



UPCOUNTRY

# CONNECTED

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024



## A wish fulfilled

Fiber makes a dream  
home a reality

RIPPLE  
OF ONE

EXPLORING  
CAVES



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association

## Supporting the Universal Service Fund

For more than 100 years, America has embraced the belief that everyone should have reliable access to reasonably priced communications services. Today, the federal Universal Service Fund, known as the USF, continues its vital role in this mission. The fund helps rural consumers access services comparable in price and quality to those in urban areas, making services more affordable for low-income families. It also supports critical connections important to schools, libraries, health care and businesses.

As we work with NTCA members daily, we see the good the USF does for rural America. We proudly support the continuation of the USF even as new broadband programs expand access to unserved areas. Simply, it makes a practical difference.

Consider, for example, the economic value of broadband, which exceeds \$1.5 trillion annually. It sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs and adds billions of dollars to local economies. With the growing demand for broadband, the USF supports the advanced, sustainable services rural businesses need to compete globally.

Similarly, fast and reliable broadband access helps narrow health care disparities between rural and metropolitan communities. The USF expands the reach of medical services through telehealth and fosters improved patient communication as well as the adoption of electronic health records.

Join us in support of the USF and its essential mission to provide broadband access to all rural residents. I encourage you to learn more about the critical role of the USF by visiting [ntca.org/universalservice](https://ntca.org/universalservice). 📞



## Help may be a click away

Thanks to telehealth services, a trip to a physician's office isn't always necessary, and when you're fighting a winter bug, that convenience counts. Here are a few tips to make your telehealth visit as productive and easy as possible:

**CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPOT:** Find a quiet, well-lit space for your telehealth session. It's not a Broadway audition, but good lighting helps your doctor see you better. Eliminate background noise as much as possible — you don't want the family pet stealing the spotlight during your appointment!

**HAVE YOUR INFO READY:** Make a mini cheat sheet with your symptoms, questions and any medications you take. It's easy to forget things during a virtual visit. Plus, it makes you look like a pro patient!

**DRESS APPROPRIATELY:** Pajamas might be comfy, but consider saving them for bedtime. Dressing appropriately can not only help your doctor assess your physical condition but also put you in the right mindset for a serious health chat.

**BE HONEST AND OPEN:** Telehealth works best when you're open about your symptoms and concerns. Don't be shy. Doctors can only help if they know the whole story. 📞





# Tugging at your purse strings

## Online romance scams can break more than just your heart

Falling in love can make anyone vulnerable. Shady cybercriminals know this and are all too eager to steal hearts and much more.

According to the FBI, a romance scam occurs when someone creates a fake online profile and fakes romantic interest to gain trust to steal the victim's money or personal information. Also known as "catfishing," romance scams can be devastating, both financially and emotionally.

Nearly 70,000 people reported being the victim of catfishing in 2022, and losses hit a staggering \$1.3 billion, according to Federal Trade Commission statistics. But actual losses are likely much higher — romance fraud is grossly underreported due to its sensitive nature.

Romance scammers often prey on older people, who may be divorced or widowed. Online dating apps are just one place they lurk. They also reach out through popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. They target victims' insecurities and work to develop intimacy as quickly as possible — a practice known as "love bombing." Scammers attempt to make the victim feel special or like they're the "only one who gets" the culprit.

Sometimes a scammer will ask for a short-term loan to get out of a bad situation and start a new life with the victim. Or, they'll say access to a credit card would smooth the way to a relationship. Other gifts include asking for money to cover the customs charges for an expensive gift, or a crypto investor who wants to help the victim cash in on the trend.

Despite the warning signs, victims are often too lovestruck to realize it's a swindle.

Romance scam victims can be male or female, young or old. Their only common denominator is that they believe in true love, and they feel they have found it. 📧

---

### Follow your head, not your heart

- Allow relationships to develop slowly and naturally.
- Set up a video chat to verify the identity of the person you are messaging.
- Research the person you are messaging.
- Conduct a reverse image search to make sure the person you are talking to is really the person in the photo.

### If you've been scammed

---

Falling victim to a scammer can happen to anyone. Talking about your experience can lessen feelings of shame and help protect others from being victimized.

- Immediately contact your bank or financial institution.
- Report it as soon as possible to the FTC at [reportfraud.ftc.gov](https://reportfraud.ftc.gov).
- Alert the FBI's fraud division — the Internet Crime Complaint Center — at [ic3.gov](https://ic3.gov). Be prepared to share any records of your communication with the scammer.
- Contact the platform where the scammer first contacted you, so it can prevent others from being victimized.



# How do we make 2024 a good year?

## It starts with us

“And now we welcome a new year. Full of things that have never been.”



**JEFF WILSON (L)**

Chief Executive Officer  
WCFIBER

**JIM LOVINGGOOD (R)**

Chief Executive Officer  
Blue Ridge Electric

This saying, by poet Rainer Maria Rilke, speaks the truth so clearly.

The closing of one year is always an astounding memory jog. So many things happen in 365 days. What will the next year hold? Our hope is that 2024 brings this world more good than bad, healing, recovery and hope.

How does one heal a broken world? Help a neighbor. Pick up that discarded wrapper that you see on the sidewalk. Pay it forward. In essence, it starts with us. Little acts lead to big changes.

There is no better testament to this than your support of so many worthy causes in our communities. We've seen you all in action volunteering, donating to area charities and making holidays bright for our less fortunate neighbors. Through the Upcountry Fiber Foundation, we're pleased to have already given \$56,820 total grants directly to Upstate charities, including \$20,000 to area food banks and food pantries. You helped make that happen through your attendance and support of our Southern Fried Circuit concert this past August.

Meanwhile, as inflation rates spike, we're seeing it in our own backyard. The rates we charge for television programming are driven by the costs we pay programmers. Our programmers notified us that per-customer programming rates are drastically increasing in 2024. We understand this is a significant increase, and we, too, are dismayed by the exorbitant costs being passed on to our customers. To be clear, Upcountry Fiber does not profit off of your television service.

We understand that this increase may be too significant for you to continue receiving television service from Upcountry Fiber. We want to help you find ways to lower your bills.

To that end, should you wish to discontinue television service and try streaming using Upcountry Fiber's internet service, we are running a promotion where you may choose between receiving either a free streaming device or a complimentary speed boost to our premium 1-Gig service for the months of January, February and March.

To take advantage of this promotion, please call our office at 888-760-2111 and mention "cut the cable." Go to [upcountryfiber.com/cutthecable](http://upcountryfiber.com/cutthecable) to learn more.

Many people are leery of streaming. We understand it is a shift from traditional television. The good news, though, is that there are many streaming services that offer a similar experience — and channel lineup — to the TV experience you are accustomed to. To learn more, visit [upcountryfiber.com/streaming101](http://upcountryfiber.com/streaming101). While we are not affiliated with a streaming service, nor do we promote one platform over another, we are committed to helping you understand that you do have options.

Together, we're going to make positive changes in 2024. 📺

The Upcountry Connected is a bimonthly newsletter published by Upcountry Fiber, ©2024. It is distributed without charge to all its customers.



is a high-speed fiber internet provider to the five counties of Anderson, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens and Spartanburg. Founded by Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER, Upcountry Fiber was created to bridge the digital divide across rural areas of South Carolina. Offering symmetrical internet speeds up to 10 Gbps over a fiber network, Upcountry Fiber offers the fastest and most reliable high-speed internet in the area.

[UpcountryFiber.com](http://UpcountryFiber.com)  
888-760-2111  
Email us at [info@UpcountryFiber.com](mailto:info@UpcountryFiber.com)

Construction Updates & FAQs:  
[UpcountryFiber.com/Updates](http://UpcountryFiber.com/Updates)

24/7 Repair Line:  
888-760-2111 – select option for repair

### BUSINESS CONTACTS:

**Max Crawford**  
Area District Manager  
[Max.Crawford@wctel.com](mailto:Max.Crawford@wctel.com)

**Brandon Smith**  
Business Solutions Consultant  
[Brandon.Smith@wctel.com](mailto:Brandon.Smith@wctel.com)

**Carter Burton**  
Broadband Deployment Manager  
[Carter.Burton@wctel.com](mailto:Carter.Burton@wctel.com)

Produced for Upcountry Fiber by:



### On the Cover:



Remote worker David Eye sought out high-speed fiber internet from Upcountry Fiber when building his family's home in Walhalla. See story Page 8.

## Spreading love and WiFi signals



Upcountry Fiber cares about our community and connecting you with loved ones.

Our team enjoys creating fun behind-the-scenes segments and important announcements for our social media channels. Sharing digital technology tips and cybersecurity suggestions is our way of making sure we maintain a strong connection.

Find us on social media and be sure our "fam" is part of your "gram!"  
#LoveInEveryGigabit



Upcountry Fiber's Marketing Communications Specialist Hannah Stephenson, right, interviews Marketing Assistant Jess Bowie for an Instagram Reel.

Get 24/7 in

# 2024

**The support you need. When you need it.**



Blazing-fast internet is standard with Upcountry Fiber.

But there's more ...

- ✓ Local
- ✓ Reliable
- ✓ Devoted
- ✓ Customer service — just a call away



UPCOUNTRYFIBER

888-760-2111 • upcountryfiber.com

## Tired of robocalls?

The Do Not Call Registry can help reduce the number of unwanted telemarketing calls you receive.

You must call from the telephone number you wish to register. Learn more at [donotcall.gov](https://donotcall.gov), or call 888-382-1222. For TTY, call 866-290-4236.



## Need help paying for internet?

The Affordable Connectivity Program is a Federal Communications Commission initiative that helps families and households struggling to afford internet service.

The ACP initiative provides a discount of up to \$30 a month.

Call 888-760-2111 or visit [upcountryfiber.com/acp](https://upcountryfiber.com/acp) to see if you qualify and to apply.





Cumberland Caverns  
near McMinnville,  
Tennessee

# BEAUTY LIES BELOW

Area caverns contain  
links to the past

Photo courtesy of Cumberland Caverns

Story by KATHY DENES

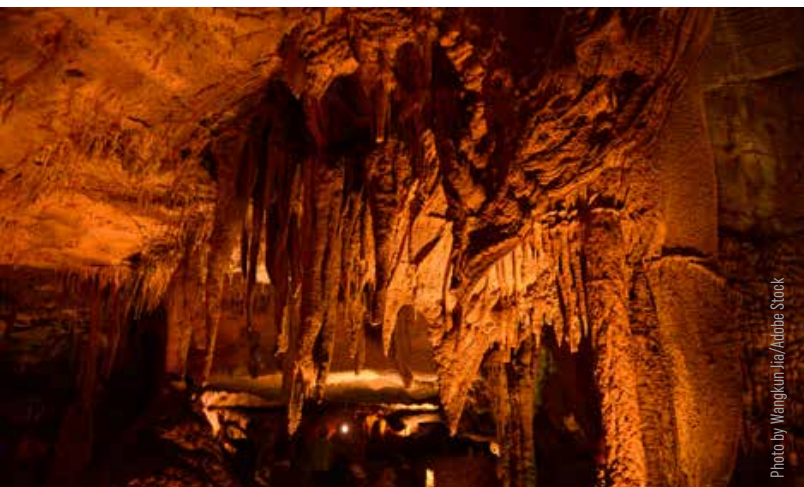
**B**ones and footprints of prehistoric jaguars and their prey are preserved within many caves across the Southeast, but that's just the beginning. There are also works of art, as well as artifacts and writings of indigenous peoples — from the ancients to those who would face a Trail of Tears. There are even tools left behind by those who mined saltpeter used in multiple wars.

There are colonies of bats, ever-growing stalactites and stalagmites, as well as flowing underground waters. Some caves are easily found, offering entry through a vast visible gash in a mountainside. Others remain hidden until their accidental discovery, perhaps by a passerby on a hot day who notices cool air seeping out through a wall of rock. They range in size from shallow squeezes to soaring cathedrals, and their passages can stretch for hundreds of miles.

## KENTUCKY



Kentucky's Mammoth Cave is the world's longest known cave system, with over 400 miles of its corridors mapped and surveyed. Within a short drive of Mammoth are numerous other caves with their own claims to fame, making the Park City area one of the most popular cave tour destinations in the country. Popular neighboring attractions include Diamond Caverns, a World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve that has offered public tours for more than 160 years. A good resource for learning more about these and other notable caves across the state is [worldofcaves.com/the-best-list-of-caves-in-kentucky](https://worldofcaves.com/the-best-list-of-caves-in-kentucky).



In Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, stalactites create a memorable natural spectacle.



The National Park Service manages Mammoth Cave.

## TENNESSEE

Tennessee's caverns are spread far and wide. Near McMinnville are Cumberland Caverns, open daily year-round, and Big Bone Cave, named for the giant sloth bones found near where Civil War-era saltpeter vats remain. In the Chattanooga area, visitors can descend by elevator deep into Lookout Mountain to witness the beauty of Ruby Falls or can cross the interstate to visit Raccoon Mountain Caverns. A drive up I-75 brings visitors to Sweetwater, where boats glide across The Lost Sea in artifact-rich Craighead Caverns, open every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas. Continue toward the Great Smoky Mountains to find the Forbidden Caverns of Sevierville and impressive Tuckaleechee Caverns in Townsend. Read about some of these and more at [explorationjunkie.com/caves-in-tennessee](https://explorationjunkie.com/caves-in-tennessee).

## ALABAMA

Alabama is home to hundreds of caves stretching along the Appalachian foothills. Of those, six are touted by [onlyinyourstate.com](https://onlyinyourstate.com) as among the very best and included in its Alabama Cave Trail. These renowned subterranean destinations include Russell Cave, Neversink Pit, Sauta Cave, Cathedral Caverns, Rickwood Caverns and Majestic Cave, formerly called DeSoto Caverns. Find information about these and other popular Alabama caves at [enterthecaves.com/best-caves-in-alabama](https://enterthecaves.com/best-caves-in-alabama). 🗨️



## TO SAVE A CAVE

Protecting the fragile ecosystems and histories of caves large and small is the mission of Southeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. The nonprofit has worked since 1991 to acquire and sustainably manage endangered caves. Through cave purchases and its EduBat and Project Underground programs, among others, SCCi has preserved historic Cherokee syllabary, written characters serving as an alphabet, found on cavern walls and created compelling curriculum and educator workshops. Check out the group's ongoing projects at [saveyourcaves.org](https://saveyourcaves.org).

## DIG DEEPER

- » [cavern.com/directory](https://cavern.com/directory)
- » [worldofcaves.com/the-ultimate-list-of-caves-in-america](https://worldofcaves.com/the-ultimate-list-of-caves-in-america)
- » [abackpackerstale.com/best-caves-in-the-united-states](https://abackpackerstale.com/best-caves-in-the-united-states)
- » Also, visit [tripadvisor.com](https://tripadvisor.com) and search for "caves" to find options in your area and beyond.



Cumberland Caverns near McMinnville, Tennessee, offers unique adventures, including a lantern tour.



# THE EYES

*High-speed internet makes a family's dream home a reality*

Story by PATRICK SMITH

For much of his career, David Eye has worked remotely in numerous cities. From New York and Nashville to Chicago and Las Vegas, he amassed a mountain of frequent flier miles and a deep appreciation for the portability of his laptop. He even telecommuted from a yacht in Miami while working on a smart building project. Dependable high-speed internet service made it all possible.

Now working for Allied Digital Services, David and his family recently chose to answer the call of the mountains. "The natural beauty here in Walhalla is incredible," he says. "We love the great outdoors and the privacy. It's the breathing room and relaxing feel that really drew us to this area."

Following years of returning home to visit relatives in Oconee County, the Eye family decided it was time to make the move from nearby Raleigh, North Carolina. It's hard to beat the natural beauty of the Appalachian Mountains. The fresh air, stunning waterfalls and rolling hills that climb into mountains are enough to make even the biggest homebody appreciate the great outdoors. "Once our kids were older, we'd planned to move somewhere between Virginia and Georgia along the Appalachian Mountains," David says. "When we started planning to move, our concern was that I need high-speed internet to work from home."

While researching providers in the area, David became aware of the broadband options from Upcountry Fiber. He became the first Upcountry customer to choose the 2.5-Gig package. As the joint venture between Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER continues to expand its network, David became an unofficial ambassador for the service, often educating his neighbors of the benefits of fast and dependable internet.

"There's probably at least a dozen homes somewhere close that will be brand-new fiber customers," David says. "It's extremely important. There's a lot more riding on it than watching TV and playing video games."

Stacy and David Eye take in their scenic backyard view.



# HAVE IT

## WIFI CONNECTIVITY, DOWN-HOME COMFORT

With the construction of his family's new home wrapping up, David is putting his high-speed fiber connection to work. "We're used to being early adopters, back to the first DSL technology in 1996," David says. "I've always wanted to make sure we were getting the fastest connections into our house."

He's dependent on the technology for his remote work schedule, which frequently has him communicating on videoconference calls with co-workers across the globe. "The pandemic made an exponentially larger impact on remote work and technology," David says. "The technology's been there waiting, but most people weren't using it, or companies wouldn't allow them to work from home. It helped people to see that you can do most of your work from home if you're given the correct tools and the correct cybersecurity features."

In addition to the benefits of broadband for remote work, the Eyes will also take advantage of the latest technology for their new home. "There are different levels to having a smart home," David says. "You can have a Bugatti or an Acura TL. Ours is probably more on the Acura side, but we'll still have several connected devices."

After much research, David chose a digital doorbell system and security cameras from Ring. He also plans to incorporate smart appliances, door locks, lighting, window shades and more.

"With aging parents, smart home technology is a lifesaver. We can get automated alerts on their health conditions if they have a problem or an emergency," David says. "The list goes

on and on and on. The importance of high-speed internet in the house is up there with electricity and water. There are more uses for WiFi devices today than even five years ago."

## RURAL ATTRACTION

The Eye family is part of a growing trend of people choosing to move away from cities and suburbs into rural areas. A recent Forbes magazine report cited United States Postal Service data showing that more than 10.2 million people submitted change of address request forms in 2020-21. The forms showed that people are leaving large cities and chilly states for less congested areas and warmer climates.

"High-speed internet is the secret sauce," David says. "If you can get that where you're living, you can absolutely do most types of work, and it allows you to do so many things beyond work." 📶

## Watch the build on YouTube

The Eye family will launch a YouTube channel documenting the development of their property. David Eye and his wife, Stacy, have named their home Travis Ranch, in honor of their first son, who passed away from sudden infant death syndrome.

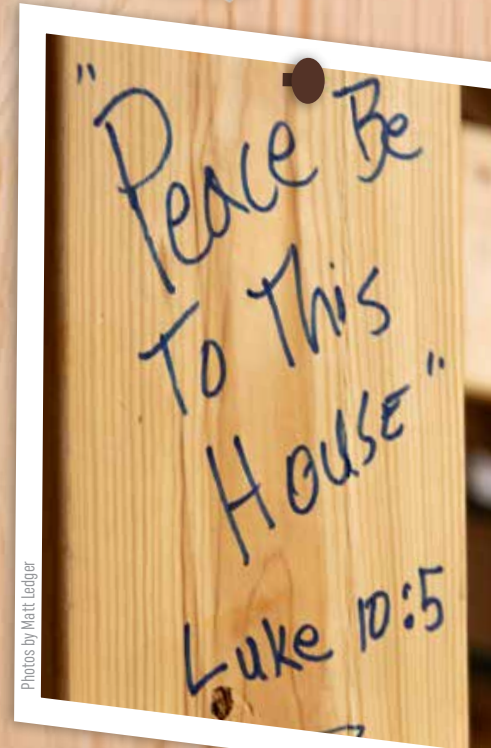
David can often be found flying a drone on his lunch break and documenting the progress of the home build. The channel's content will also include videos recorded by Stacy. The YouTube channel is currently archived, but David plans to make it public soon.



David launches a small drone daily to capture footage for a planned YouTube channel.

"High-speed internet is the secret sauce."

—DAVID EYE



Photos by Matt Ledger

David and Stacy wrote their favorite scripture verses on studs as their house was built.

# IN THE GAME

## Esports growth offers students community and opportunity

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

The Texas Wesleyan esports program started with a 2017 conversation that wasn't about video games at all. Eugene Friar, who was then working in student affairs and is now director of esports and gaming, approached the vice president of his division to talk about what the university could do to be a fun and exciting option for prospective students.

"I was hoping he'd give me some answers, but he flipped it on me and was like, 'Bring me some ideas, and we'll discuss it,'" Eugene says. "I wasn't thinking esports at all, even though I've been a gamer since the Commodore 64 days."

While brainstorming, Eugene came across fledgling esports programs at places like the University of California, Irvine, Missouri's Maryville University and Robert Morris University in Pennsylvania. Groups of students were coming together to compete in multiplayer games like Overwatch, Super Smash Bros. and League of Legends.

Today, the National Association of Collegiate Esports, or NACE, recognizes more than 240 schools with competitive esports teams. The experience not only opens doors in the gaming industry but can also help students develop skills for a variety of careers.

Texas Wesleyan's esports team evolved from a group focused primarily on competition to one that welcomes anyone from casual hobbyists to hardcore gamers. For Eugene, it's an important community that supports students who might not share other interests on campus. But it's also a

Trojan horse for helping them find their path through school and beyond.

"We tell our recruits early in the process my job is to trick you into learning," Eugene says. "If you want to try out for one of our teams, hopefully we'll go to the stadium and play. But what's your major? What are you going to do after you graduate? How is this going to help you get there?"

### LEVELING UP

As access to high-speed internet expands from urban centers to rural areas, competitive gaming's popularity has soared. A study by Pew Research Center found that about 70% of college students say they play video games at least once in a while.

While the Texas Wesleyan Rams have teams for the squad-based shooter game Overwatch 2 and the fighting game Super Smash Bros., it's also important for Eugene to appeal to that larger audience. When the program was more focused on competitive gaming, he found that some students with a casual interest in gaming felt like they didn't belong. That's why the



The Texas Wesleyan University Overwatch team reviews video for a match.

Photo courtesy of Eugene Friar





**ABOVE:** University of Kentucky students enjoy competing in the school's new esports lounge.

**RIGHT:** Students try out the gaming lounge at the University of Kentucky's Latinx Open House.

club includes a team that creates, edits and streams content for platforms like Twitch and YouTube, as well as groups for fans of anime, Dungeons & Dragons and more casual gaming.

Eugene says overall participation increased by slightly deemphasizing competition and offering more ways to participate with casual gaming clubs, a social media team and an event team. "We went from having seven competitive teams to two, and the number of students in our program has actually gone up a little bit because there's more ways for people to get involved," he says.



Bryce Edwards, a junior, received a scholarship to help run the esports program and became captain of the school's Smash Bros. team. He says the social and leadership skills he learned in that role will be invaluable as he pursues a career in marketing.

For Kelvin Coker, a senior criminal justice major and wrestler, it's been a new way to connect with people. "People need a place that allows them to be themselves and interact with people of different backgrounds so that they can develop the skills necessary to go through life," Kelvin says. "It was a different vibe than wrestling, which was extremely refreshing. It felt good to be among people who shared interests in things outside of sports."

Heath Price, associate vice president of partnerships at the University of Kentucky, found the same enthusiasm when he first met with an informal esports club on his campus in 2018. With school resources behind it, the UK Esports Club has grown to include hundreds of members who enjoy the university's recently completed gaming lounge, along with approximately 70 students who play competitively.

"What we've seen is that the idea of a gamer just being someone who might be interested in building games is kind of a misnomer," Heath says. "A lot of these

young people have varying interests. I think as much of a career builder as anything is giving people some of those opportunities for exposure and to do things in the community."

## TAILOR MADE

Eugene takes a similar approach at

Texas Wesleyan. Whether it's a student who wants to start a clothing line designing the school's esports jersey or a mass communications major building the team's content roadmap for the year, he always looks for ways the program can help students pursue their larger goals.

"The content team isn't about making funny content.

It's about project management," he says. "The student organizations aren't just about talking about the things you love. They're leading a meeting and organizing people."

With the gaming landscape constantly changing, that may even mean meeting students somewhere other than esports. Texas Wesleyan's teams currently compete in the second division of the NACE Starleague, the biggest collegiate esports league in North America.

The Rams had a national championship-winning team for the FIFA soccer game series. Today, that team doesn't exist because the game no longer exists. Earlier this year, Electronic Arts, publisher of the FIFA series of games, ended its branding partnership with global soccer organization FIFA. That left some competitive players out in the cold and highlights a unique challenge for esports.

"You don't win a national championship in football and a few years later it's like, 'Remember when we used to have a football team?' So when the publishers get involved it's tricky," Eugene says. "It wouldn't surprise me if the esports part of what we do goes away in time and you see the more content creation and pop culture things last. It's about meeting the students' needs and matching their interests in a really positive way." 🗨️



**The Texas Wesleyan University Super Smash Bros. team prepares for a competition.**



# Sharing skills

## Helping to find a path out of poverty

Story by CHERÉ COEN

After moving to Seneca 22 years ago, Stephanie Enders searched for places to volunteer. She connected with the Department of Social Services and the United Way, volunteering to help single moms involved with an adult mentoring project.

“It was there that I realized the benefits cliff — where when you make more money you get less,” Stephanie says.

Struggling families receive government assistance, but a small raise in pay can disproportionately reduce the amount of assistance a family receives, leaving them worse off financially than they were before. “I realized it was a bigger problem than I thought,” Stephanie says.

In 2011, Stephanie created Ripple of One, an organization designed to move people out of poverty through financial literacy, education and support through a program of incentives. Donations from individuals and the community account for 70% of the funding, with the state and federal grants providing the rest.

Ripple of One participants learn to create a budget, manage debt, improve their credit scores — even plan for home ownership. The organization matches what participants save up to \$200 a month. By the conclusion of the program, participants have enough savings to carry them through three to six months, should the need arise. “A few of our graduates have \$10,000 to \$12,000 in savings,” Stephanie says.

Ripple of One also creates road maps for success, says Dreama Clay, program director. For instance, if a participant wants to become a nurse and has little education,



Photo by Matt Ledger

**ABOVE:** As program director for Ripple of One, Dreama Clay helps families get the resources, knowledge and support necessary to be healthy and successful.

**RIGHT:** Ripple of One's 2021 graduates celebrate together after completing the program.



Photo contributed by Sabrina Gaines


Ripple of One can help her complete certification to work in the field, make money and earn a degree.

“Now you’re on a path to a career that could change your life and your family’s life,” Dreama says. “We help people who are struggling. We look at how they see themselves, how they see their future and where they want to be in two to three years, which is the program length. We help them overcome obstacles keeping them from being financially independent.”

Participants must have transportation to join the program. Those without transportation have the opportunity, after 90 days in the program, to earn vehicles donated by community members. Ripple of One’s “Driven to Work” program maintains a lien on the vehicle until the individual graduates.

Sabrina Gaines learned money management skills through Ripple of One, earned her bachelor’s degree in child and family studies and now works as a skills manager. “Since joining Ripple, I have gained more money management skills,” she says. “I have raised my credit score by 300 points. I also have savings accounts — one for emergencies, one for each of my younger children — and a growing account earmarked for down payment on a house.”

The bottom line, Dreama says, is the support. “Sometimes all a person needs is for someone to believe in them,” she says.

To learn more about Ripple of One, including how to become a participant or volunteer, go to [rippleofone.org](http://rippleofone.org). 

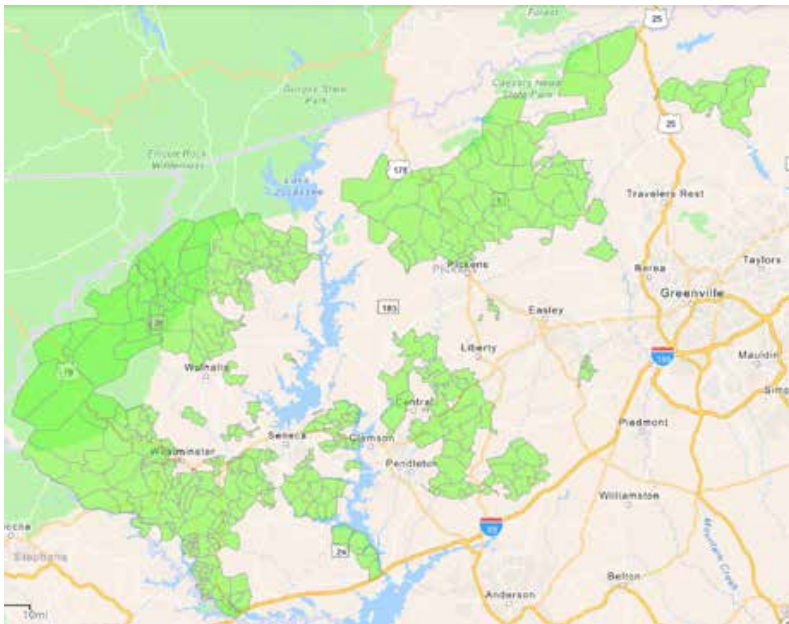


# BUILDING BROADBAND in the Upstate

In 2023, Upcountry Fiber connected 1,400 miles of fiber optic cable. This expansion allowed 9,266 more families and small businesses to access high-speed broadband.

Upcountry Fiber's network currently has an excellent net promoter score of 85, landing Upcountry Fiber in the top percentile of broadband providers nationwide.

We are committed to expanding the reach of our high-speed internet to underserved and unserved areas. The collaboration of teams at Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER will continue as we deploy this vital utility to our neighbors and businesses.



►► Upcountry Fiber service is available in the green areas shown on our network map. Fiber crews are currently working in other parts of our service area to further expand broadband availability.



**TO LEARN MORE** about Upcountry Fiber, and to register your interest in signing up for service, go to **[upcountryfiber.com](https://upcountryfiber.com)**.



## EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

*Zach Hinton*

VICE PRESIDENT OF ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT SERVICES

Zach Hinton is the vice president of economic development and support services for Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative. He joined BREC in 2015 as part of the team that formed the Upcountry Fiber partnership with WCFIBER.

Zach has a bachelor of arts degree from Wofford College, worked as a staffer for U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett and is a former deputy with the Greenville County Sheriff's Office.

He and his wife, Sarah, have been married 15 years and live in the Dacusville area with their two children, Robert, 8, and Rebekah, 2. The Hinton family's dog, Sam, was Zach's K-9 partner. Zach enjoys playing golf and spending time with his family. His favorite movie is the classic "The Godfather."

# When one pot hits the spot

*Simple, delicious and easy*

**M**eals you can make in one pot are ideal for today's busy cooks for two reasons. For starters, little time is wasted going from one pot to another, making sure everything is cooking together nicely. Secondly, you're cooking in one pot, so there's minimal cleanup.

As the name implies, one-pot meals are just that. They are the secret to getting dinner on the table in a jiffy. Generally, the vegetables and protein are cooked together in the same pot. If any other side dishes are needed, it's usually nothing more than a green salad with buttery croustons or a nice piece of crusty bread.

One-pot meals are filled with comfort, something we all yearn for like a big, cozy blanket on a chilly winter's night.



**Food Editor  
Anne P. Braly  
is a native of  
Chattanooga,  
Tennessee.**

Photography by **Mark Gilliland**  
Food Styling by **Rhonda Gilliland**

## CHEESEBURGER PASTA

*This is the perfect easy wintertime one-pot meal. It's like having a cheeseburger and spaghetti at the same time, and the kids will love it!*

- 1 yellow onion
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/2 pound ground beef
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 2 cups beef broth
- 8 ounces pasta shells, uncooked
- 4 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded
- 2 tablespoons pickle relish
- 2 green onions, sliced

Finely dice the onion. Add the onion, olive oil and ground beef to a large deep skillet, and saute over medium heat until the beef is fully browned and the onion is soft and translucent. Drain off any excess fat, if needed.

Add the flour to the skillet and continue

to stir and cook for 1 minute more. The flour will begin to coat the bottom of the skillet. Be careful not to let the flour burn.

Add the tomato sauce and beef broth to the skillet and stir to dissolve the flour off the bottom of the skillet.

Add the uncooked pasta to the skillet and stir to combine. The liquid in the skillet may not fully cover the pasta, but that is OK.

Place a lid on the skillet, turn the heat up to medium-high, and let the liquid come up to a boil. Once it reaches a boil, give it a quick stir to loosen any pasta from the bottom of the skillet. Replace the lid, and turn the heat down to low. Let the pasta simmer, stirring occasionally (always replacing the lid), for about 10 minutes, or until the pasta is tender and the sauce has thickened. Turn off the heat.

Add the shredded cheddar to the skillet and stir until it has melted into the sauce. Stir the relish into the sauce, then top with sliced green onions. Serve warm.





## FIVE-HOUR BEEF STEW

*Delicious smells will fill your home as this stew cooks slowly in the oven.*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 1/2 pounds chuck roast, cut into bite-size pieces</li> <li>1 cup celery, chunked</li> <li>4 carrots, chunked</li> <li>2-3 medium potatoes, chunked</li> <li>1 onion, sliced or large dice</li> <li>1/2 cup fresh bread crumbs</li> <li>1 large can tomatoes</li> <li>1 cup red wine, optional</li> <li>1 tablespoon salt</li> <li>2 tablespoons sugar</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4-5 tablespoons minute tapioca</li> <li>2-3 generous splashes of Worcestershire sauce</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

Do not brown the meat. Combine all ingredients in a large baking dish with a tight-fitting lid or cover securely with foil. Bake in a 250 F oven for 5-6 hours. Do not hurry this stew. The slow oven is the key to success.



## ONE-PAN CHICKEN PASTA

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1/4 cup panko breadcrumbs
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon minced garlic, divided
- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 1 1/2 cups crushed tomatoes
- 8 ounces penne pasta
- 1/2 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1/4 cup shredded Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large broiler-safe skillet over medium-high heat. Add panko and 1 teaspoon garlic. Cook, stirring, until the panko is golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to a small bowl and set aside. Wipe out the pan.

Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in the pan over medium-high heat. Add chicken, Italian seasoning, salt and the



remaining 1 tablespoon garlic. Cook, stirring frequently, until the chicken is no longer pink on the outside, about 2 minutes. Add broth, tomatoes and penne. Bring to a boil and cook, uncovered, stirring frequently, until the penne is cooked and the sauce has reduced and thickened, 15 to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, position an oven rack in the upper third of the oven. Preheat the broiler to high. When the pasta is cooked, sprinkle mozzarella over the penne mixture. Place the pan under the broiler. Broil until the mozzarella is bubbling and beginning to brown, about 1 minute. Top with the panko mixture, Parmesan and basil.



## ONE-POT PRIMAVERA

- 4 skin-on, bone-in chicken thighs
- 1 pound small red potatoes, halved
- 1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon olive oil, or as needed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 (1-ounce) package of ranch dressing mix
- 6 slices bacon, chopped

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place chicken thighs in a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

Toss potatoes, Brussels sprouts and garlic together with olive oil in a bowl until vegetables are lightly coated. Add vegetables around and between chicken thighs in the baking dish. Season with salt, pepper and thyme. Evenly pour the entire packet of ranch seasoning over the chicken and vegetables. Sprinkle chopped bacon on top.

Bake until chicken is no longer pink at the bone and the juices run clear, 30 to 35 minutes. An instant-read thermometer inserted near the bone should read 165 F.

Set an oven rack about 6 inches from the heat source and preheat the oven's broiler. Place the baking dish under the broiler, and cook until chicken skin becomes golden brown and crisp, 2 to 3 minutes. 🍳



233 Highway 28 Bypass  
Abbeville, SC 29620

PRSRT STD  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
HILLSBORO, OR  
PERMIT No. 66



# LIFE UNLIMITED

where anything is possible

**Dream big at home with Upcountry Fiber internet.** Experience the true meaning of limitless possibilities as you live your best life in your hometown. So sit back, relax, and let us keep you connected with lightning-fast speeds.



(888) 760-2111  
[UpcountryFiber.com](http://UpcountryFiber.com)

**SIGN UP NOW**  
FOR UNLIMITED INTERNET