the classroom all the time, but the idea is to do hands-on activities in an outdoor setting. It allows the students to be field scientists."

The outdoor programs help make conceptual coursework stick in students' minds, according to MVI science teacher Lori Castner.

"We did one based on force and motion, and the cool thing is we were talking about

speed and various things like that over the course of a couple weeks, and during activities we'd be discussing things and they would refer back to the experiences they had here," Castner said.

On April 27, the fifth graders visited the Tessentee Bottomlands Preserve, a property owned by Mainspring Conservation Trust, to study the conservation and transfer of energy in the natural world. Students conducted numerous experiments throughout the day, learning about how heat transfer and insulation is a critical part of the life

See **SNEAKERS** on page 2A

Rants & Raves (Call 369-0568 after 5 p.m.)

The N.C. legislature is trying to weaken the public schools.

...

I've got a roof over my head, food on the table, a good wife and a new pack of chewing tobacco. Life is good in Macon County.

...

People need to stop whining about parallel

parking. If you can't parallel park then don't stop on Main Street and find somewhere else to park.

...

The Town of Franklin wants to take credit for hikers coming into town when they have absolutely nothing to do with it. The town offers hikers nothing, it's a county shuttle and private

businesses that do.

...

No one can drain the swamp in Washington, D.C. without term limits in Congress.

...

Our Macon County commissioners work together well. Washington should take notice!

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The Franklin Press maintains copies of back issues for sale for up to one year if available.

To review articles published beyond one year, bound copies of the newspaper are available at the Franklin Press office.

Muddy Sneakers

continued from 1A

cycles of the plants, animals and insects found throughout the preserve, from water babies and caterpillars to a king snake the group found on their walk around the property.

The Muddy Sneakers expeditions all feature structured experiments for the students, but Davis said there are always opportunities for exploration and expansion when students and instructors happen upon some unexpected creature or peculiarity in the woods.

"Science is about asking questions and being curious, and when you find something the kids just start asking questions," Davis said. "Things happen along the way that you're not expecting, and you incorporate that into whatever you're teaching."

This is the 10th year Muddy Sneakers has offered programs in Western North Carolina's school systems, but the first time they've

been able to branch out as far as Macon County. The program started in Transylvania County and remained fairly small for several years, but it has since grown to include 13 counties with an additional office in Salisbury as of two years ago. When Castner found out she could bring the group to work with her students, she said it was a mad dash to pull funding together in time for the first expedition.

"I scrambled to get the money. I didn't find out they'd even come this far until the end of May, so we didn't get started until late October," she said. "I wrote grants, we got some funding from Mainspring and some from the University of Georgia. The PTO gave us some and the STEM program, too. I had to piece it all together."

Castner said she was already working on next year's program, though, and she hoped to see the relationship with Muddy Sneakers continue to grow in the school



Press photo/Carter Giegerich

Muddy Sneakers field instructor Carlton Burke works with MVI students.

system. She said the program did wonders for showing students a connection to the natural world, which Davis said is one of the main goals of the program throughout the

western part of the state.

"Our goal is to awaken something in them that inspires curiosity and show them something they saw in the classroom in a whole

new way," Davis said. "We want to connect them to the natural world. You take care of what you love, and we're trying to foster a love for the outdoors."

Close call

continued from 1A

a barbed wire fence into his yard to await another ride to take them home. The Haywood County school system sent a bus to retrieve the stranded students and staff, taking them home safely to Macon County.

Between the emergency responders, the neighbors, the passing motorist and all of the staff from SCC and both public school systems, Kesgen said the situation was resolved as quickly and calmly as possible, given the circumstances.

"We were in a safe place and played with dogs and goats in his backyard. It was less than an hour to get another bus to us," she said. "We were very well taken care of by everyone involved, and the students were just awesome."

The SCC staff was trained for

emergencies like this one through the college, which Kesgen said played a part in executing the bus evacuation calmly and efficiently.

"We're a part of the college just like any other program, so we're required to go to all the safety trainings and do emergency drills with the college when we're trained to use the college vehicles," she said.

Gibbs said the school system is still working to determine the exact cause of the fire, but he suspects the blown out tire somehow ignited the vehicle's brake lines which then led to the out-of-control blaze.

The blown tire was likely a fluke, Gibbs said. The bus had recently passed inspection and blowouts are exceedingly rare on the school vehicles' tires.

"I talked with Randy Stoudemire, and he's been in the bus garage for close to 30

years, he's never seen a tire blow out," Gibbs said. "In my 22 years around the system, being a coach and driving school teams all over, I've taken activity buses to Charleston, Atlanta, all over the place and I've never seen, heard of or experienced a tire blowing out. We don't do recaps on those tires – they're always fresh, new tires."

The activity bus was a total loss, and will cost close to \$90,000 for the school system to replace. With the end of the school year coming up, the school system will work around the missing vehicle for now but Gibbs said the destroyed bus would be a major setback if it's not replaced by next year.

"That's something we're working on for this school year," he said. "It's going to be difficult if we don't have that bus replaced for next school year."



Photo submitted

The activity bus was a total loss.

Deputy

continued from 1A

officer and did not put down the weapon despite calls to do so by Momphard, who identified himself multiple times as a deputy with the sheriff's office.

According to a search warrant for the residence issued after the shooting, Momphard fired six rounds

from his service weapon, a Glock 22 pistol. Momphard used his radio to call for assistance and reported shots fired at 12:06 a.m. on Monday.

Macon County EMS arrived on scene and found Knibbs deceased in his living room.

"Upon my arrival at the residence and after checking

on my officers and reviewing the scene, I contacted and requested the assistance of the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation to conduct a full investigation into the incident," Holland said. "We respect the SBI's investigation and I stand behind the deputy completely. Until the investigation is fin-

ished, (Momphard) will be on administrative leave."

According to the search warrant issued for the residence, SBI investigators seized a magazine from Momphard's service weapon that was missing six bullets, along with a shotgun and shotgun shells from inside the home.

"It's a tragedy that some-

one lost their life because of a bad decision," Holland said. "My thoughts and prayers are with the family of the deceased and everyone involved, including my deputy."

Following the investigation by the SBI, the district attorney's office will review the information to determine if any charges will be filed.

JAWBreaker

continued from 1A

played a significant role in distributing the same poison into our community that is becoming an epidemic nationally," Holland said. "They each made a conscious decision to get into the business of selling drugs and did so without any concern or compassion for the families they were helping to destroy."

Also arrested during Operation JAWbreaker were Austin Posey, of Franklin, Carie Ann Huskey, of Bryson City, Christie Hurst, of Franklin, and Jessica Keener, of Highlands.

Holland noted that the operation is ongoing and he anticipated more arrests in coming weeks, both locally and in Atlanta, where the drugs were purchased prior to their transport back to Western North Carolina.

"During this enforcement effort we have received a lot of quality information from the public and many of those tips helped us track down these individuals bringing drugs into our neighborhoods," Holland said. "I know people can be frustrated when they send us information and it appears like nothing is being done, but I can assure you that we listen to those tips and take

them seriously. These arrests would not have been possible without the public's help along with the cooperation of multiple law enforcement agencies in two states."

The charges for each of the suspects arrested in Operation JAWbreaker are as follows:

- Wade Thomas Ennis, of Highlands – Two felony counts of trafficking opium/heroin, one felony count of continuing criminal enterprise, one felony count of conspiring to traffic opium/heroin, one felony count of possession of heroin, one felony count of possession with intent to sell manufacture or deliver methamphetamine, one felony count of maintaining a vehicle or dwelling for the distribution of a controlled substance and one misdemeanor count of possession of drug paraphernalia. \$1,000,800 bond secured.
- James Douglas Steele, of Franklin – Three felony counts of delivering heroin, one felony count of conspiring to traffic opium/heroin, one felony count of continuing criminal enterprise, one felony count of possession of heroin and one felony count of possession of a controlled substance on jail premises. \$1 million bond secured.
- Arthur Scott Potts, of Highlands – One felony count

of possession of heroin, one felony count of possession of a controlled substance, one felony count of being a fugitive from justice, one misdemeanor count of driving while impaired and one misdemeanor count of speeding. No bond.

- Jessica Elizabeth Keener, of Highlands – Two felony counts of trafficking opium/heroin, one felony count of conspiring to traffic opium/heroin, one felony count of possession with intent to manufacture, sell or deliver methamphetamine, one felony count of possession of controlled substance on jail premises, one felony count of maintaining a vehicle or dwelling for the distribution of a controlled substance, one misdemeanor count of resisting a public officer and one misdemeanor count of possession of drug paraphernalia. \$700,000 secured bond.
- Austin Henry Posey, of Franklin – One felony count of conspiring to traffic opium/heroin, one felony count of felony aiding and abetting a fugitive and one felony count of possession of stolen property. \$515,000 secured bond.
- Christine Teague Hurst, of Franklin – One felony count of conspiring to traffic opium/heroin and one felony count of

aiding and abetting a fugitive. \$500,000 secured bond.

- Carie Anne Huskey, of Bryson City – One felony count

of trafficking methamphetamine and one felony count of aiding and abetting a fugitive. \$500,000 secured bond.

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