



UPCOUNTRY

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025

# CONNECTED

## Superhosts

A welcoming Westminster  
tiny home

GIVING GRACE

FILM FESTIVALS







By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## An Ongoing Mission

### NTCA supports rural broadband

As we begin a new year, our NTCA members are on my mind, specifically how they do so much to create a better tomorrow by deploying and sustaining reliable broadband networks that connect rural communities to the world.

We've come a long way since the creation of NTCA in 1954, and I wanted to start 2025 with a reminder—or possibly an introduction—to who we are and how we serve the people who work so hard for you.

We represent about 850 independent, family-owned and community-based rural telecommunications companies. Without NTCA members, many communities would continue to be left behind by larger, national internet providers. So, we strive to advance policies that help these companies close the digital divide. This includes supporting programs like the Universal Service Fund, which helps rural consumers get and stay connected to high-quality, affordable internet.

I'm proud to note how well our NTCA members do their jobs. The robust and reliable broadband they provide enables businesses to connect to customers, doctors to patients and teachers to students. And the work they do in their communities goes beyond providing internet service. Many host digital literacy classes, sponsor STEM and esports initiatives at schools, support economic development initiatives and so much more.

In short, NTCA members are dedicated to improving the communities they serve.

As we enter a new year, we continue to support our members as they work to make your lives the best they can be. 🗨️

## HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

### BROADBAND NETWORKS SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

Your fast, reliable internet connection connects you to the internet, bringing you a seemingly endless number of services. Whether you enjoy streaming entertainment, gaming, video calls and more, this essential service adapts to your needs.



Did you know, however, that same network may also underpin a range of other services essential to your community? While the specifics may vary from place to place, fast internet networks create a foundation for rural America.



### PUBLIC SAFETY

The communications systems serving first responders often rely on broadband-speed internet.



### EDUCATION

School systems send large amounts of data and offer classrooms access to online resources.



### GOVERNMENT

From informational websites and apps to the computer networks and databases needed to operate, local governments require excellent connectivity.



### HEALTH CARE

Whether transmitting medical records or for telehealth visits, medical providers increasingly rely on digital tools.



### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Fast broadband networks provide a community resource attractive to both businesses and homebuyers, creating a keystone for growth.

# A Safe Place to Stay

## Isaiah House provides comfort for foster children



Photo courtesy of Corey Paulson

Television host Mike Rowe, center, surprises Isaiah 117 House co-founder Ronda Paulson and her family for a taping of his Facebook show “Returning the Favor.”

Story by MELANIE JONES

When Ronda and Corey Paulson met their first foster child at the back door of the Carter County, Tennessee, Department of Children’s Services, he was wearing too-small pajamas. The clothes he was wearing when he was removed from his unsuitable home were filthy, and DCS was unable to provide any that fit him properly.

The 9-month-old was fortunate the couple could come get him quickly. Some foster children spend hours—if not days—at overwhelmed and understaffed DCS offices, sometimes sleeping on the floor.

That situation has begun to change, however, thanks to a far-reaching program the Paulsons were inspired to establish in 2018. Thanks to word of mouth and a 2020 feature by “Dirty Jobs” host Mike Rowe on his Facebook page, their effort is spreading nationwide.

When the couple took the baby boy, Isaiah, home they lavished him with love and everything else an infant could need. But the Paulsons couldn’t stop thinking about something they learned in their

foster-parenting classes—the DCS office is usually the only place for a child to go on removal day.

They thought of little Isaiah. And they started studying the Bible’s book of Isaiah, including part of one verse in particular, Isaiah 1:17, which calls on people to “take up the cause of the fatherless.”

Then they thought, “What if there was a home?” Corey says.

### **BUILDING A MOVEMENT**


So, that’s what they set out to create. Ronda put together a board and worked with the local DCS office to come up with a workable concept. They raised money, bought a house and renovated it to DCS specifications. They painted the door red, and they called it Isaiah 117 House.

The house provides space for DCS workers who now bring children there instead of an office building. Children and teens have access to baths and showers. They get brand-new clean clothes and

toys. They have beds to sleep in if the placement takes more than a few hours. Volunteers cook them nutritious meals and comfort food.

That was 2018, and it was supposed to be one and done. “Clearly, we’ve learned that God had other plans,” Corey says.

Word of mouth spread. Soon neighboring Tennessee counties wanted their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Then, in 2020, Ronda and the Isaiah 117 House were featured on Mike Rowe’s Facebook show “Returning the Favor.” Two million people saw that episode on March 9, 2020. Then the calls really started coming in. Corey says they heard from people in 41 states and four countries wanting to start their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Now about 30 are open and more are in the works across 12 states.

“On March 13, the world shut down,” Corey says of the COVID-19 pandemic. “But our mission kept growing. We say Mike Rowe and Jesus are building houses for children.” 

### **LEARN MORE**

Interested in learning more about Isaiah 117 House or how to establish one in your area? Visit [isaiah117house.com](http://isaiah117house.com).

# The Torch Burns Brighter Than Ever

## Serving our community has been an honor

*This column is written by Jeff Wilson, CEO of West Carolina and Blue Ridge Electric's partner in Upcountry Fiber. Jeff is retiring at the end of February, with Chris Townson named as his successor. You'll meet Chris in the March/April issue of Upcountry Connected.*

As I reflect on the growth and accomplishments of Upcountry Fiber, I feel immense pride—not just in the network we've built, but in the relationships that made it possible. Our partnership with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative has been more than a collaboration. It's been a journey grounded in trust, respect and a shared commitment to bringing reliable, high-speed internet to Upstate South Carolina. Together, we've laid the groundwork for a connected future, creating opportunities for residents and businesses in previously underserved communities.



**JEFF WILSON**  
Chief Executive Officer  
West Carolina

Upcountry Fiber embodies the true spirit of cooperation. From the outset, we shared a vision with Blue Ridge Electric—broadband connectivity is not a luxury but a necessity. Delivering high-speed fiber to rural communities is challenging, requiring vision, investment and a belief in the power of partnership. Blue Ridge Electric has been an ideal partner, sharing our dedication to this region. Their expertise, unwavering support and commitment to their communities have been pivotal in our success.

Trust has been the cornerstone of our partnership. We've tackled every challenge with open communication and mutual respect, knowing we're stronger together. Our teams at West Carolina and Blue Ridge Electric have poured their hearts into this work, tackling obstacles with resilience and grace. From initial planning to laying 3,000 miles of fiber now reaching over 20,000 homes and businesses, their dedication has transformed Upcountry Fiber from a project into a promise for the people of Upstate South Carolina.

To the employees and boards of directors of both organizations, thank you. Your expertise and hard work have connected thousands and created a lasting impact in this region. Your pride in this mission shines through every connection made, every business empowered and every community strengthened.

Looking ahead, I am excited about the future of Upcountry Fiber. While much has been accomplished, our work is far from done. I'm confident that the cooperative's commitment to innovation, service and community will only grow stronger. Our leadership team brings fresh energy and perspectives, grounded in the values that have guided us from the start. Customers can trust that Upcountry Fiber will continue delivering on its promises, expanding its reach and investing in the latest technologies to keep this region connected.

To our customers, thank you for trusting us to connect your homes, schools and businesses. We understand how much you depend on us, and we remain committed to meeting your needs—now and into the future.

I leave Upcountry Fiber in capable hands, with a strong foundation built on trust, cooperation and shared purpose. The future is bright, and I look forward to seeing Upcountry Fiber continue its mission to connect and empower the Upstate. Together, we've built something remarkable, and I'm confident it will only get better from here. 📧

The Upcountry Connected is a bimonthly newsletter published by Upcountry Fiber, ©2025. 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](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:



Bonnie Yoder and her husband, Eric, own a tiny home they rent to guests through Airbnb. They plan to build another in the near future.  
See story Page 13.

Photo by Matt Ledger



# MEET OUR NEW EMPLOYEES



**ANDREW NEWMAN** lives in Seneca and is in outside residential sales. He loves spending time with family around bonfires and is devout in his faith in Christ. He and his wife, Ivy, have two children, Elijah, 4, and Sam, 2.



**JULIAN WHITE**, from Abbeville, is a network operations center technician I. He likes to play games and hang out with friends and family.

**Fun fact:** Julian escaped from an escape room.



**DAVID WORLEY**, a managed IT services technician II, was born and raised in Pelzer. His hobbies include building and flying drones, video games, 3D printing and laser engraving. David and his wife, Lindsey, have two daughters, Sadie Rose, 5, and Danielle Vera, 1.

**Fun fact:** David lived in New York City for a year for acting school.



**EDWARD CRUZ** is an account service representative who lives in Walhalla. He enjoys traveling and fishing trips.

**Fun fact:** Edward is a medical translator and likes to help others.



**NICHOLAS HOLBROOKS**, a construction technician I, was born and raised in Fair Play.

In his spare time, he likes to hunt. Nicholas and his wife, Whitney, have three children, Caison, 14; Jet, 8; and 20-month-old Valen.



**JUSTIN SAYLORS** is a network operations field technician who lives in Abbeville.

His hobbies include golfing, hunting and playing with his kids. Justin and his wife, Brooke, have two boys, Kace, 4, and Jude, 3.



**CAITLIN BURCH** is a customer service representative who lives in Greenwood.

Her hobbies include camping, concerts, spending days at the lake and Georgia football. She and her husband, Gareth, have two children, Easton, 13, and Emma, 11. A baby boy is due in February.

**Fun fact:** Caitlin loves to find shark teeth.



**PATRICK MULCAHY** is a network operations center technician I. Originally from Greenville, he has lived in Abbeville for 20 years.

His hobbies include travel, gaming and astrophotography. Patrick married Kristin Beals 20 years ago, and they have five small dogs.

**Fun fact:** Patrick has attended over 300 concerts.



**HANNAH G. PATTERSON** is an account service representative, originally from Greenwood but now living in Central.

She enjoys going to new places, hiking, painting and playing games on her Xbox.

**Fun fact:** Hannah has a bachelor's degree in biology.



**GRAYSON HILL** is a network and cybersecurity analyst from Lexington, and naturally his main hobby is hacking. He and his wife, Emily, have a 2-year-old named Maeve and a second daughter due in April, who they'll name Frances.

**Fun fact:** Grayson has been a pastor for four years.



**TRAVIS EDWARDS** is a construction technician I from Pickens.

He likes to travel, and his favorite hobby is cooking on the grill or smoking barbecue.

**Fun fact:** Travis likes to build computers.

# welcome

# TO THE TEAM!

# Roll Out the Red Carpet

## Fans play key role in film festivals' success

Story by KATHY DENES

The new year brings film fans front-row access to the latest—possibly greatest—in movie entertainment. Surprising plot twists, emotional turbulence, enlightenment, wild outdoor adventures, horror, invasions from space and even close encounters with celebrities are all in store. The 2025 film festivals are ready for their close-up.

These festivals in communities large and small offer great destinations. There's something for everyone. For example, the Lookout Wild Film Festival is a staple in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

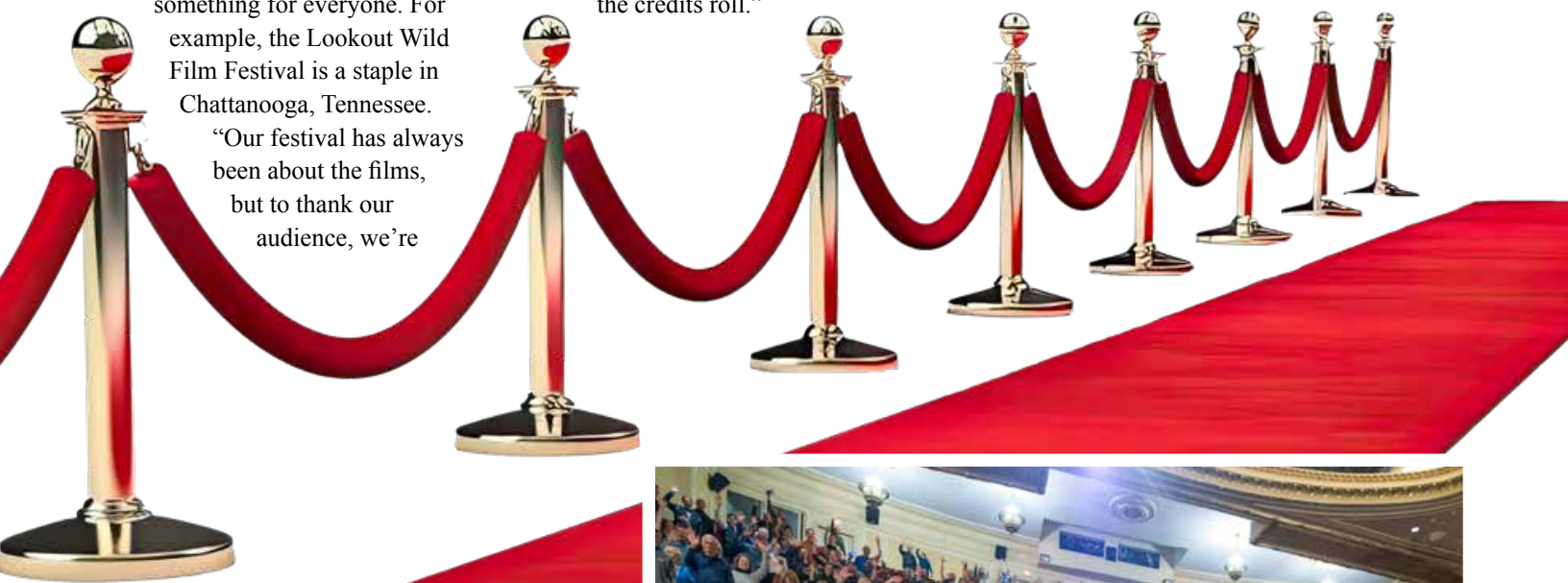
“Our festival has always been about the films, but to thank our audience, we’re

trying to bring in more of the festival aspect,” says Steve Rogers, event director for Lookout Wild Film Festival. “It’s about creating a welcoming and inclusive festival culture. You get to be in a room where every person around you shares a love for adventure and the craft of storytelling. Exploring amazing locations, cheering for stunning visuals and tearing up at touching moments become shared experiences that stay with you long after the credits roll.”

### FAN FOCUS

Almost every film festival relies on fan participation. Screenings and special events are typically open to the public.

Fans at film festivals often rub elbows with industry insiders, filmmakers and actors as they get an inside look at the movies and topics that will shape the entertainment scene in the coming year. They also get to see impactful projects that



Festivalgoers pack a Chattanooga venue for the Lookout Wild Film Festival.

## REGIONAL FESTIVAL FARE

**The Lookout Wild Film Festival, Chattanooga, Tennessee:** The festival season in the Southeast starts out on the wild side when this returns to Chattanooga, Jan. 16-19, for its 13th year. The festival welcomes guests to its new venue, The Signal at the historic Choo Choo complex, to screen films capturing the thrill of outdoor adventures and the importance of environmental conservation. Live music is thrown in for good measure before screening sessions and during intermissions. Find details on the festival focused on "wild places and the people they inspire" at [lwff.org](http://lwff.org).

**The Chattanooga Film Festival, named after its host city:** The festival is June 21-28 at the historic Read House. The films are a treat for fans of horror, and the festival touts itself as a summer camp for cinephiles. Actor and producer Elijah Wood won the Moonstruck MoonPie Eating Contest back in 2015.

**The Southern Fried Film Festival, Huntsville, Alabama:** This festival combines independent film, music and technology.

**The Lindsey Film Fest, Florence, Alabama:** The University of North Alabama hosts the Lindsey Film Fest, Feb. 27 to March 1. Created in 1988 by George "Goober" Lindsey of "Andy Griffith Show" fame, the festival is free.

**The Beaufort International Film Festival, Beaufort, South Carolina:** The festival returns Feb. 18-23 for its 19th run. Last year fans saw actor Gary Sinise receive the Pat Conroy Lifetime Achievement Award as the festival celebrated the 30th anniversary of "Forrest Gump." Beaufort served as a backdrop for the film.

**Cosmic Holler Film Fest, Ashland, Kentucky:** An out-of-this-world experience is guaranteed. This one-day fall film festival at the Paramount Arts Center is a celebration of all things science fiction. Last year's festival kicked off with a visit from Capt. Kirk himself, William Shatner.

may never make it to their neighborhood theaters. But beyond that, fans meet people with similar interests, making the festivals social events involving much more than just cramming in as many screenings as possible.

Finding a great festival to attend is easy—they are plentiful. One great resource for starting your search is [filmfreeway.com](http://filmfreeway.com).

### HIT THE MARK

A festival's website is the best resource to find everything from ticket availability to screenings info, schedules, parking and even lodging. Online ticket sales for the public often start well in advance, and popular festivals can sell out quickly.

A great option for the adventurous film buff is to sign up as a festival volunteer. Many festivals are staffed by volunteers, and even the largest festivals rely heavily on volunteer workers. Duties range from greeting patrons and taking tickets to helping at evening parties. Volunteers often reap the rewards such as free admission and sometimes even access to industry professionals.

Another option is to become a member of the organization putting on a festival, which can bring year-round benefits. Some festivals also offer members the option of in-home streaming of films throughout the year, while others have affiliations that provide discounts at movie theaters throughout the country.

Once at the festivals, attendees can easily navigate their many options through schedules continually updated on the event's website or even through an app. Take, for example, the Sidewalk Film Festival, which will take over the Historic Theatre District in downtown Birmingham, Alabama, Aug. 18-24. Spread across about a dozen venues, it offers more than 200 film screenings, plus educational and Q&A sessions. To help attendees stay on track, the festival's website, [sidewalkfest.com](http://sidewalkfest.com), has maps and an interactive schedule. 📱



Outdoor adventure gets top billing at the Lookout Wild Film Festival.

Photos courtesy of LWFF





# Rewriting the Odds

## ClemsonLIFE serves students with intellectual disabilities

Story by HIANNA SABO

**A**t 9 a.m. on a typical Monday, while most college students are rushing to their first lectures, ClemsonLIFE students are settling into their specialized classes, such as applied math. In the afternoon, they're honing their social skills and working at internships. By 3 p.m., they're at the Fike Recreation Center for fitness workouts, followed by tutoring sessions and dinner.

This isn't a typical college schedule, but then again, ClemsonLIFE isn't a typical college program. Now in its 16th year, ClemsonLIFE—which stands for Learning is for Everyone—provides career skills and independence for higher education students with intellectual disabilities.

"The employment and independent living outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities have always been abysmal," says Joe Ryan, Ph.D., the Sue Stanzione Distinguished Professor of Special Education and founder of the program. "Our goal was to give the skills necessary to help employ and become active members of society."

The results speak for themselves, with a staggering 97% employment rate for ClemsonLIFE graduates, 67% of whom live independently—more than four times the national average.

### PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE

ClemsonLIFE offers three distinct tracks—a two-year Basic Program, a two-year Advanced Program and a two-year Hospitality Certificate Program. Each track builds upon the last, equipping students with applied skills and education to help them succeed after college.

ClemsonLIFE Director Erica Walters emphasizes the program's holistic approach. "We truly are part of Clemson University," she says. "Our students take traditional courses. They are Clemson University students, so they get the access that anybody else would."

This integration is critical to the program's success. With 52 students enrolled and nearly 700 student volunteers—the largest student organization on campus—ClemsonLIFE fosters a supportive environment. "I don't know any other program that's close to how welcoming

the Clemson student body has been to the program," Ryan says.

The local business community also embraces ClemsonLIFE with open arms. "I remember the year when we used to have to go and knock on doors trying to get employment partners, and now they're coming to us," Walters says. "It was an incredible moment."

### BUILDING FUTURES

For Ryan, the mission is deeply personal. "I have an older brother who has passed away now, but he had an intellectual disability," he says. "I saw firsthand the deficits of what the K-12 system left graduates with when they left high school. They still weren't prepared to succeed in society."

Walters' dedication to the program started in college. "I started working at a camp here in Clemson. That was my first real exposure to individuals with disabilities, and it changed my education path," she says. "It's been a passion of mine ever since. I love that our students are showing people that, yes, they can live independently, be employed and do the job."





Photo courtesy of Kim Kempf

The program has established partnerships with state legislators to secure funding, while a network of donors helps bridge the financial gap for many families.

Every contribution—whether financial or volunteer hours—gives more students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to experience independence on their terms, backed by a solid education and support system.

For families, it's peace of mind for the future. "The simple fact is, nobody will take care of your son or daughter as good as you will as a parent," Ryan says. "So, if your kid was going to college, and you graduate with a 97% employment rate, I'd be pretty darn happy."



Photo courtesy of Kelli Cooley

**TOP:** Blakely Kress enjoys working out during a fitness class.

**FAR LEFT:** ClemsonLIFE students enjoy team-building exercises, including, from left, James Bowers, Alyssa Biggs, Jamison Hayduk, Chloe Galetti and Emily Weiss.

**LEFT:** Emily Parkey Ferguson cuts cucumbers for a cooking class.

**BELOW:** Lindsey Fletcher folds laundry during a class about independent living.

### WORK LEFT TO DO

As ClemsonLIFE grows, so does its vision. The program is set to launch Alumni Coaching for Employment Success, or ACES, in nearby Greenville, offering continued support to graduates as they navigate independent living and employment.

"Our kids come from over 13 states," Ryan says. "Once they establish here, they have their friendships, they have employment, everything else, they want to stay here." ACES will provide that crucial bridge, helping graduates transition from a campus environment to a larger urban setting.

ClemsonLIFE is proving that with the proper support and opportunities, individuals with intellectual disabilities can not only participate in society but thrive as independent, contributing members.

As Walters puts it simply, "It's meaningful." 🗨️



Photo courtesy of Kim Kempf

They may do it differently, but they can get it done."

The team's work extends far beyond Clemson. "Erica and the staff have helped mentor almost 100 other colleges to start programs," Ryan says. "Everything from Auburn to Louisiana State to West Virginia University, NC State." These collaborations contribute to the growth of postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disabilities, from about 112 when ClemsonLIFE started to 340 across the United States today.

### COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

The path to success isn't without challenges, but Walters emphasizes they are working to change the narrative. "A lot of our families, when their sons or daughters were born, they weren't told that college was an option," she says. The program actively addresses this lack of awareness to ensure financial unpreparedness no longer creates barriers to access.



Photo courtesy of Kelli Cooley

**ClemsonLIFE students, from left, Nataleigh Deal, Liam Egan, Taylor Freeman, Hunter Hopkins and Lauren Peterson benefit from the program's specialized classes.**

# A SMOLDERING SITUATION

## Volunteer fire departments face dwindling numbers, aging workforce



Illustration by Adobe Stock

Story by MELANIE JONES and JEN CALHOUN

**W**hen a crisis strikes in a rural community, the first people on the scene are usually friends and neighbors who sacrifice their time and safety because they want to help, not to draw a paycheck. They put out the fires. They drive the rescue vehicles. They save lives.

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, nearly 19,000 of the nation's 29,452 fire departments are all-volunteer, and the number of volunteers has been shrinking. In 2020, the number of volunteer firefighters reached a record low. On top of that, more than half of those volunteers in smaller departments are aged 40 or older, and 34% are 50 and older.

That doesn't mean older firefighters can't get the job done, says Steve Hirsch, NVFC chairman. At 62, Steve is the training officer of the fire department in Sheridan County, Kansas. He recalls a man once asking him the age of the oldest firefighter in his department. He told the man 93. The man laughed and said, "No, I mean the age of your oldest firefighter that's still responding to calls." The man was shocked when Steve again replied, "93."

"But you know, that was out of a station that might get one or two calls a year," he said. "He'd grown up in that area his entire life. He knew where every hole and every gate was in his neighborhood. He wasn't out there pulling hose or doing entry, but he was able to drive a pickup. It worked out nice."

### A HEALTHY MIX

Steve doesn't believe older firefighters are a bad thing. He sees the importance of having all ages.

"We can't let the fire department get all old," he says. "Nothing wrong with a good mix. That's pretty important. But we still have to have young people to get out there and do the work. Is there a safety factor in having everybody that's older? Probably, because

the older we get, the more likely we are to have heart attacks and other health issues."

Depending on the state, county or even the fire district, firefighters may not have to meet physical requirements. "A lot of places, they're hard up enough for people that if you've got a pulse, you're probably qualified," Steve says.

Not all volunteer fire departments are having trouble recruiting younger volunteers, however. The Vincent Volunteer Fire Department in Owsley County, Kentucky, maintains a squad of 17 or 18 members between the ages of 25 and 55. That's not too bad for a small, unincorporated community in a county of about 4,000 people.

"It's hard to find younger people, because a lot of times, the tradition just doesn't carry," says Capt. Billy Long, who heads the department. "There's just not a lot of involvement with it. But here lately, we've had a lot more involvement with the community. It's been good this past five, six, seven months."

### BENEFITS AND SACRIFICES

Billy, who is 41, understands the benefits and the difficulties of becoming a volunteer firefighter. On the one hand, the job is rewarding, especially in a small town like Vincent. "You get to know everybody," he says. "Also, the involvement—it can open up other doors. I've been a volunteer firefighter since 2002, and I've also been an EMT for 12-13 years now."

But it's also a tough, time-consuming job. "I guess a lot of it is the time, the effort, the training," Billy says. "You've got to attend training every year. It's a lot of effort to do something without pay."

Steve says his best recruitment tool is his existing firefighters. He also says his department is probably the only one in a



“A lot of places, they’re hard up enough for people that if you’ve got a pulse, you’re probably qualified.”

—Steve Hirsch, chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council

Photo courtesy of Steve Hirsch



National Volunteer Fire Council Chairman Steve Hirsch has been training firefighters for 25 years.

Photo by Adobe Stock/Teerapong23



multicounty region that has an aerial ladder. Park that on the street, and people start coming in. Being active on social media is a good way to recruit younger people, he says. But having a good attitude is a big part of it.

He hears a lot of negative comments about the younger generation, how they’re always on their phones. “What I find is, most of the time, they’re checking to make sure that I know what I’m talking about, and that’s OK,” Steve says.

It’s important to keep recruiting, he says, because we can’t let the fire departments die.

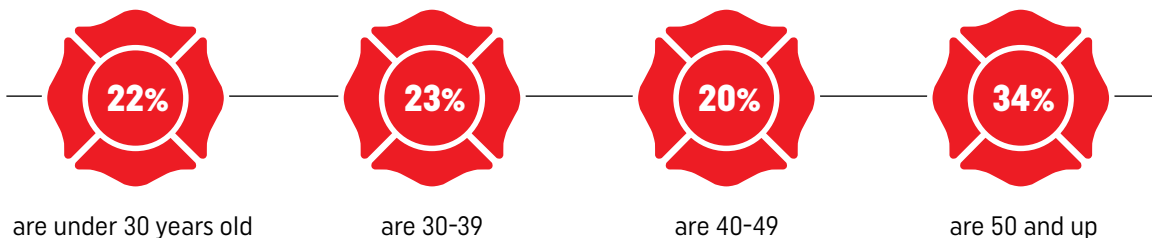
“What is a community going to do when they don’t have a fire department?” he says. “That’s probably the newest, biggest building in that town of 80-some people. People use that fire station for all sorts of events in the community. A lot of our small towns have lost their school, they’ve lost their grocery store. A lot of them have lost their banks. Some of them don’t have cafes anymore. So that fire department becomes the glue that binds that community together. And, you know, you lose one more glob of glue, and pretty soon, things just fall apart.” 📱



The number of volunteer firefighters reached a record low of **676,900** in 2020

**200%** Increase in call volume in the last 35 years

The volunteer fire service is an aging population. In communities under 2,500:



Source: National Volunteer Fire Council

# Supporting Oconee County Kids

## Grace's Closet helps local students be and look their best

Story by LAZ DENES

It's amazing the big ideas that can sprout from a little mother-daughter bonding in a school lunchroom. Grace's Closet—an Oconee County nonprofit that feeds, clothes and provides personal hygiene products and school supplies free of charge to Oconee County students in need—is a shining example.

In 2015, Julie-ann Shannon visited Keowee Elementary to have lunch with her daughter, Lilly, who was in kindergarten at the time. Lilly invited a friend to join them, and Julie-ann noticed the little girl was still hungry after finishing her small meal. She later learned this was the norm for her daughter's friend. Julie-ann became aware of more and more students who were eligible for the school breakfast and lunch programs but were not getting enough to eat on weeknights and weekends. So, she decided to act.

Grace's Closet was born in 2016 when Julie-ann and co-founder Joyce Powell began supplementing weekend food bags provided to students at Walhalla High School. By its second year, a Grace's Closet was set up at three Oconee County

schools, and it quickly grew to include a safe, welcoming, store-like atmosphere at each of the 18 schools where students could “shop” at no cost for shoes, apparel and other necessities. With an operating budget of \$350,000 per year, the organization offers its services to any student who needs them, starting in pre-K and running all the way through high school.

### COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Grace's Closet is funded through donations from private individuals and the business community, including the Upcountry Fiber Foundation. Julie-ann serves as executive director, its nine-member board is chaired by retired Duke Energy executive David Baxter, and the school district provides free warehouse space at its Seneca headquarters. A team of 60 volunteers works to keep Grace's Closet locations stocked and the organization funded. Meanwhile, LifePoint Church in Seneca heads up food distribution, funded completely by the church and the Keowee Falls branch of the Cliffs Residents Outreach.

Julie-ann, who moved to the area from Maryland with her family shortly before the idea for Grace's Closet began taking shape, credits the dedication of its legion of volunteers, the board and the school district for making the nonprofit a resounding success.

“Who wouldn't have a heart full of joy just being able to help our students? We're just helping bridge the gap so that they can be the best they can be, building



Photo by Matt Ledger

Board member David Baxter and founder Julie-ann Shannon sort clothes in the supply room of Grace's Closet.

their self-confidence,” she says. “It's amazing to see the smiles on so many of their faces when they receive new items they are needing.” 📦

### HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Financial gifts can be made to Grace's Closet via PayPal or by mailing them to Grace's Closet, P.O. Box 126, Walhalla, SC 29691.

Grace's Closet is supported by a variety of corporate sponsorships, grants, merchandise donations, financial contributions and more.

Volunteering opportunities for individuals and groups are also available.

To learn more, call 843-557-9399, send an email to [GracesClosetOfOconeeCounty@gmail.com](mailto:GracesClosetOfOconeeCounty@gmail.com) or visit the nonprofit's website, [gracescloset.org](http://gracescloset.org). The organization is also on Facebook, [@gracesclosetofoconeecounty](https://www.facebook.com/gracesclosetofoconeecounty).



# Small Spaces in New Places

## Building a tiny cottage in Westminster

Story by DIANNA TROYER

**I**ntrigued by their friends' tiny house, Bonnie and Eric Yoder decided to build their own and rent it out on Airbnb.

Would anyone book it, they wondered, considering it would be on their wooded secluded property in Westminster?

"We had to try," Bonnie says. "We knew it was a peaceful and quiet spot, perfect for all sorts of getaways. I always thought I'd enjoy taking care of an Airbnb because I love decorating houses and hosting others. Eric is a homebuilder, and I clean houses for a living, so we combined our occupations."

Eric designed and built a two-story, 520-square-foot country cottage to accommodate four adults and one child with two queen beds and a twin bed in the loft. There's also a washer, dryer and full kitchen.

Providing high-speed internet was a priority, so the Yoders relied on Upcountry Fiber's services. "Upcountry Fiber has been a pleasure to work with," Bonnie says. "Our guests have commented on how good the Wi-Fi works and how fast it is. Several guests have used Brooke's Cottage as their workstation and loved it. We appreciate Upcountry Fiber and their outstanding service."

Photo by Matt Ledger

An app makes answering guests' questions easy, and a broadband-enabled virtual hosting platform makes it possible for Bonnie and Eric to manage bookings from anywhere.

### BROOKE'S COTTAGE

A towering tulip tree helps shelter the tiny house, named Brooke's Cottage, after the couple's youngest daughter, Madison, whose middle name is Brooke. "We had an idea to build three Airbnbs and name them after our three children's middle names," Bonnie says.

To decorate it, she chose a color theme of steel blue accented with white for the exterior and interior. "It's a popular color and fun choice for a tiny house," Bonnie says.

She planted white hydrangeas in a flowerbed. To make the backyard relaxing, she placed wicker chairs on the covered patio, put up a hammock and draped string lights along a wooden fence. "We thought it turned out perfect




Bonnie Yoder manages the Airbnb rental that her husband built.

and couldn't wait for our first reservations," she says.

Listed on Airbnb as Tiny House Cottage, Westminster, S.C., the cottage is in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Clemson University, waterfalls, hiking trails, lakes, escape rooms, ax throwing, mini golf and a botanical garden.

"Summer and fall are the busiest times," Bonnie says. "It's fun to meet people who come to our area for all kinds of reasons." Some come for a work retreat, a Clemson football game, a wedding or weekend getaway, according to reviews.

Bonnie has now been named an Airbnb Superhost with nearly 500 guests. Renting Brooke's Cottage has been so enjoyable for the Yoders that they plan to build another one with a similar floor plan. "I don't think we would change anything," Bonnie says. "We love it." 

# All the Comforts of Home

Classic trio's widespread appeal endures

The definition of comfort food depends on your region. In the Midwest, it might be a bubbly hot dish just pulled from the oven. In the Southwest, comfort may come in the form of a steaming bowl of chili, while Southerners might look toward biscuits and gravy with a side of grits.

Three simple dishes, however, bring together the entire culinary country—tomato soup, a gooey grilled cheese sandwich and a warm slice of apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.



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

## CREAMY TOMATO SOUP

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 3 cups yellow onions, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 (28-ounce) cans tomatoes
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil or  
1 1/2 tablespoons dried basil, plus  
more to serve
- 1 tablespoon sugar, or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black  
pepper, or to taste
- Dash of Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Heat a nonreactive pot or enameled Dutch oven over medium heat. Add butter, then add chopped onions. Sauté

10-12 minutes, stirring occasionally, until softened and golden. Add minced garlic, and sauté 1 minute until fragrant.

Add crushed tomatoes with their juice, chicken stock, chopped basil, sugar, pepper and a dash of Worcestershire. Stir and bring to a boil then reduce heat, partially cover with lid and simmer 10 minutes.

Use an immersion blender to blend the soup in the pot or transfer to a blender in batches and blend until smooth—being careful not to overfill the blender with hot liquid—then return soup to the pot over medium heat.

Add heavy cream and grated parmesan cheese and return to a simmer. Season to taste with salt and pepper, if needed, and turn off the heat.

Ladle into warm bowls, and top with more parmesan and a sprinkle of basil.





## GROWN-UP GRILLED CHEESE

### Makes 4 sandwiches

- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 yellow onions, diced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme or 1/4 teaspoon dried
- 2 teaspoons fresh rosemary or 3/4 teaspoon dried, divided
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar
- 8 slices artisan sourdough bread
- Mayonnaise
- 12 ounces Gruyere cheese, grated at room temperature
- 6 ounces sharp white cheddar cheese, grated at room temperature
- 4 thin slices Muenster cheese, at room temperature

Add 1 1/2 tablespoons butter and olive oil to a skillet and heat over medium-low heat. Add diced onions, salt, pepper, fresh thyme and 1 teaspoon of fresh rosemary to the hot skillet and saute about 10 minutes, stirring often, until onions are soft and

starting to brown. Stir brown sugar into the onions and cook another minute. Transfer onions to a plate.

For each sandwich: Spread one side of two pieces of bread with a little bit of mayonnaise.

To the same skillet, add remaining butter and rosemary and heat over medium heat. Add both pieces of mayonnaise-coated bread, mayonnaise side down, and cook until bread is golden brown and crunchy, 2-3 minutes.

As soon as you add the bread to the skillet, add a bit of cheese to the top of each piece. Once it starts to melt a little, sprinkle a couple tablespoons of the caramelized onions over the top of one of the pieces of bread.

When the bread is golden brown, sandwich the pieces of bread together and cook on low heat until the cheese is fully melted. Transfer to a plate and repeat with remaining slices of bread and ingredients.

## GRANDMA'S SIMPLE APPLE PIE

- 1 double-crust pie pastry
- 1 large egg, beaten
- Filling:**
- 6-7 cups apples, about 2 pounds
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg



Preheat the oven to 425 F. Peel the apples and cut them into quarters. Remove the core and slice the apples 1/4-inch thick.


In a large bowl, combine the apple slices with lemon juice, sugar, flour, cinnamon and nutmeg. Toss apple mixture well and set aside.

Roll out half of the pastry dough into a 12-inch circle. Line a 9-inch pie plate with the dough and fill it with the apple mixture.

Roll out the remaining dough and cover the apple filling. Pinch the edges to seal, trimming any excess. Style the edges as desired by crimping or pressing with a fork.

Cut four to five slits on top of the crust to allow the steam to release. Whisk the egg with 2 teaspoons of water or milk and brush over the crust.

Bake at 425 F for 15 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 375 F and continue baking for another 35-40 minutes or until the crust is golden and the apples are tender.

Remove from the oven and let rest for at least 30 minutes before serving. Serve with vanilla ice cream, if desired. 



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