



CONNECTED

HONORING THE LEGENDS

Stephen Hardy
sings songs "One
Piece at a Time"

STAYING UPBEAT

The Square on Air helps
musicians online

LONG-DISTANCE BONDS

Broadband makes connections
across the miles



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Broadband matters now more than ever

Rural broadband providers are supporting two critical bills making their way through Congress. One would secure present efforts to keep you connected, while the other provides support for future broadband expansion.

The Keeping Critical Connections Act was introduced earlier this year by U.S. Sens. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and Kevin Cramer, R-N.D. This bill would appropriate \$2 billion to help smaller broadband companies who worked with struggling customers during the pandemic and who did not disconnect those who couldn't pay.

As the health crisis and economic shutdown disrupted millions of lives, internet providers across the country took the Pledge to Keep Americans Connected by waiving late fees, opening community Wi-Fi hot spots, and not terminating service to customers because of their inability to pay their bills.

For all this good work, however, our members have seen uncollectibles rise. NTCA members have on average some \$80,000 in accumulated nonpayments by customers since the pandemic hit. These are significant amounts, as these broadband providers are often small companies with fewer than 30 employees. Keeping Critical Connections will help them continue serving their communities.

In terms of long-term deployment, NTCA also supports the Rural Connectivity Advancement Program Act of 2020, introduced by U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-S.D. This bill would set aside a portion of the proceeds from FCC spectrum auctions to fund rural broadband deployment.

These bills will help broadband providers like yours continue their work to ensure every American has access to the communications services necessary in today's world. 📶



Podcast listenership continues to grow as Americans increasingly turn to the audio format for news, entertainment and learning. "Podcasts now reach over 100 million Americans every month," said Tom Webster, senior vice president of Edison Research, whose Infinite Dial research reveals that 37% of Americans listen to podcasts every month.

That's an increase from 32% just one year ago. That number has climbed steadily as more content becomes available to appeal to a wide range of interests.

Two new podcasts have been released this year that address a topic of growing importance: rural broadband.

Heading into 2020, rural broadband had become a major point of focus in the U.S., with an increasing number of state and federal programs aimed at solving the lack of broadband access in parts of rural America. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted businesses, schools and health care delivery, the need for nationwide broadband access was amplified.



A podcast from NTCA



In February, NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association launched its **"Smart Rural Communities"** podcast. The show takes a look at rural broadband providers who are bringing advanced digital infrastructure to small towns and regions through powerful fiber networks. These broadband networks are jumpstarting economic growth, igniting educational opportunities and improving health care in some of America's most remote areas.

"Rural Broadband Today" launched in June. This podcast tells the stories of those working to bring broadband internet access within reach of every citizen. The interview-style show presents conversations with elected officials, industry experts and business leaders at the forefront of America's efforts to solve the rural broadband challenge. It's produced by WordSouth — A Content Marketing Company. 📻

Both podcasts can be found on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or by visiting www.ntca.org/smart and www.ruralbroadbandtoday.com.

Can you see me now?

Videoconferencing technologies empower remote work



If you've found yourself logging on for more video meetings at work lately, you're not alone. According to the 2019 Impact of Video Conferencing Report by Lifesize, 48% of business professionals say their use of videoconferencing at work has increased compared to two years ago.

And that study was before a global pandemic drove even more companies to work remotely. Videoconferencing isn't without limitations, but businesses and workers are finding it an essential tool for empowering remote work.

FLEXIBILITY

With videoconferencing, employees and contractors can work from home while still collaborating with their teams and attending important meetings. The flexibility enables individuals in rural communities to not only have more control over their work-life balance but also "telecommute" to urban companies for better opportunities.

Companies also benefit from the ability to recruit talent from anywhere. Business owners have the freedom to set up shop in rural communities, for example, then employ or partner with experts from around the world.

CONNECTION

Video teleconferencing not only empowers remote productivity but also helps workers overcome some of its challenges. According to Buffer's 2019 State of Remote Work Study, 19% of remote workers cite loneliness as their biggest struggle when working remotely. Video calls can help.

Compared to telephone conferences, video calls make it easier to form connections. The experience more closely reflects face-to-face

encounters. For example, participants can see facial expressions and body language to better identify how others are responding to their ideas as they collaborate on projects.


SAVINGS

When teams work over videoconferencing platforms, everyone involved saves time and money. Cutting a commute across town — or in some cases, the globe — benefits people's schedules, companies' bottom lines and even the environment.

Plus, the work itself can be more efficient online. In the Lifesize study, 89% of respondents agreed that videoconferencing reduces the time it takes to complete projects or tasks. People may be more likely to enter an online meeting with an agenda and honor the scheduled start and end times. Plus, they can avoid the interruptions common to in-office meetings.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

Despite its many benefits, videoconferencing isn't without challenges. Not all tech tools are secure, so companies must research available options carefully to protect their employees and data. Team leaders must make an effort to coordinate meetings ahead of time to ensure everyone is online and available. And if any employees lack access to fast, reliable internet, technical difficulties can bring meetings to a frustrating halt.

Despite their drawbacks, videoconferencing platforms are here to stay. In the Buffer survey, 99% of respondents agreed they'd like to work remotely at least some of the time for the rest of their careers. Thanks to the increasingly widespread use of videoconferencing technology, they just might. 

Three options for effective videoconferencing

1 ClickMeeting

For interactive meetings and webinars, try ClickMeeting. Presenters can share their screen, run live Q&A sessions to engage the audience and collect valuable attendee data using polls. With an automated follow-up feature, this platform makes it easy to keep the momentum going after a webinar ends.

2 Microsoft Teams

For a platform that scales with ease, check out Microsoft Teams. Users can schedule video meetings with a single person or run large webinars and meetings of up to 10,000 participants. A long list of features and functionalities makes it a top choice for many businesses.

3 Google Meet

For fans of the Google Suite, Google Meet is a convenient choice that smoothly integrates with other applications like Google Calendar and Gmail. Participants can easily join in from their web browser or dial in to listen from anywhere. This platform has big-business capabilities without the big-business price tag, making it a great option for growing companies.

Bringing people together when we have to be apart

The founders of our cooperative knew technology could help them keep in touch with others near and far. But they probably didn't imagine it would allow my 90-year-old mother to have Alexa video-call me all the way from Idaho.



JEFF WILSON
Chief Executive Officer

For decades, technology has helped them create and maintain essential human connections.

Because of the telephone lines we strung across our part of South Carolina, parents could talk with children and grandchildren who had moved away. With that technology, sons and daughters serving their country at military bases from coast to coast had a lifeline back home. If bad weather rolled through, we could call and check on friends and family, and if trouble did strike we could reach help by calling first responders.

Building our phone network connected the people of our communities like never before.

Today, I think those founding members would be amazed at the ways we use the technology highlighted in this issue to stay connected.

During this pandemic, my mother Mary has learned to use her new Echo Show device to make video calls with me in South Carolina and other family members in Iowa, Oregon and Nebraska. She's also been using it to make video calls with a 95-year-old dear friend who is living in a nursing home. At a time when all of us are feeling a little isolated, the senior adult population in that most vulnerable category for this virus, are often even more cut off from friends and family. I'm proud of her for learning the new technology — she also asks Alexa to find recipes and play music from 60s and 70s — but I'm also proud to be a part of cooperative here at WCTEL that works hard every day to connect people like my mother.

We share videos of first steps, birthdays and graduations through social media platforms. Streaming video has allowed us to virtually attend classes or church. Video calls allow us to catch up with friends and families, hold meetings for work or participate in virtual Sunday school.

Perhaps you've embraced new technology during this unusual year. Even if it's not virtual meetings, many members have, for the first time, tried paying bills over the web or online shopping.

I appreciate your patience and willingness to learn these new skills. I know I'm ready for things to get back to normal, but I'm proud to see the difference our cooperative makes in keeping our community connected — no matter how you choose to do that today or in the future. 📞

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL COOPERATIVE MONTH

Every year, we take time to recognize National Cooperative Month, and I never pass up a chance to celebrate our cooperative story. I will always appreciate the bold decision by the local residents to band together to found WCTEL. No other company was willing to invest in a telecommunications network in our area, so they took it upon themselves to bring our region into the modern era. Their cooperative spirit lives on today through our board and employees who proudly continue the tradition of connecting our members through technology. Thank you to our members for your continued support!



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On the Cover:



Stephen Hardy, who picked up a guitar as a teenager in Iva, now chases his musical future with a nod to past rock legends. See story Page 8.

Halloween PHOTO CONTEST COMING UP!



Take your best shot and enter WCTEL's Halloween Photo Contest!

Entries into the contest, open to kids ages 12 and younger, must be submitted by Nov. 2 at 4 p.m. by email to photocontest@wctel.net.

The photos will be posted to WCTEL's Facebook page, and voting for the winners will be Nov. 2-9 via Facebook. The three photos with the most likes will win prizes. The winners will be announced on Nov. 9.

For details, visit wctel.com/Halloween.



Ellison Pruitt wins WCTEL Scholarship

Congratulations to 2020 WCTEL Scholarship winner Ellison Pruitt of Belton-Honea Path High School.

Pruitt was awarded the \$8,000 scholarship. She plans on studying early childhood education at Clemson University.

Broadband glossary terms

► **Gbps** — Gigabits per second, a standard of measurement for very fast internet that can download or upload billions of bits of data per second. Most internet connections are measured in Mbps, which is megabits per second. But fiber connections can be significantly faster and measured in Gbps (1 Gbps = 1,000 Mbps).

► **"Gig"** — Often used to describe internet services that can provide at least 1 Gbps of speed. This is an extremely high-speed connection for both homes and businesses.

► **Mbps** — Megabits per second, a standard of measurement that describes how many bits of data your internet connection can upload or download per second. The higher the number, the faster you can upload or download content online.

► **Fiber** — The fastest, most reliable network infrastructure available. Built with strands of fiber rather than copper, fiber optic networks can provide speeds of 1 Gbps and beyond.

► **Symmetrical speeds** — Symmetrical connections allow the user to achieve equal upload and download speeds. For example, someone with symmetrical speeds can upload or download a given photo or other data file in the same amount of time.

► **Router** — A unit that connects the devices in your home to your internet connection with Wi-Fi, and to one another. A router is often paired with a modem, another device that brings the internet from our network into your home.

► **Wi-Fi** — The technology that makes wireless internet possible. Because Wi-Fi uses radio waves to transmit your internet signal, you no longer have to plug your devices into an Ethernet cable to get online access.

► **Streaming** — Downloading media a few seconds at a time so that you can enjoy a podcast, music or video even as it downloads. This enables you to enjoy live video in real time and to consume media without having to fully download it to your device first.

► **Bandwidth** — The capacity your internet connection has for uploading or downloading data. You can think of this like a pipe that carries water. A large pipe can move big quantities of water much more quickly than a small straw. Similarly, increasing your internet bandwidth enables you to upload and download data more quickly.

GET ORGANIZED

It's easy and fulfilling ... really

Walk into a well-organized home, and you experience a sense of freedom. Freedom from clutter, freedom from chaos and freedom from the claustrophobia that comes from a house in disarray.

People become frustrated when they can't find the things they need, says Liz Jenkins, a certified professional organizer and owner of A Fresh Space in Nashville.

"The visual distractions make it hard to be productive because everywhere you look, there is something that needs to be done," she says. "People who have disorganized homes are often very frazzled people because nothing ever seems to go smoothly for them, and that's caused by the chaos around them that prevents them from functioning properly."

The key to organization requires letting go of what is not used, loved or functional, says Houston-based Ellen Delap. She is past president of the National Association of Productivity

and Organizing and a certified professional organizer at professional-organizer.com.

"Work with a partner, and donate those items to a cause that is important to you," she says. "True editing means that you have decided that you have 'enough' and you only need to keep what is essential. This is for all types of organizing in your home, whether it is your kids' clothes or toys, your kitchen, your garage, or your closet. Think of decluttering as peeling the layers of an onion. Go layer by layer until you have what is needed and precious."

There are several areas around the house that are considered clutter "hot spots," according to Delap.

The garage: This is one of the biggest hot spots, because it's often the dumping ground for things people don't know what to do with, as well as the last spot anyone gets organized. Garages are commonly not where we park the car. That is where large items are placed before a final decision is made. Those items sit in the garage over a period of time.

When garage-cleaning day arrives, make sure you have plenty of heavy-duty trash bags, basic cleaning supplies, empty boxes for collecting items for donation and plastic containers in varying sizes to categorize and store tools and other items. This type of edit may create space so that you can actually park your car.

The kitchen and pantry: This is a challenging area that's the hub of your home. Get organized by creating zones to help you get meals and snacks easily prepared, such as a coffee zone and areas for keeping knives, cutting boards and bowls together. Create a baking zone with your whisks and other utensils in one drawer. Near your stove, store pots and pans.

Pantry organizing starts with editing and decluttering. Empty it all out. Then group items as grocery stores do, in categories like breakfast, snacks, beverages, baking and condiments. Place frequently used items at eye level for adults for easy access. For your kids, use open baskets with food at their level to help them independently access snacks. An organized kitchen and pantry make it a joy to prepare meals together.

Master closets: People don't go through their clothes often enough, so things tend to pile on top of each other. Your closet is where you create the start of a great day. Begin with letting go of clothes that are too big or uncomfortable or clothes you would not want to be seen wearing. This is more easily done with a "clutter buddy" who helps you decide if that's your best look, what you love or even what fits properly.



Creating a well-organized space means letting go of items that are not used often.

Edit out what you have seldom worn, and arrange your clothes in categories that work for you. Some of us prefer color to organize our clothes, while some of us prefer to organize outfits. You know what works best for you. If you have multiple closets, cull down to one closet for each season, or have two closets — one for dressy clothes and one for daily wear.

The laundry room: It's easy for things to pile up in a laundry room, such as clean clothes forgotten on a folding table. It's important to establish a laundry routine that sets up days of the week for completing a load, meaning that you get it from the dryer back to the closet in one day. If you stick to it, you'll find your life goes much more smoothly, with no last-minute searching for that matching blue sock.

The home office: This is the room in the house that often becomes a dumping ground for all things. Create a command center where you can triage incoming paper into categories: to do, to pay and to file. Next, organize your files by context, such as home, auto, financial and personal. Finally, create an archive section for papers you need to keep. This section could include taxes, legal documents and those papers you want to keep longer than one year. Move papers throughout your process so that there is a flow.

Remember your goal when you're knee-deep in decluttering your life: to restore the rooms in your home to their original use and intended function. 🗑️

Looking for someone to help?

Consider hiring a professional like you would a personal trainer or other service provider to make your home a haven and place to relax. The NAPO website — www.napo.net — has a directory that helps you find a local professional who can help with organizing, decluttering and even productivity.

FIVE EASY ORGANIZING TIPS

Professional home organizer Liz Jenkins often finds that clients who are disorganized lead "frazzled" lives. "Nothing ever seems to go smoothly for them because of the chaos around them that prevents them from functioning properly," she says.

Here are some tips for organizing your living space and, thereby, your life.

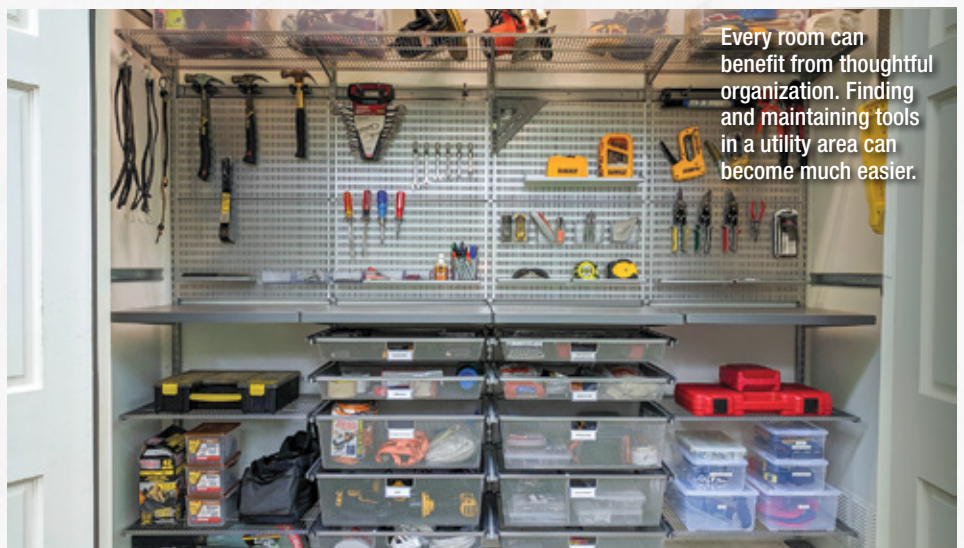
1. Create "homes" for groups of items that belong together, ideally in the spaces where you use them.
2. Use containers to corral groups of items on shelves or in drawers.
3. Label everything!
4. Reduce what you bring into the house. The less you have, the less you have to store.
5. Dedicate time every day to getting and staying organized. Even five minutes tossing unwanted items away every day will make a huge impact in the long run.



A neat pantry can simplify meal prep and reduce stress.



Group like items into well-marked containers.



Every room can benefit from thoughtful organization. Finding and maintaining tools in a utility area can become much easier.

A BLAST from the PAST

Hardy keeps legends
of rock 'n' roll alive
with performances

Story by JOHN CLAYTON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT LEDGER

Stephen Hardy has honed his musical talent in homage to some of county music's most influential artists.

Stephen Hardy arrived in Iva at the age of 14 with a secondhand guitar and a few friends from western Tennessee. Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash all made the trip, too. They still travel with him just about everywhere he goes.

Hardy spent the rest of his teenage years in Iva and graduated from Crescent High School. Since then, he has grown as a musician, often paying homage to those rock legends who became his musical heroes and influences.

"I grew up, until I was about 14, an hour from Memphis," says Hardy, who initially picked up a guitar that belonged to his brother. "Then we moved to lower Anderson County. Around age 19, I started playing shows and gigs and whatnot."

Hardy says his friend Chris McGill helped push him toward music and the career that has followed. "Chris played guitar at his church," Hardy recalls. "I had already started playing a little bit right after we moved from West Tennessee, and he kind of pushed me. Just watching him play was sort of like an inspiration to me."

Early on, it was the music made famous in Memphis that captured Hardy's attention. Then, influences from Liverpool, England, grabbed his imagination. The Beatles, which is still Hardy's favorite

band, along with Cash and the rockabilly artists of the 1950s shaped not only Hardy's musical tastes but also his future in music.

He says Perkins, who wrote and first recorded the Presley hit "Blue Suede Shoes," is among his all-time favorite musicians. "He just had a huge impact on me," Hardy says.

CONNECTING WITH CARL

While Hardy always had an affinity for the music created at Memphis' Sun Studio, he couldn't have imagined as a teenager how close he would grow to the likes of Perkins, Presley and Cash.

As a cast member of "Million Dollar Quartet" onstage, Hardy has often performed as Perkins, Presley or Cash in

a traveling version of the Tony Award-winning musical. With his dark hair, deep baritone voice and affinity for the early rock 'n' roll made famous in Memphis, Hardy was a perfect fit for "Million Dollar Quartet."

"It's a story about Sun Studio and Memphis, Tennessee, that they say was the birthplace of rock 'n' roll," he says. "Even before Elvis came in 1954, there were blues artists who were really innovative in around 1952 and '53. So, you can definitely make that argument."

"Million Dollar Quartet" inspired Hardy and another performer from the musical to create a tribute show called "Shake, Rattle & Roll." The shows provided opportunities for Hardy to perform live, and the 29-year-old hopes they've paved the way for a music career beyond the theatrical interpretations of his rock 'n' roll heroes. Instead of pubs and clubs, the theater productions have taken Hardy to numerous musical venues that have given him a new perspective on performing.

"I have a love for that music, even the lesser-known stuff that came before rockabilly and rock 'n' roll. I loved all the blues guys and all the Sun Records artists," he says. "Doing the show really solidified my love for the music. Not only just the genre, but just in performance in general, because you're playing for 300, 400 or 500 people consistently. I actually grew quite a bit as a performer."

At the end of 2019, Hardy played gigs in Abbeville, Anderson and Greenwood before taking on Nashville and marriage. Hardy and his wife, Brittany, are chasing his dream in the epicenter of country music. In a unique way, Cash — the "Man in Black" Hardy occasionally portrays onstage — gets credit for bringing Hardy and his bride together. "She was searching Johnny Cash hashtags online when she found my page," Hardy says. "Johnny Cash's music had enjoyed kind of a renaissance due to the 'American Recordings' he did with Rick Rubin in the early 2000s."

Hardy and Brittany, who is from Southern California, dated long distance before starting their life together in Nashville earlier this year.

"I have a love for that music, even the lesser known stuff that came before rockabilly and rock 'n' roll. I loved all the blues guys and all the Sun Records artists."

– Stephen Hardy



Stephen Hardy has played acoustic sets at regional restaurants, including Dust Off Brewing Company in Rock Hill, South Carolina.



Introducing Stephen Hardy ... and his guitar

Online at: stephenhardyandhisguitardy.bandcamp.com

HIS OWN VOICE

Hardy released a digital album called "Introducing ... Stephen Hardy and his guitar," featuring the same rockabilly vibe he has made familiar onstage and paying homage to some of the lesser known musicians of the pre-Elvis era. He recorded the album in August 2017. "It's my take on a lot of legendary yet largely overlooked recordings from Sun Studio in Memphis by artists Carl Perkins, Harold Jenkins, Sonny Burgess and Warren Smith," Hardy wrote in an introduction for the album.

The collection includes the Perkins songs "Tennessee," "Look at the Moon," "That's Right" and "Just in Time," along

with "Crazy Dreams" by Jenkins, "Ain't Got a Thing" by Burgess and Smith's "Red Cadillac and A Black Moustache."

As the U.S. began to slowly reopen during the pandemic this past June, Hardy found himself in front of audiences again, this time as himself. He says it was a welcome return, but Cash, Perkins and Lewis were waiting to take the stage once again.

Hardy is to reprise one of his musical roles in "One Night in Memphis," a theatrical account of a legendary — or perhaps mythical — jam session involving Cash, Perkins, Lewis and Presley in late 1956. "I'm looking forward to that," Hardy says. "It's more of a concert format than theater. It should be fun." 📺



Far from home

Broadband connects families across the globe



Story by KALEIGH COX

For Joshua and Kate Baker of Minnesota, welcoming their first child in 2019 was a time of joyful celebration and anticipation. Joshua Baker's parents, however, weren't close enough to celebrate in person, as they still live in his hometown over 1,000 miles away in New York.

Fortunately, the Bakers had broadband internet, so when they found out they would be parents, they turned to FaceTime to share their news. "With FaceTime, you get to see their emotion," Kate Baker says. "They were very excited!"

The Bakers are not alone. With the arrival of fast, reliable broadband, people aren't just connecting to the internet. They're connecting to one another. When families find themselves spread across the globe, the ability to connect instantly is a particularly special gift.

When their son, Micah, was born, the Bakers continued to use online apps and tools to keep his grandparents involved in his life. Planning a trip to meet in person would take significant time, money and coordinated effort. But the internet makes it easy to spontaneously pop on and connect anytime, just as two families living in the same town might do.

The Bakers also invited his parents to join Cluster, a social media app that enables users to share photos, videos and other updates with a small, private group of family and friends.



Joshua and Kate Baker use broadband to keep in touch with distant family.

Joshua Baker's mom, Faith Baker, was delighted. "We love to be as connected as we can," she says. "I can struggle with the separation and feel that we miss so much. I appreciate how they've found ways to overcome that."

Even 10-month-old Micah seems to appreciate the technology. “He recognizes his grandparents and understands who they are,” Kate Baker says.

She says being a new mom is busy, but staying connected online is worth the time and effort. “We’ll send pictures and keep communicating that way. It makes his grandparents feel included,” she says.

STAYING CONNECTED

For Jess and Sarah Curry in Texas, broadband wasn’t available in their early days of starting a family. As a military family navigating deployments, it was hard to stay connected. Jess Curry has left on deployment nine times over the past 20 years, and during those times, he would have to wait in line for an opportunity to check his email every few days. Even when videoconferencing technology became available, the inability to use it at home complicated things.

“We’d get all dressed up and drive to post to do a scheduled 15-minute video call,” Sarah Curry says. “There was so much pressure, and it seemed the kids would inevitably be melting down during the call. I would drive away feeling like I was supposed to be grateful, but I was miserable knowing my kids had cried through the call — and that seeing their dad for just a few minutes would only make them cry more.”

Thanks to advances in technology and a stronger internet connection, the most recent deployment was nothing like those early years. “He has Wi-Fi in his room and office, so we can talk on FaceTime every few days,” Sarah Curry says. “In between calls, the kids love using Marco Polo to record and send video messages

for their dad to watch and reply to when he can. Before, it was hard for the kids to be put on the spot and think of all the things they needed to say to him. Now, they can send what they want to say when they think about it. Especially for my teenagers — that’s been really helpful.”

With the steady communication, each kid’s relationship with their dad feels more natural and ongoing, even during deployment. He’s more present for the little moments, like when their 15-year-old daughter’s dance class tried to teach a parent to dance.

“We called up Dad and used the screen on the computer,” says Sarah Curry. “She taught him this dance, and they did it together on a split screen. He was in his uniform doing plies and other ballet moves. He’s going to do what it takes to connect with his daughter, even if it means he has to pirouette in his room.”

OPEN COMMUNICATION

In many families, the internet allows children to connect with people they may never have met otherwise. When Linda Martin of North Carolina adopted her son Max in 2008, people around her discouraged her from pursuing an open adoption.

“We wanted him to be able to ask questions and learn about his family history, but we had a lot of pushback,” Martin says. “People said that birth parents move on and lose interest.”

Thankfully, that hasn’t happened, she

says, and connecting online has helped. When Max was an infant, Martin shared photos and updates over email. As he grew, he began to pursue his own relationship with his birth mom, starting with phone calls with Martin present. Now, at 11 years old, Max likes using online apps to stay connected.

“We text a lot, and we use Instagram’s video call feature to talk face to face. I tell her everything, and I like to hear what’s going on in her life, too,” Max says. He shares pictures of his cat, gives updates when he loses a tooth and even made an excited video call when he landed the role of the Nutcracker in his ballet company’s production. He also gets to learn about his birth mom’s life. “She told me she went to Coachella the day after she found out she was pregnant with me,” he says. “So, technically, I can say I’ve been to Coachella.”

While Martin acknowledges that an open adoption isn’t right for everyone, she’s thankful for the ways her son has been able to know his birth mom. They met in person for his birthday last year, and the foundation of connecting online helped Max overcome any hesitations and enjoy the meeting. “It was really fun!” he says.

They hope to meet again when he turns 13, but in the meantime, he’s thankful for opportunities to share his life with her online. “We talk a lot now, and I get to tell her everything,” Max says. 🗣️

When Jess Curry was on deployment with the U.S. Army, broadband helped his family stay in touch.



After adopting Max, left, Linda Martin of North Carolina used broadband to help him stay in touch with his birth mother.





HI! I'M AMANDA CLARK

In this column, you'll learn about technology and read simple tips to get the most out of your electronics. For more tips or help with your devices, be sure to read this column in future publications. I'm always happy to help!

DEVICE OF THE MONTH



Jabra Elite 75t earbuds

Whether you're working out or working from home, a set of great-sounding Bluetooth earbuds can liven things up. Consider the wireless Jabra Elite 75t earbuds for great performance at a reasonable price. Price: \$180.



Stay secure

A VPN offers a layer of protection when you're on the go

Privacy and security on the internet are vital as more and more of our daily lives revolve around digital communication and most of our financial interactions shift online. A virtual private network, or VPN, can add an additional layer of protection, especially if you find yourself accessing your data outside your home.

WHAT IS A VPN?

At its most basic level, a VPN links your device to a remote computer called a server and allows you to use the internet through that server's internet access. Anyone looking at your internet traffic would only see a secure, encrypted connection to that remote host. A VPN can also keep websites and internet services from tracking your browsing habits, monitoring your search history and knowing your geographic location.

You may not even realize you're already using a VPN. If you're working from home and have access to your company's network, odds are that it's through a VPN.

WHY WOULD I WANT ONE?

If you're at home, VPN use for security is limited, since it is highly unlikely a hacker has targeted your home network. But you may still be interested in being anonymous to companies collecting your data for advertising and commercial purposes.

Once you leave your home and start using other Wi-Fi networks, a VPN becomes more important. It doesn't matter how good your passwords are. They won't do you much good

if they're intercepted by a hacker while you're accessing your bank account at a local coffee shop or even a hotel. People with bad intent can set up access points with similar names to legitimate connections, tricking users into unwittingly giving up their information.

IS THERE A DOWNSIDE?

Connecting to a VPN may slow your connection to the internet. Most VPN providers will show you a list of server locations along with the expected delay, allowing you to choose the fastest link. If you're using a VPN at home, it may also interfere with connections between your VPN-protected computer or smartphone and some of your smart devices.

WHAT'S A GOOD FREE OPTION?

They may not come with all the features that a paid VPN includes, but if you're only using it sporadically, then a free option makes sense. TunnelBear (tunnelbear.com) has a data limit of 500MB per month, but it is user-friendly, available on desktop and mobile versions, and is backed by McAfee, the security software giant.

WHAT'S A GOOD PAID OPTION?

NordVPN — nordvpn.com — is the biggest name in the VPN business for a reason. It provides top-grade security, speedy connections and ease of use across a variety of devices. It can get expensive at \$11.95 a month, but the price drops if you choose annual plans. Most pay services periodically offer discounts, so it may be worth checking out a free option and waiting for a deal. ☑

‘The Square on Air’

Area music featured and promoted from Abbeville studio

Story by JOHN CLAYTON



Vilai Harrington, left, talks with host Benji Greeson during a June streaming episode of “The Square on Air” originating from Abbeville. Above, Harrington performs an original song.

Entertainment venues, pubs and restaurants closed in May. Musicians accustomed to playing to a different room every weekend, if not every night, saw social distancing and virtual concerts on social media become their norms.

The timing turned out to be perfect for “The Square on Air,” the brainchild of local musician Fred Engler. He had intended to use his downtown Abbeville studio to host musicians and live audiences, but COVID-19 forced him to adapt. “The way it works now is we’re switching seamlessly between talking and playing and singing,” says Engler, who has long been the front man for his own group, Fred Engler and the Trouble Shooters. “It’s kind of cool right now with no live audience. It’s just all online.”

Benji Greeson, host of the “Southern Fried Morning Show” on Abbeville’s WZLA 92.9 FM, has led the show since it originated. He sits behind a desk and chats up musical guests who segue between

stories and songs, some of which they have packaged as music videos. Episodes have streamed live at 6 p.m. each Sunday.

“I think people enjoy it,” says Greeson. “I enjoy meeting new artists. After the first month, we were up to around 12,000 views just through Facebook.”

The performances stay available on the show’s YouTube channel. Those performances have included former “American Idol” contestant Clay Page, a native of nearby Elberton, Georgia. The show has also broadcast the “psychedelic folk” of Brother Oliver, the country sounds of singer-songwriters Mark Webb Jr. and Brooks Dixon and the folk-rock harmonies of the trio Howl In The Valley.

The show became a vehicle for the guest musicians to promote themselves during the COVID-19 lockdown, while also providing a showcase for an unlikely state-of-the-art studio in Abbeville’s downtown. “We put all their information out there on the screen, so people can donate to them in real time through Venmo or PayPal,”

Greeson says. “The rug was jerked out from under them. They went from playing five, six or seven times a week in some cases to absolutely nothing.”

Engler says the livestream wouldn’t be possible at all if not for high-speed internet from WCTEL. “We’ve got everything we need as far as that goes,” he says. “We haven’t come close to using all the bandwidth that we have available.”

“The Square on Air” was to go on a brief hiatus after July and return in September. Engler says he sees the show evolving to include a live audience, and the studio would become a small venue for music lovers who prefer a concert setting over pubs and bars.

“This is something we can grow on,” Engler says. “We could have an intimate setting where people really come for the music and sit and listen — more for the entertainment than for chatting and meeting with their friends. I see potential, and that’s something we could explore.”

Apples

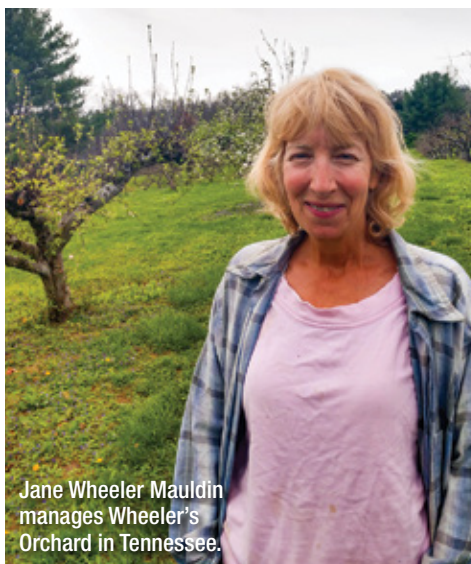
in abundance

A Tennessee sustainable orchard offers many choices

Apple season around the South turns mountaintops and hillsides into beautiful shades of reds, greens and golds. Through the years, winds have swept across the Cumberland Plateau and deposited minerals into the land, creating topsoil perfect for growing fruits of all kinds — apples, specifically, at Wheeler's Orchard atop Tennessee's Fredonia Mountain.

It was 1974 when Wade Wheeler and his wife, Ann, left their home in Chattanooga, traveled north to Dunlap, Tennessee, and then on up Fredonia Mountain to settle with their children. Their land was perfect for farming — 50 acres in a gorge where cooler air protects plants from the scorching heat of summer and warm air from the valley guards tender vegetation in early spring. “Dad talked to some old-timers who told him that the man who once owned the property grew the best fruits on the mountain,” says his daughter, and the farm's manager, Jane Wheeler Mauldin.

In 1978, the Wheelers planted their first apple trees — familiar old varieties like Granny Smith, Gala, Red Delicious and Golden Delicious. Fifteen years later, a second planting of newer varieties — Braeburn, Mutsu and Fujis — resulted in 10 acres of apple trees.



Jane Wheeler Mauldin manages Wheeler's Orchard in Tennessee.

The Wheelers also lease land near Fall Creek Falls along the Cumberland Plateau where they grow Pink Lady and Arkansas Black apples, as well as a couple of heirloom varieties, Black Twig and Limber Twig.

Wheeler's Orchard, one of the only sustainable orchards in the Southeast, grows 22 varieties of apples, and a third planting is scheduled. The orchard will soon bring some of the latest apples to market, including Harvey Cumberland and Ginger Gold.

Braeburn, though, is Mauldin's favorite. “They're an amazing apple for cider, to

cook with and to eat,” she says. “I like to pick them a little early — before they're fully ripe — so they have a little bit more tang to them.” Every apple variety has a slightly different flavor. Some are better for eating, while others are best suited for baking. But some, such as Braeburn, pull double duty. These also include Granny Smith, Jonagold, Honeycrisp, Mutsu and Pink Lady.

Visit the orchard and pick your own apples, or buy them prepped in the orchard's apple shop where shelves hold everything apple — fruit fresh from the orchard, homemade cider, apple butter, apple jelly and more. There are also local crafts, teas, soaps and honey here. And jelly made from the orchard's grapes is a favorite each autumn.

Bring a picnic, spread out a blanket, and enjoy the cool mountain breeze.



FOOD EDITOR
ANNE P. BRALY
IS A NATIVE OF
CHATTANOOGA,
TENNESSEE.



OLD-FASHIONED APPLE CRISP

- 6 medium Braeburn or other crisp cooking apple, peeled and chopped
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 3/4 teaspoons ground cinnamon, divided
- 1 1/2 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- 3/4 cup old-fashioned oats
- 3/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup cold unsalted butter, diced into small cubes
- Pinch of kosher salt

Heat oven to 350 F. Butter an 8x8" baking dish. Set aside.

In a mixing bowl, add apples, sugar, 3/4 teaspoon of the cinnamon and lemon juice. Stir to combine, then transfer to the prepared baking dish.

In a separate mixing bowl, add brown sugar, oats, flour, remaining cinnamon, salt and diced cold butter. Use a pastry cutter or two forks to cut the butter into the oat mixture until it resembles pea-sized crumbs. Spread this topping over the apples in the baking dish and gently pat to even it out. Bake 40-50 minutes or until golden brown and bubbly. Serve with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, if desired.

HOMEMADE APPLESAUCE

This applesauce is delicious with oatmeal for breakfast or as a side to roasted pork for dinner.

- 3 Golden Delicious apples, peeled, cored and quartered
- 3 Fuji apples, peeled, cored and quartered
- 1 cup unfiltered apple juice
- 2 tablespoons cognac or brandy (or for a nonalcoholic substitution, apricot juice)
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

In a large saucepan, combine the apples and remaining ingredients. Bring to a soft boil and continue cooking until the

apples are soft, 20-30 minutes. Using a hand blender or potato masher, blend to desired consistency. Serve warm immediately or chill for later use.

Note: For a sweeter applesauce, add 2 tablespoons sugar. And you can use whatever apples are available, although combining two different varieties provides a richer flavor.

FRIED APPLES

This is an easy go-to dessert. The Wheeler family especially enjoys it around the holidays.

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 10 tart apples, peeled, cored and sliced
- 1-2 teaspoons cinnamon

- 2/3 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup water or apple cider

Melt butter in a skillet, then add the remaining ingredients. Simmer over medium heat, covered, until the apples are tender. Remove the lid from the pan and continue to cook until the liquid has reduced to a thick syrup, stirring occasionally, about 15 minutes. Delicious over vanilla ice cream. 🍷

If you go—

Where: Wheeler's Orchard
956 Wheeler Road
Dunlap, Tennessee

When: The farm is open through December.

Information: wheelersorchard.com



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