



UPCOUNTRY

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024

# CONNECTED

## Merry and Bright

Seneca shines for the holidays

NEW OFFICE

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RURAL WRITERS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## A Winning Game

Esports brings fun, competition and a future

**N**TCA members are committed to doing more than providing fast, reliable internet service. They strive to enrich the community, including finding new opportunities to help everyone as technologies and online trends evolve.

For example, a growing high school sport unlocks all the traditional benefits of competition, such as team building, while enhancing skills applicable to modern careers. Known as esports, competitive gaming can make a difference in the lives of students.

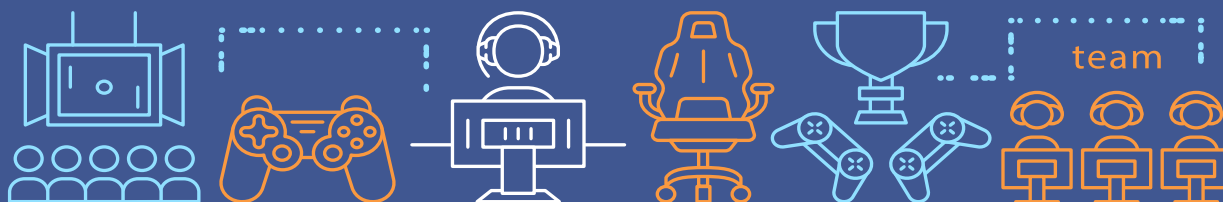
High schools across the nation have embraced esports, and the National Federation of State High School Associations includes esports alongside basketball, football, volleyball and more. Without fast, reliable internet services, however, rural students wouldn't have access. That's the power of providers like yours—they break down barriers and open doors to new opportunities.

Many of the competitions may seem familiar to gamers, ranging from sports games and racing simulations to strategy

and multiplayer battle titles. A growing number of colleges recognize esports and field teams. There's even professional-level competition.

The benefits of esports resemble those found in traditional high school sports. Success relies on teamwork and cooperation. Participants learn life skills and gain a deeper understanding of technology needed for careers ranging from software development to marketing. The broad world of gaming also brings people together, and 61% of gamers say they've met someone they otherwise would not have ever encountered.

Every day broadband uplifts rural America, and we look forward to seeing what innovations and opportunities come next. 🗨️



# ESPORTS

## ESPORTS STATS

Esports is increasingly popular, turning gaming into team competitions at high schools, colleges and even in professional competitions. Some online streaming services offer live coverage of competitions.

### WHO ARE GAMERS?

- 24%** are younger than 18 years old
- 36%** are between the ages of 18-34
- 13%** are between the ages of 35-44
- 12%** are between the ages of 45-54

### WHO ARE ESPORTS SPECTATORS?

- 50%** are between the ages of 25-41
- 26%** are between the ages of 16-24
- 20%** are between the ages of 42-56

### BUILDING SKILLS

Esports creates skills today's students will find marketable.

- Computer network and hardware proficiency
- Digital literacy
- Broadcasting
- Soft skills
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Problem-solving
- Team building

Source: NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

# A Sound Investment



## System upgrade takes listening to next level

Whether you're gaming, watching a movie or listening to music, a high-quality sound system can take you from casually listening to feeling like you're part of the action. If you've thought about installing a sound system in your home, 'tis the season, to treat yourself to one that easily meets your needs and budget.

All sound systems have two basic components. First, there's the source providing the audio signal. This can be a TV, gaming device or digital music player, like your phone or computer. The second component is the amplifier, which boosts the audio signal. More than just volume, the amplifier improves the overall sound quality with more detail and clarity.

When it comes to speakers, music formats only require two, but the more speakers you have, the more immersive the sound will be. A soundbar, sometimes called a media bar, has multiple speakers enclosed in a single horizontal unit, usually placed above or below the TV. A surround sound system is much more complex, with speakers strategically placed around the room to deliver the best possible sound.

### SOUNDBAR VS. SURROUND SOUND

Soundbars are ready to go right out of the box. They're relatively inexpensive, sleek and easy to install. Soundbars are ideal for smaller spaces because of their minimal visual impact.

When shopping for a soundbar, pay close attention to the number of speakers hidden inside. A larger soundbar doesn't

necessarily mean better sound quality. Look to manufacturers like Bose, Sonos or Vizio for reliable options.

Surround sound is the choice for high fidelity and full dynamic range of sound—think of your listening area as a movie theater with booming audio. It considers factors like room size, acoustics and listening positions to determine the number of speakers and locations. If you already have a basic speaker system at home, upgrading to surround sound might be as simple as adding an extra speaker or two.

### PRICE OF PERFECTION

Very simple sound systems can still deliver a fantastic listening experience, so don't worry if you're starting on a smaller budget. But if you're designing your own setup and need advice on speaker placement or hiding wires behind walls, you'll need an electrician for expert guidance. Installers charge an average of \$50-\$100 an hour, so remember to budget for that.

The most common format for surround sound systems is the 5.1, with six audio channels, five speakers and a subwoofer that delivers the deep, rumbling bass frequencies. A 5.1 setup can cost between \$300 to \$1,700.

A more extensive option is the 7.1 surround, with two additional audio channels and two more speakers. Comparable to the audio setup found in large cinemas, the cost of this configuration runs anywhere from \$400 to \$4,000. [🔗](#)



# A Season of Both Abundance and Need

**H**appy holidays! As we enter the holiday season, we find ourselves surrounded by the magic that defines these months. Families travel from across the country with one simple goal—to be home for the holidays. Gatherings take place around tables filled with food, while the hustle and bustle of gift shopping and twinkling lights brighten our homes. It's a time when cherished traditions are passed down and the spirit of giving is alive.



**JEFF WILSON (L)**  
Chief Executive Officer  
West Carolina

**JIM LOVINGGOOD (R)**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Blue Ridge Electric

But the season also reminds us of those in need. With light comes darkness, and with abundance comes scarcity. Many of our neighbors struggle, and that's where real magic happens—when we come together to support one another. This is the heart of our Give Big, Get Gig initiative, which we're excited to extend to Upstate South Carolina with the opening of our new Upcountry Fiber office in Seneca.

The concept is simple: Bring in three or more nonperishable food items, and we'll reward you with a free speed boost to our 1-Gig plan for December. This is when internet usage tends to peak with families streaming holiday movies, setting up new gadgets and connecting their phones to home WiFi. Last year, our internet partner, West Carolina, collected over 4 tons of food, which was distributed to local pantries whose shelves were nearly bare. This year, with your generosity, we can do even better.

To participate, just visit our office in Seneca in November with your donations. If you're not yet a customer, our team can help you sign up for services. Once you've made your contribution, enjoy faster speeds throughout December. If you love the extra speed, simply call us to make the upgrade permanent. Otherwise, your service will return to your regular plan in January.

Beyond the holidays, we're continuing to offer streaming support through community classes, most recently in Belton. Many of our customers are transitioning to streaming, but we know it's not always easy. Program providers sometimes pull channels unexpectedly, and sports fans have seen their games disappear midseason. Streaming can help, but navigating different platforms is tricky. That's why we've partnered with MyBundle to simplify things.

If you're wondering how to catch your favorite NFL game, visit [mybundle.tv/pages/nfl](https://mybundle.tv/pages/nfl) and select your team. You'll see all the available streaming options. In addition, we've launched a new app in partnership with MyBundle that aggregates all your streaming services into one easy-to-use guide. Visit [mybundle.tv/app](https://mybundle.tv/app), enter your phone number, and follow the prompts to get started. It's like having a TV guide in the palm of your hand.

We understand the world of TV and streaming can feel like the Wild West, but we're here to make it easier for you.

As always, we are grateful to serve you and wish you and your family a wonderful holiday season! 📺

*Jeff Wilson Jim Lovinggood*

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 West Carolina, 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  
888-760-2111  
Email us at [info@UpcountryFiber.com](mailto:info@UpcountryFiber.com)

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



Seneca will be a scenic destination this season with fun Christmas events, including the Magical Musical Holiday Light Show. See story Page 8.

Photo courtesy of Caleb Gilbert

# MERRY Christmas

## FROM OUR FAMILY TO YOURS!

The employees of Upcountry Fiber are grateful for the support of our customers. We wish you a season filled with love and laughter with friends and family.

Our offices will be closed on the following dates while our employees spend the holidays with their families:

**Nov. 28 and Nov. 29**—Thanksgiving

**Dec. 24 and Dec. 25**—Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

**Jan. 1**—New Year's Day

## CALL BEFORE YOU DIG

Decorating a Christmas tree is one of the season's many traditions that, thankfully, doesn't require any digging. Just remember that planting real trees—or any other project that requires breaking ground—must include a call to South Carolina's 811 program.

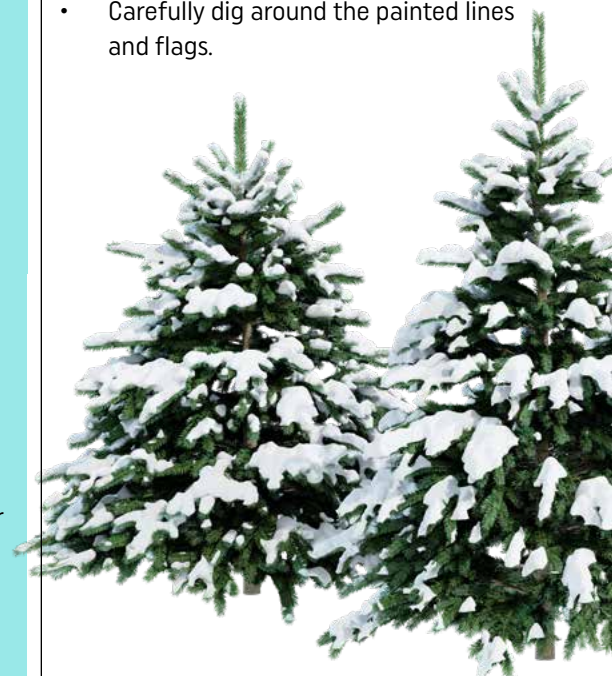
State law requires homeowners and contractors to call 811 before digging. Starting a digging project haphazardly can damage expensive infrastructure and put lives at risk. SC-811 notifies all utilities based on the address, allowing those stakeholders to safely mark their facilities.



Find out more at [sc811.com](http://sc811.com).

### FIVE STEPS FOR SAFE DIGGING:

- Call 811 for your lines to be marked.
- Wait the required amount of time—three full business days for normal requests, not counting the day of the call.
- Call 811 or 888-721-7877 to confirm all lines have been marked.
- Respect the marks and call for re-marking, if needed.
- Carefully dig around the painted lines and flags.



## TIPS FOR DEALING WITH ROBOCALLS

If you've been seeing unfamiliar numbers popping up on your phone this season, they aren't coming from the North Pole. Robocalls are an annoying imposition by folks who have a special spot on the naughty list.

Here are a few tips for dealing with robocalls:

- Add your number to the National Do Not Call Registry.
- Check for tools and services from your wireless carrier or blocking features on your smartphone.
- Download and activate robocall blocking apps.
- Let calls from unknown numbers go to voicemail.
- If you accidentally answer a robocall, just hang up. Pushing other numbers or answering yes can cause an unauthorized charge.
- If the caller asks for anything involving a gift card, it's very likely a scam.
- Report any scam calls to the Federal Communications Commission's Consumer Complaint Center at 888-225-5322.

Visit [ctia.org/consumer-resources/how-to-stop-robocalls](http://ctia.org/consumer-resources/how-to-stop-robocalls) for more information.





# Blast Off

Go on a holiday adventure at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Looking for an out-of-this-world family experience this holiday season? The U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, will capture everyone's imagination, from kids to adults.

The center was first conceived as Wernher von Braun and his team of rocket scientists were in the final months of refining the Saturn V rocket that would send Apollo astronauts to the moon. As director of the nearby Marshall Space Flight Center, von Braun saw the need for a permanent exhibit to showcase the hardware of the space program.

He petitioned the Alabama Legislature to create a museum with the help of the U.S. Army Missile Command and NASA. The U.S. Army donated land for the museum, and the U.S. Space & Rocket Center opened its doors in 1970, the year after Apollo 11 successfully carried astronauts to the moon and back.

Since then, the center has hosted more than 650,000 visitors each year from as many as 64 different countries. Visitors can get an up-close look at an authentic Saturn V rocket, one of only three in the world, as well as Pathfinder, the world's only fully stacked space shuttle display.

## A HELPING HAND

While the holidays often bring hope and happiness, for many people achieving those peaceful goals are elusive. That's particularly true this year, as communities throughout the Southeast strive to recover from damaging winds and devastating floods.

Dolly Parton, Walmart and countless others have contributed to organizations supporting these rural areas in need. If you wish to contribute, consider these options:

American Red Cross: [redcross.org](http://redcross.org)

The Salvation Army: [salvationarmyusa.org](http://salvationarmyusa.org)

## SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE TO EXPLORE

Not only is the USSRC an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, but it is also the official NASA Visitor Center for Marshall Space Flight Center. The museum offers regular bus tours highlighting the facility where the Space Launch System is in development to carry astronauts to Mars, asteroids and even deeper into space.

In addition to exhibits detailing the most complete chronology of launch vehicles in the country, the center's Apollo 16 command module, real Apollo 12 moon rock and daily STEM on Stage performances let visitors interact with artifacts and exhibits.

Children under 8 can explore an International Space Station-themed playground at Kids Cosmos, and every Saturday kids 12 and up are invited to the Maker Lab for hands-on projects that incorporate lessons on topics like solar energy and robotics. Adrenaline junkies can ride the G-Force Accelerator to experience three times the force of gravity or take the Moon Shot to see what a rocket launch feels like as you fly 140 feet straight up in 2.5 seconds.

**"The Space & Rocket Center is really an amazing feast for the eyes. It's a place to learn about the past, the present and the future of space exploration."**

—Pat Ammons, senior director of public and media relations

## AN ASTRONOMICAL CHRISTMAS

One of the USSRC's most popular attractions is the INTUITIVE Planetarium, which features a state-of-the-art digital dome theater. Each screening is unique as a team of live astrophysicists takes visitors on a tour of the solar system.

"It is truly an extraordinary, absolutely world-class planetarium," says Senior Director of Public and Media Relations Pat Ammons. "It's all live and interactive. They take you on a personal tour, you can ask questions and it's highly interactive."

Throughout the holidays, the planetarium also screens a special feature called "The Star of Bethlehem," which explores both the science and religion behind the famous celestial phenomenon. 📺



Photos courtesy of the U.S. Space & Rocket Center

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LEFT: The U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, is a holiday destination for the family.



Photo courtesy of Neil Ardrey



ABOVE: Finn Cushing, 2, tries an astronaut's suit on for size.

LEFT: See a piece of the moon, a rock brought home by astronauts.





# A Celebration for the Senses

Seneca's Christmas spectacle offers something for everyone

Story by LAZ DENES



Families and friends find the reindeer selfie stop irresistible.

Christmas celebrations come in all shapes and sizes, and the annual events built around Seneca's Magical Musical Holiday Light Show rank among the best of them.

Each year around the holidays Norton Thompson Park becomes a vibrant forest of brilliant Christmas trees mixed with many colorful displays symbolizing the season. A lush 44-foot tree welcomes visitors to the park that spans two city blocks. It's surrounded by a delightful display of sights and sounds that has grown significantly in recent years. Last year's display incorporated more than 1 million lights for the first time, all performing in perfect sync to Christmas music filling the downtown area through a state-of-the-art audio system.

This year's Magical Musical Holiday Light Show begins Nov. 22 and runs nightly from 5:30-10 p.m. through New Year's Eve. Scattered throughout its run is a series of special events to help elevate the spirit of Christmas among locals and out-of-towners alike.

Santa visits downtown Seneca several nights each week, when the city offers free hot chocolate and rides around the light show on a Christmas-themed train and vintage firetruck. Custom-made firepits are perfect for roasting s'mores.

There are gingerbread house decorating contests for all ages during the first half of December, featuring cash prizes. On select nights during the month, visitors can take a candlelight tour of the century-old Lunney Museum and its unique holiday decor.

Seneca's downtown streets draw their biggest crowds of the season on a pair of special nights, the first being the annual



Santa and Buddy the elf team up for holiday visits.

Photos courtesy of the city of Seneca



official lighting of the 44-foot main tree and parade that follows. This year's event is set for Dec. 2. Later in the month is the annual A Jazzy Christmas musical celebration, a seasonal variation of the weekly jazz concerts on Ram Cat Alley from April to October.

### A GIFT FOR THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Scott Moulder, chief administrative officer for Seneca, prioritized expanding the Christmas festivities each year. It was a modest affair before he first asked the city council for the budget needed for a serious upgrade.

"The 'tree' they were using was a metal pole with lights strung on it, and that's what they lit on parade night," he says. "I asked about getting a real-looking tree and that's what sparked the idea. I asked the city council for funding to redo our Christmas decorations, and everything just took off from there."

In Scott's first year, about 8,000 visitors were drawn to the park and downtown streets during the light show's run. That number swelled to more than 60,000 visitors last year, some from as far away as California. The economic impact on downtown businesses, even those up on the U.S. Highway 123 bypass, has been significant.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for us to provide an environment where visitors and residents can come out and enjoy one another, maybe relax and have a little bit of leisure time during a very hectic and busy time period," Scott says. "We want to give them an opportunity to slow down, enjoy a celebration and spend time with their friends and families. To see the kids out there laughing and smiling, the twinkle in the kids' eyes, it just means more to the staff than we can ever describe. Our staff wears elf shirts. We do it unlike any other. I've tried to Google and search the country for anyone who does it like we do. There might be bigger ones, but nobody is as interactive as we are in downtown Seneca." 📱



On cold nights the s'mores pit becomes a popular spot.

### TONS OF HOLIDAY FUN

Seneca's weeklong holiday extravaganza is jam-packed with activities for the whole family. Here are a few highlights for this year's event:

**Santa, S'mores and Hot Chocolate on the Green (Friday and Saturday nights, select weeknights in December)**—Santa makes a grand entrance to greet kids and take photos. Kids can enjoy free hot chocolate and \$5 s'mores kits to roast in one of the vertical firepits. "The Polar Express" themed Spirit of Seneca train and the Pride of Seneca, a vintage 1957 American LaFrance fire truck, offer free rides through the park displays.

**Gingerbread House Decorating Contest (Dec. 1-12)**—Multiple categories, each with a \$100 first prize, include teams and age groups from kids to adults. Winners will be announced at A Jazzy Christmas. Check Seneca's events website, [senecascevents.com](http://senecascevents.com), or Facebook page, @senecascevents, for rules and information.

**Seneca's The Magic of Christmas Parade and Tree Lighting (Dec. 2)**—Entertainment on the main stage, including dancers and carolers, begins at 5 p.m. Official lighting of the main Christmas tree is at 5:50 p.m., followed by the parade at 6:30 p.m.

**A Jazzy Christmas**—The Jamie Wright Band will headline the event on downtown's Ram Cat Alley. Food vendors will be on-site, and restaurants will be open for business. See [visitsenecas.com/events](http://visitsenecas.com/events) or Facebook for date and start time.

**A Lunney Christmas by Candlelight**—Tour the historic Lunney Museum, a charming bungalow built in 1909 that's elegantly decorated for the holidays. For schedule and reservations, visit [arthistoryculture.org/events](http://arthistoryculture.org/events).

# THE ART OF SELF- RELIANCE

## Rural writers get a boost from the internet

Story by JEN CALHOUN



Photo courtesy of Shawna Holly



Shawna Holly was researching how to publish her first novel when she ran into a type of writer’s block she’d never experienced. This particular block had nothing to do with plot holes or mental tangles. Instead, it centered around the relatively slow-moving churn of books through the nation’s traditional publishing houses.

“The industry—from my perspective—is very busy, like so many other businesses right now,” Shawna says. “There are very few literary agents and acquisitions editors compared to how many debut authors are seeking representation, and they’re all overworked. As a result, the path to traditional publishing is slow. For authors seeking a faster solution, self-publishing is the answer.”

So, that’s what she did. In June 2023, the Boerne, Texas-based writer published her first novel, “The Stories We Keep,” via a self-publishing platform that distributes paperbacks and e-books all over the world. Her second book, “When We’re Broken,” came out earlier this fall. Both books are in the genre of women’s literary fiction.

### TAKING CHARGE

Shawna is among a growing number of writers embracing self-publishing

platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speed up the book publishing process. This is especially true for writers from small or rural towns who may have a harder time finding an agent or fostering connections to publishing houses in larger cities.

“Agents receive thousands of queries a year, and they’re only taking on maybe two or three new authors in addition to the clients they already have to manage,” Shawna says. “It just makes it darn near impossible to find that magic match. I just thought, ‘I’m in my 40s and have more stories to write. I don’t want to wait.’”

Best-selling authors who famously self-published before landing big book deals and film adaptations include Amanda Brown, who wrote “Legally Blonde,” and Andy Weir, who wrote “The Martian.” Colleen Hoover, the East Texas author of the blockbuster “It Ends with Us,” also self-published her first book, “Slammed,” in 2012. She increased her audience by giving away free books and by posting regularly on social media.

Even those self-published writers who don’t reach traditional literary heights have profited in the world of self-publishing. The Alliance of Independent Authors published a survey in 2023 reporting that

self-published authors earned a median income of \$12,749—more than double that of traditionally published authors. They also made up more than 50% of Kindle’s Top 400 books of 2023, the survey found.

### UNTANGLING THE WEB

Self-publishing isn’t the only internet tool that sparks creativity, however. Connie Clyburn is an East Tennessee-based writer of several books, including “Wisdom from the Doublewide” and the devotional “Aging Fabulously.” Connie found fellowship online through video calls with other writers from as far away as Ireland.


From her home in Telford, Tennessee—which she describes as “a little wide place in the road between Jonesborough and Greeneville”—she also uses the internet to connect with others through her online magazine. Called *ah law, y’all*, the quarterly publication highlights the Southern Appalachian area.

“You don’t always think about how vital the internet is as a writer,” says Connie, who infuses her writing with scripture and ways to apply it to everyday life. “But, as a rural writer, it has opened up a big world. Anything that I come up with





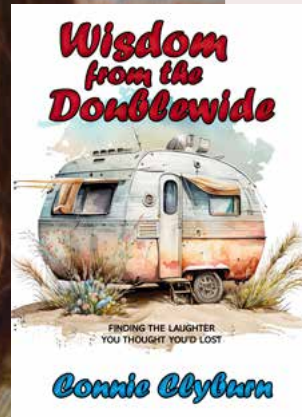
Photo courtesy of Connie Clyburn

that I want to read about or research or just connect with is right there at your fingertips.” 

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information on Connie Clyburn, look up her blog, “Wisdom from the Doublewide,” and the online magazine *ah law*, y’all.

Find out more about Shawna Holly and her books at [shawnaholly.com](http://shawnaholly.com).



LEFT: Connie Clyburn got her start as a journalist, and now she writes books, a blog and a newsletter from her home in East Tennessee near Jonesborough. Connie turned her blog into the book “Wisdom from the Doublewide.”

OPPOSITE PAGE: Shawna Holly lives outside of San Antonio, in a town of about 15,000 people. An Air Force veteran, Shawna self-published her book, “The Stories We Keep,” to avoid the sometimes long and tedious process of finding an agent and a publisher.

## GET A START WITH SELF-PUBLISHING

Most writers learn quickly that finding a publisher is often harder than writing the book itself. Books are meant to be read, but the steps involved with finding an agent and publisher can waste valuable time and resources. As a result, many writers self-publish. The comprehensive book and writers' blog “What We Reading” lists several self-publishing platforms. We've listed a few resources here for e-books. Visit [whatwewereading.com](http://whatwewereading.com) for more information on self-publishing print books.

### Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, also known as KDP

- Highest market share and sales in the self-publishing industry.
- Writers earn royalties of between 35% and 70% depending on the price of the book.
- It's important to note there's another option called KDP Select, which is different than KDP. KDP Select users get certain marketing perks that can help sell their books. In exchange, they can't publish their work with any other self-publishing company.

### Apple Books

- Writers earn royalties of 70% on all e-books.
- Second-biggest player in the industry after Amazon's KDP.
- No upfront fees for authors once they have an iTunes account.

### Barnes & Noble Press, also known as B&N

- Writers earn 70% on e-books above 99 cents.
- B&N is considered one of the easiest platforms to use.
- Completely free to use, and it does not require exclusivity.

Other platforms include Kobo Writing Life, Draft2Digital, StreetLib, IngramSpark and PublishDrive, some of which have different pricing models and royalty distributions. Each of these platforms generally offers distribution to all the major e-book retailers, so it's important to research all options.

Source: “15 Best Self-Publishing Platforms for Your Book” from the blog “What We Reading.”

# Setting Up Shop in Seneca

Story by DIANNA TROYER

## Upcountry Fiber opens new office to better serve customers

Upcountry Fiber began offering life-changing, high-speed internet service across Anderson, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens and Spartanburg counties. The company is not taking the community's enthusiastic response for granted.

"We're thankful for community support and strive to meet the needs of our customers," says Max Crawford, Upcountry Fiber's Area District Manager. "For many, having high-speed internet is like a gift."

Max attributes the internet service provider's exponential growth to the quality of its high-speed broadband. "I'm proud to be able to offer such a good service," he says. "Our symmetrical internet speeds up to 8 Gbps over a fiber network is the fastest and most reliable high-speed internet in the area."

### A HOME BASE FOR CUSTOMERS

While the state-of-the-art internet service is revolutionizing how area residents live and do business, Upcountry Fiber is not content to rest on its laurels. "We're

proud of what we've done, but we are still focused on the future," Max says. "We've had such a great response and increase in accounts that we're opening a new office to provide face-to-face customer service. Our staff can answer questions about internet services and streaming to watch major TV networks. Or, some customers like to pay their bills in person."

Upcountry Fiber's 3,676-square-foot office at 9 Boardwalk Place in Seneca was remodeled during summer and fall. Before the new office opened, Upcountry Fiber had a facility for its techs and employees involved with engineering and construction to work, but there was no place to greet customers. "We look forward to having everything in one building," Max says.

The convenient location fulfills Upcountry's mission to be customer focused and community minded. Staff members have a motto and philosophy: "We work here, we live here, and we serve here."

"Whether it's connecting our neighbors, investing in our community or chatting

about fiber with anyone, our communities are at the heart of what we do," Max says.

### RAPID GROWTH

Since 2021, \$71 million has been invested to make broadband available to underserved areas. Upcountry's goal is to bring high-speed internet service to more than 46,000 addresses in the service area by 2025. Fiber internet helps people connect with family and friends and to have access to medical appointments, online classes and job opportunities.

"When people see our crews working in a neighborhood, they get excited," Max says. "We look forward to continued growth."

Besides high-speed internet access, Upcountry Fiber also offers more than 200 channels of high-definition television and secure reliable phone service. The company's Facebook page is a vital resource for customers, featuring information on classes about cybersecurity, stress reduction, virtual reality and other internet tips. [📺](#)




Photo by Matt Ledger

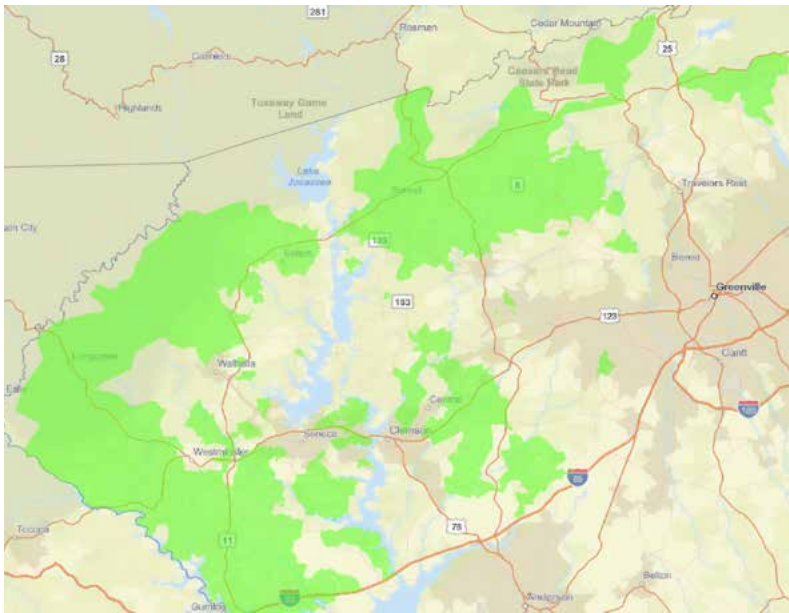


# Connecting the Upstate to BROADBAND

Upcountry Fiber constructed approximately 3,000 miles of fiber optic cable in 2024 and connected 17,000 residences and businesses to high-speed broadband.

Upcountry Fiber’s network currently has an excellent net promoter score of 85. This survey measures customer loyalty, satisfaction and enthusiasm for a company. Upcountry Fiber’s score places it 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 West Carolina 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


*Hannah G. Patterson*



Hannah G. Patterson is an account service representative for Upcountry Fiber. She helps customers with questions they may have and helps them make changes to their accounts. Hannah started as a contractor earlier this spring and became a full-time employee in June, working in the new Upcountry Fiber office in Seneca.

“I’m grateful that I get to help people achieve connectivity in areas typically underserved in the telecommunications world,” Hannah says. “My previous boss, West Carolina Board President Wes McAllister, instilled in me a desire to make customers feel special and to support local, small businesses. I look forward to expanding my knowledge and understanding to better serve customers in our communities.”

“I am privileged to have the opportunity to work for Upcountry Fiber and bring services to rural communities throughout the upstate of South Carolina,” she adds. “I look forward to being a part of a company that genuinely cares for its customers and the community.”

In her spare time, Hannah enjoys the sunshine during hikes, explores thrift and antique stores and is an avid fan of Xbox games. She maximizes her broadband connection with several digital streaming services, often watching thrillers or her favorite TV shows “Community” and “That ’70s Show.” 

# Holiday Simplicity

Breakfast casseroles are a gift for busy hosts

**M**ake-ahead casseroles can make the difference between holiday stress and satisfaction. From sweet to savory, there are many choices. Here are several to try this season.



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

## BLUEBERRY PANCAKE CASSEROLE

### Crumb Topping:

- 1/2 cup flour
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

### Pancakes:

- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 tablespoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups whole buttermilk
- 1/2 cup milk
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1-2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
- 2 cups blueberries
- Maple syrup, for serving

## SCRAMBLED EGG BAKE

- 4 slices bacon
- 8 ounces dried beef
- 2 4-ounce cans mushrooms, drained
- 1/2 cup butter, divided
- 1/2 cup flour
- 4 cups whole milk
- 16 eggs
- 1 cup evaporated milk

Saute the bacon until almost done. Add dried beef, mushrooms and 1/4 cup butter. While hot, add flour and stir in whole milk. Simmer sauce until thickened and smooth, stirring constantly.

Beat eggs with evaporated milk and salt. Scramble in remaining 1/4 cup butter.

Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Ladle a layer of sauce into the dish followed by a layer of scrambled eggs. Repeat layers, ending with a layer of sauce. Garnish with mushrooms and bacon. Cover with foil and bake at 275 F for 1 hour.

To make ahead: Make casserole, cover and refrigerate. Bake as directed.

**Crumb topping:** The day before, in a medium bowl, combine flour, sugars, cinnamon and salt. Add melted butter and stir until fully incorporated. Cover and refrigerate.

**Pancakes:** Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine flour, sugar, salt, baking powder and baking soda.

In a separate bowl, combine eggs, buttermilk, milk, melted butter, lemon zest and vanilla extract. Whisk wet ingredients until well combined. Add wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir until just combined. The batter will be lumpy. Do not overmix.

Pour the batter into the greased baking dish. Sprinkle the blueberries over the top. Remove the crumb topping from the fridge and crumble over the top of the blueberries and batter. Bake for 35-45 minutes, until puffed and light golden brown. Use a toothpick to check the center for doneness. Serve warm with maple syrup.





## FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

- 1 12- to 14-ounce loaf French or sour-dough bread. Stale bread works great.
- 1 8-ounce package full-fat cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 3 teaspoons vanilla extract, divided
- 8 eggs
- 2/3 cup packed brown sugar
- 3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 1/4 cups whole milk

### Topping:

- 1/3 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cold and cubed
- Maple syrup and/or powdered sugar for topping

Grease a 9-by-13-inch casserole with nonstick spray. Either cut the bread into 1-inch cubes or tear it into preferred size. Spread half of the cubes into prepared baking pan.

Using a hand-held or stand mixer with a whisk attachment, beat the cream cheese

on medium-high speed until completely smooth. Beat in the powdered sugar and 1/4 teaspoon vanilla until combined. Drop random spoonfuls of cream cheese mixture on top of the bread. Layer the remaining bread cubes on top of cream cheese. Make sure some cream cheese is still exposed on top. Set aside.

Whisk the eggs, milk, cinnamon, brown sugar and remaining vanilla together until no brown sugar lumps remain. Pour evenly over the bread. Cover the pan tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 3-4 hours or up to 24 hours. Overnight is best.

When ready to bake, remove from the refrigerator and uncover while you make the topping.

Mix the brown sugar, flour and cinnamon. Then, use a pastry cutter or your hands to cut the cold butter into the topping mixture until crumbly.

Bake at 350 F for 45-60 minutes. You can use a knife to check the French toast—it should come out mostly clean when the dish is ready. Avoid putting the knife into the cream cheese dollop, which could give a false reading.

## SAVORY RICE CEREAL CASSEROLE

- 2 pounds pork sausage
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 3 cups Rice Krispies
- 3 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 6 eggs
- 2 cans cream of celery soup
- 1/2 cup milk



In a skillet, cook sausage with onion until meat is no longer pink and onions are tender; drain. Transfer mixture to a lightly greased 9-by-13-inch casserole. Top with layers of rice, cereal and cheese. In a bowl beat the eggs with the soup and milk. Spread mixture on top. Cover with foil and refrigerate overnight.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Remove foil and bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour or until a knife inserted in center comes out clean. Let stand for 5-10 minutes before serving.

Note: Making this a day ahead helps to soften the cereal. It can be baked right away, but the cereal may still be crispy. 📺



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