

MARCH/APRIL 2021



VTX1 Companies

COMPASS

VOL. 2, NO. 2



HITTING THE ROAD

Choke Canyon RV welcomes visitors

A MAN OF MANY HATS

Envy Designs owner serves his community

CONNECTING CREATIVES

Artists and artisans unite through broadband



— By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO —

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

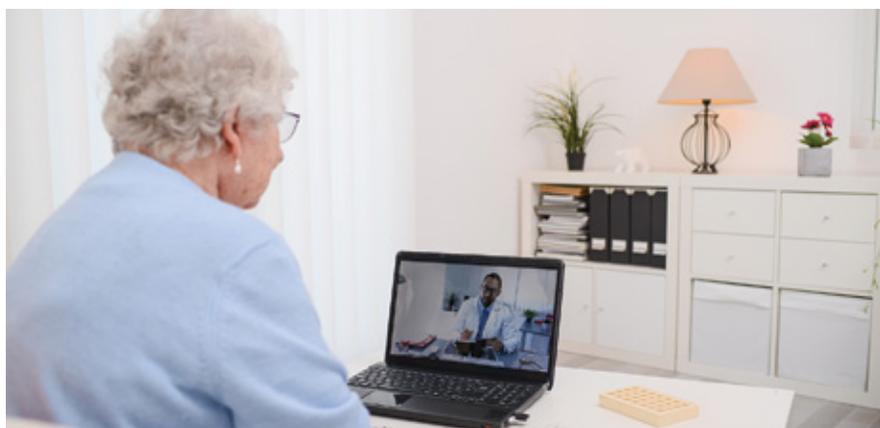
Here's to hope in 2021

The pandemic has made it clear that every American needs broadband to thrive. We need it for work, for school, for health. And we need it for accessing government services, for growing businesses and for building communities. If there is a silver lining to 2020, which was a hard year for so many, it's that more people are now acutely aware of the essential nature of broadband services.

The new year brought new challenges, many of them playing out at our Capitol, a building I've had the honor of visiting many times to talk to members of Congress about the need to support broadband for all of America. But I choose to have hope that better angels of our nature will guide us to rebuild, and I believe NTCA and our members have an opportunity to help that rebuild with the work that we do supporting broadband connectivity and other critical services for rural communities.

The hard-working members of NTCA have made so much progress in the past decade toward solving the rural broadband challenge. There is much work yet to do, but I have hope in the progress they are making. Through federal and state funding programs, coupled with local investments by providers themselves, we are on our way as a country to connecting everyone.

There is a day in our future when we can say that everyone who needs or wants a broadband connection has access. That day is coming, sooner than later. I have hope. 📶



What to expect from your first telemed visit

A virtual doctor's visit is a great way to receive expert care from the comfort and safety of your home. If you've never had a video call with a doctor, you may be surprised at how easy and effective telemedicine appointments can be. Here's what to expect from your first visit.

You'll be asked to share your medical history with the doctor

Before you're connected with a doctor, you'll be asked to provide your medical history and, if applicable, insurance information. This allows the doctor to better understand your background and needs before diagnosing or treating you. If you're using telemed to seek treatment for a sick spouse or child, be sure you enter their information into the account rather than your own. Doctors won't provide care or advice for anyone besides the patient whose information they've reviewed.

You can receive a diagnosis and treatment for a wide range of conditions

You may be surprised to know that doctors can address a variety of health concerns during a telemed visit. You can use telemed services for common ailments, such as colds, rashes or stomachaches, as well as mental health

issues, chronic conditions and more. At the end of your call, the doctor can even send a prescription to your preferred pharmacy so you can get the medication you need quickly and easily.

You'll save time and money

Because health care providers pass on the savings they enjoy by treating you virtually, you'll likely pay less than you would for an in-office visit, even if you don't have insurance. If you do have an accepted insurance plan, your telemed visit could even be covered in full. You'll also save the time it requires to drive to and from a doctor's office and wait in a crowded waiting room. With a telemed app, you can either be seen by a doctor right away or schedule a convenient time for your virtual visit. Telemed visits are two-way video calls. This means you'll be able to see the doctor and the doctor will be able to see you, too.

Making the connection

Are you ready to schedule your first telemed visit? Check with your health insurance provider for their preferred telemed app or conduct a quick Google search to find an app that meets your needs. You'll be connected with a health care professional for easy, cost-efficient treatment in no time. 📶

The price of entertainment

Consumers can tap into a rushing stream of content delivered across devices ranging from TVs to smartphones. Sports, news, movies, comedies, dramas, music — the list of options is seemingly endless.

But there is a cost. And for many consumers that price increases each spring. If you have it handy, take a moment to review a bill for your TV programming from three years ago. Compare it to today, and in most cases the difference is obvious — television programming is pricier.

The increases are not limited to traditional cable TV providers either. Streaming services have seen prices spike, too. When Google launched YouTube TV, the monthly price was about \$35. Now, it's \$65.

In cases such as Google, as well as other providers, adding new, desirable content channels helps drive the increases. For traditional networks, investment in higher-quality programming has become essential to compete with streaming services like Netflix, Amazon and HBO Max. Those costs are then passed on to cable providers and their customers.

But more content is not always the root

cause of the higher prices. In fact, for many providers, such as the rural communications companies serving much of America, the increasing cost of content is an annual struggle to hold prices down. It's not a push to increase profits, and their efforts to control prices illustrate the give and take behind what you see on your bill.

For these companies, only a small portion of a monthly television subscription fee goes to personnel costs, equipment upgrades and tasks such as equipment maintenance. So, where does all the money go?

Much of the cost is wrapped up in agreements allowing TV providers to bring content to you. Networks like ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox regularly renegotiate these agreements. In many cases, these are annual negotiations.

A 2019 analysis of cable TV rates by Consumer Reports found that while advertised rates generally increased by 3% to 4% annually, fees for the major networks and channels airing live sports climbed between 8% and 10% each of the previous four years.

How are those rates determined? Essentially, the TV provider must pay

networks a fixed fee for each subscriber of the service. But each year there are fewer traditional TV subscribers to carry that load. In 2020 alone, about 6.3 million people dropped their cable or satellite TV service, according to investment research firm Moffett Nathanson.

Without an expanding subscriber base to offset these increasing costs, TV providers often pass the expense on to consumers in the form of fees added to advertised prices, according to the FCC's 18th Annual Video Competition Report.

When it comes to these hidden costs, there is one bright spot for consumers. The Television Viewer Protection Act passed at the end of 2019 requires cable and satellite companies to disclose the total monthly price of subscribers' TV bills, including all individual fees and charges, when they sign up.

That transparency won't make your bill any lower. But it will give you an accurate picture of the full cost of your monthly TV bill. 🗨️



Equipping and enabling vibrant rural communities

The 2020 census data will be coming out this year — and despite what the headlines may say, rural America is alive and well.

As you may recall, I urged everyone to participate in the 2020 census. The population counts go a long way in determining our representation in Congress and the statehouse, as well as funding for state and federal programs.



DAVE OSBORN
Chief Executive Officer

According to the 2020 census website, 2020census.gov, the census will shape the future of our community for the next decade. There's no doubt that an accurate population count is critically important.

While census numbers will contribute to the allotment of funding and political clout, they will also help to tell the story of rural America. The 2020 census should provide definitive evidence of the trends shaping communities like ours. I'll be the first to say that whatever trend lines on a graph from the U.S. Census Bureau suggest, parts of rural America are more vibrant and offer more opportunities today than ever.

Some communities have no doubt fallen on hard times. But many others, including ours, are very much alive. According to experts at places like the USDA and the National Council of State Legislators, about one-third of rural counties are growing, one-third are stable and one-third are shrinking. Researchers point to 2016 and 2017 as years where many rural areas began showing growth after many years when the number of residents diminished.

Will news and research taken from information contained in the census be positive for everyone in rural America? Most likely, it will highlight some of the challenges rural communities like ours face. Events such as the pandemic have left some city dwellers intrigued by the many benefits of living in rural areas. We'll know for sure once the data is released, but the 10-year scope of the census may well show a continuation of the gradual, decades-long shift to fast-growing cities and suburbs to small towns and rural areas. It's possible statewide and national news outlets will use a broad brush to highlight this demographic trend as they cover the census statistics over the next few months.

Census numbers — a comparison across decades that may not fully acknowledge recent positive changes — do not tell the whole story. In many ways, the people of rural America have more opportunities now than ever before in business, education, health care, entertainment and overall quality of life. I'm proud to say broadband makes many of those opportunities possible.

In fact, our confidence in that vitality and belief in the future is why we've invested millions of dollars into improving the telecommunications infrastructure in our communities. You'll never find a stronger group of advocates for our communities than our team here at VTX1.

We're proud of the rural areas and small towns we connect to the world, along with many others — and we work hard every day to make our communities a vibrant place to live.

Sincerely,

Dave Osborn
CEO, VTX1 Companies



VTX1 Companies

Contact Us: 800-446-2031

Hours of Operation:

- Business Offices:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Customer Service:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-7 p.m.
- VTCI & Fiber Tech Support:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.- 9 p.m., Sat.-Sun. • 10 a.m.-7 p.m.
- Wireless Tech Support:
Mon.-Sun. • 24/7

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WORDSOUTH
— A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY —

On the Cover:



Jennifer Rowlett, owner of Choque Canyon RV, welcomes travelers to her Three Rivers RV park near a popular fishing spot.
See story Page 8.

Remembering Fred Hillje

Fred Hillje, a longtime member of the Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. board of directors, passed away unexpectedly on Dec. 29, 2020, at the age of 81. Known to friends and family as "Freddy," Hillje represented District 7 (Artesia Wells and Annarose) since 1971.

"An exceptional man has left us. Freddy Hillje was an outstanding leader and valued colleague who achieved many impressive accomplishments throughout his life," says Board President Idalia "Dolly" Villareal. "His desire to be of service to others touched many lives and leaves a lasting legacy in his community and in our industry. I am thankful for his natural leadership, friendship and guidance. He will be greatly missed."

Born in La Salle County in 1939, Hillje wore many hats throughout his life, spending a decade working for Southland Drilling Company before he became a stock farmer, partnering with his brother. He was also ranch foreman for the La Cantarana Ranch. He served as a hunting guide for many years, often entertaining hunters with his tall tales, known as "The Gospel Truth According to Freddy."

Hillje is survived by Peggy, his wife of 57 years; three children; seven grandchildren; three sisters; a brother; and many nieces, nephews and friends. His contributions to Valley Telephone over his nearly 50 years of service were invaluable, and his loss will be felt for years to come.

"Freddy Hillje never missed an opportunity to help a member get service or get help when they had a problem," CEO Dave Osborn says. "Freddy was a great resource for me. We spent many hours together on various company matters, and I always enjoyed his company, insights and wit. He will be greatly missed and leaves behind many friends and colleagues."



Welcome, Adalberto Garza

Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. board of directors recently welcomed its newest member, Dr. Adalberto Garza, who will represent District 5 (San Isidro).

Garza, a retired veterinarian, has a long history of service. He's a former chairman and past president of the Texas Veterinary Medical Association and a former secretary and board president of the Edinburg School Board. He is currently the interim general manager of the Starr County Groundwater Conservation District in addition to being a member of the Starr County CARES Act Committee.

Garza and his wife, Elva Fernandez, have one son, Diego. Diego Garza and his wife, Melinda Garcia, have two daughters, Isabella and Sofia.



Welcome to the board, Dr. Garza!

Save the date

VTX1 Companies has scheduled the 2021 Virtual Annual Meeting for March 24 at 6 p.m.

Additional details on our website and a postcard mailing with information regarding registration and viewing will be sent to our VTCI members soon.

Good Friday

All VTX1 offices will be closed on April 2 for Good Friday.

A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

The park that's been in hot water for 100 years

Story by ANNE P. BRALY

Hot Springs Reservation became Hot Springs National Park in 1921, but much happened before and after to make it one of the most interesting national parks in the country. Most national parks cover thousands of acres and are located amongst forests filled with wildlife, old-growth trees and other noncommercial features. Not so for Hot Springs, now celebrating its 100th birthday as a national park. The park is small by national park standards. For example, Big Bend in South Texas is 801,163 acres, compared to Hot Springs, which is 5,550 acres. But what sets Hot Springs apart from other parks is the fact that the town of Hot Springs, Arkansas, grew up around it as Americans came in droves to take advantage of the mineral-rich waters that flow down the hills from the springs on mountains surrounding the city.

Congress created Hot Springs Reservation in 1832 to preserve the thermal water for the use and benefit of the people of the United States. This was years before the Department of the Interior came to be and long before the National Park Service was even a twinkle in the nation's eye, says Tom Hill, curator of the Hot Springs National Park Museum. "That was 40 years before the creation of the world's first national park at Yellowstone," Hill says. "In fact, that same year, 1832, was the first time that the words 'a nation's park' entered the country's lexicon in an effort to preserve the flora and fauna of the rapidly expanding nation. Thus, Hot Springs Reservation was created while the country was just starting to grapple with the emerging realization of dwindling or disappearing resources. We were a nation's park before there was such a thing."

The park's museum, located in the visitor center, houses more than 760,000 objects, including plant and insect specimens, archeological artifacts, architectural

elements from historic structures, personal memorabilia, photographs, technical drawings and more. And visitors can find all of these things within the borders of the park.

One of the most interesting items is a 15th century Spanish halberd discovered in the White River in the 1920s. John Fordyce, owner of the Fordyce Bathhouse on Bathhouse Row — newly restored and now housing the park's visitor center — purchased the weapon back in the 1930s. "This item has been studied by archeologists and historians, and the consensus is that it must date to the 1541-1543 time period when De Soto was moving around in what would later become Arkansas," Hill notes.

Centuries later, Americans came to soak in the warm water pools looking for a cure-all for whatever ailed them. Some stayed and established bathhouses and supporting businesses, and the city grew up around them. The amount of visitors to the springs began to diminish in the 1950s

as modern medicines developed. By 1985, only the Buckstaff Bathhouse remained open — and it still is. It's been in continuous operation since 1912.

But that turn of events wasn't the end of Bathhouse Row. The Park Service has restored and repurposed most of the buildings, from Superior Bathhouse — now a brewery making the world's only thermal water beer — to the old Hale Bathhouse, which is now a luxury hotel. Quapaw is now a modern spa, and the Ozark has become a cultural center and art gallery. The park's shining star is the Fordyce Bathhouse, an ornate Renaissance Revival structure from 1915 that's now home to the national park's visitor center and museum.

According to National Park Service visitation stats, Hot Springs National Park averages about 1.5 million visitors a year who come to relax in one of the bathhouse spas or hike to the Mountain Tower and ride the glass elevator to the top for views of the city and surrounding mountains. [↗](#)



A couple takes in the scenery near one of 47 hot springs at Hot Springs National Park.

Photo courtesy of Casey Crocker.



A LOOK BACK

1832

President Andrew Jackson signed into law on April 20 the Congressional Act setting aside the hot springs and their environs as a U.S. government reservation.

1877

The first Hot Springs Reservation superintendent, Benjamin Franklin Kelly, arrived in Hot Springs.

1887

The first Army and Navy General Hospital opened on Jan. 17.

1921

Hot Springs Reservation became Hot Springs National Park on March 4.

1927

On March 12, park policeman James A. Cary died on West Mountain after sustaining a gunshot wound. He was the first National Park Service ranger to be murdered while on duty.

1974

On Nov. 13, Bathhouse Row joined the National Register of Historic Places.

1989

A dedication ceremony for the Fordyce Bathhouse Visitor Center took place May 13 at the newly restored bathhouse.

2021

Hot Springs National Park celebrates its 100th birthday.

1803

The hot springs formally became the property of the United States when the Treaty of Paris of April 30 conveyed ownership of lands in the Louisiana Territory to the U.S., which, at that time, was just 28 years old.

1862

In May, during the Civil War, Hot Springs briefly became the Arkansas state capital when Gov. Henry Rector moved state records and staff there, fearing federal troops were on their way to Little Rock.

1884

The project to build a creek arch over Hot Springs Creek saw completion under the supervision of Hot Springs Reservation Superintendent Samuel Hamblen.

1915

A bathhouse regimen cost around 55 cents, the average daily pay of most American workers.

1924

The Arlington Hotel opened, featuring thermal water piped in from the hot springs. The hotel, still the largest in the state, was a favorite of gangster Al Capone.

1947

More than 1 million baths were given in bathhouses around town during the year.

1982

The Grand Promenade became a National Recreational Trail.

2000

During the second week of October, President Bill Clinton signed the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, which, in part, set aside \$3 million for the rehabilitation of Bathhouse Row.

Take HOME on the ROAD

Choke Canyon RV welcomes travelers

Story by ANDREA AGARDY | Photography by DAVID PIKE



Choke Canyon RV owner Jennifer Rowlett encourages guests to offer suggestions on how to improve their stays.

Jennifer Rowlett’s epiphany came as she scanned the roadside while driving along Highway 37. After 18 years as a stay-at-home mom, she was ready to go into business for herself.

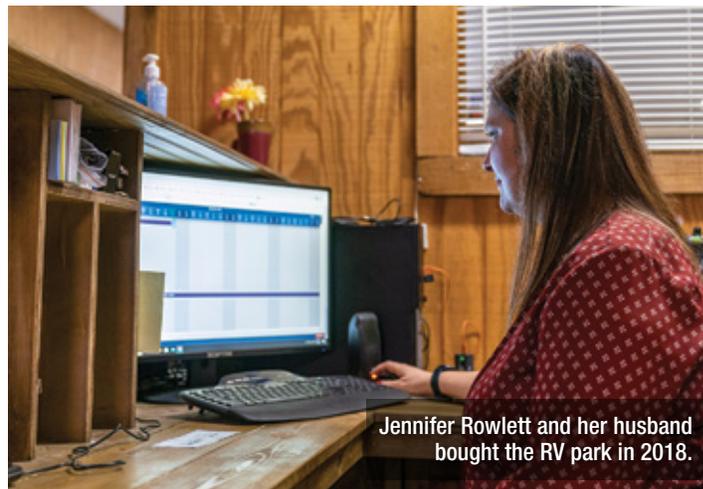
“I saw an RV park, and I thought, ‘Oh my gosh! That would be the easiest thing to run,’” she says. “There’s very little overhead because you don’t have inventory or a whole bunch of employees. Just the odd problem here and there and a park manager. Seeing an RV park inspired me to pursue buying RV parks.”

In 2018, Rowlett and her husband, Calvin, purchased their first park, located in Three Rivers. They rechristened it Choke Canyon RV. At the time, they were working to obtain the necessary approvals to develop a Corpus Christi property they own into an RV park.

“We came across this RV park in Choke Canyon and thought it would be a missed opportunity not to learn how to run a park with an already functioning business,” she says. “This way we could see the problems, the good and the bad, firsthand. We jumped on that opportunity.”

STAYING CONNECTED

Just a mile from the entrance to the Choke Canyon Reservoir, the park can accommodate 76 RVs and is open all year. Guests



Jennifer Rowlett and her husband bought the RV park in 2018.

staying at the park are provided water, sewage and electricity hookups, as well as free Wi-Fi — which is still something of a novelty at RV parks. “Because of VTX1, I’m able to offer free high-speed internet via Wi-Fi,” Rowlett says.

Rowlett was thrilled when VTX1’s fiber optic network expansion reached Three Rivers. “Everybody wanted their fiber, and I was definitely on that list,” she says. “I got the fiber, and the internet has been amazing! It’s been pretty much flawless — no complaints at all. I think that lures people in.”

VTX1's services make it easier for Rowlett to run her business. She's installed a doorbell camera in the recreational building, allowing her to keep an eye on who's coming and going. "Without the fiber internet, I wouldn't be able to do that, and that has been a pretty fantastic feature," she says.

Rowlett is also pleased with her phone service. "My phone is my lifeline," she says. "My manager and I are very seldom in the office, but VTX1 has phone forwarding options. People can call the landline, and it transfers to the cellphone. We can answer it wherever we are. That works out great."

CREATURE COMFORTS

Choke Canyon RV guests have access to on-site laundry and restroom facilities with a shower. There is also a patio, TV-equipped recreational room, sofa and pool table.

Rowlett loves receiving feedback and has a suggestion box for guests to share their ideas to improve the Choke Canyon RV experience. "I want this to be the best place that they've been in the area. I want them to be comfortable, and I want to make them happy," she says. "They wanted an area to play darts, so I bought a dartboard. The little things that I could do and achieve quickly, I've done."

Like thousands of other businesses, the pandemic has hurt Rowlett's bottom line. But while it's delayed her plans for Choke Canyon RV's future, it hasn't derailed them. "When I make up what I've lost, I plan on definitely adding more," she says. For example, she wants to create a park area where people can play and spend time together outdoors.

FRIENDLY FACES

Guests who arrive from across the country include families who spend one night in Three Rivers as part of a longer trip. Meanwhile, oil field workers rent spaces and stay for months at a time. For the oil workers, staying in an RV park is not only less expensive than other housing options, but it's also a way to have the comforts of home waiting for them after a long day of work.

"I think the oil field workers like the convenience of not having to pack and unload suitcases," Rowlett says. "They have their own space, their own bed and their own pillows. Plus, most RVs have kitchens, so they can buy their own food. It's just a minihouse, so it's a little bit more homey."

Despite their diverse backgrounds and reasons for hitting the road, Rowlett says her guests share a common mindset — RV folks pride themselves on being welcoming. They often strike up friendships with their temporary neighbors, forming a momentary community. "They just have a different mentality," Rowlett says. "They're so friendly and outgoing. I admire their ability to not have fear, hook up their RV and just drive to distant areas. RVers are just a different breed of people. I admire them." 📱



Choke Canyon RV welcomes guests for one-night and extended stays.



HIT THE
road! 

CHOKÉ CANYON RV
2625 Highway 72 W., Three Rivers
361-436-0845 | chokecanyonrv.com

CREATIVE SPACES

Artists and craftspeople find community online

Story by DREW WOOLLEY



Jessica Sanders, left, and Addie Moore keep ETX Creatives running along with Lisa Horlander, who is not pictured.



The online community is home to 350 artists and creatives.



ETX Creatives welcomes artists and visitors at in-person events.

Addie Moore just wanted to know a schedule for local art shows. A mixed media artist and art teacher at Chapel Hill High School, she and her friends knew there was a need for better communication among creatives in Tyler, Texas, and beyond.

“I heard it enough times that eventually I realized, ‘OK, I guess I have to do it,’” she says of her commitment in 2018. “Our first meeting we just went out for a beer and decided to make a Facebook group.”

That group became ETX Creatives, an online community of artists and artisans throughout East Texas. Today, the curated Facebook group is home to 350 creatives who use the space to share their work, offer inspiration and encouragement, or share news about upcoming exhibitions.

“We’re a largely rural area, so you have your friends from high school, church or that you’ve met over time. But it tends to happen in pockets,” says Moore. “There aren’t a lot of public spaces, so the internet provided a space for us to connect, express what we’re doing artistically and to let people know you’re not alone in Edom or your small town. You have a community.”

BREAKING THE BLOCK

Having a community of people who understand the struggles of the creative process has been especially important over the last year when artists and creatives have been hit hard by the economic challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.

“It’s a great place for us to say, ‘I’m having some creative block,’ or ‘How are you staying positive during this

time?’” says Moore. “I think having this creative community that knows what we’re going through and can give suggestions if we’re stuck or having trouble with a particular process has been a great support.”

ETX Creatives also hosts a blog on its website, etxcreatives.com, where visitors can find updates on the latest events and shows across East Texas. The site also allows promotion of items ranging from handmade ceramics and jewelry to clothing and one-of-a-kind paintings. The group also produces the “ETX Creatives Podcast” to showcase local artists and to delve into the creative process.

Before the pandemic, ETX Creatives hosted in-person exhibitions and workshops where hundreds of visitors from throughout the state could try their hand at printmaking or creating their own T-shirts. While those meet-ups have been put on pause, the group has continued to raise funds for local artistic projects.

And the best may be yet to come. Along with her ETX Creatives partners Jessica Sanders and Lisa Horlander, Moore is working to organize their informal group into an official non-profit. Once established, they can raise money for their own space, where they aim to continue hosting public events, have a permanent gallery and provide studio space for short-term artist residencies.

“My ultimate goal is to influence an economy among the creative community so people want to buy from local artists,” says Moore. “It can create appreciation and community support beyond just a space for us to talk to each other.” 

THE FUTURE OF ART

When it was founded in 1961, the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen promoted local creators with a traveling "Guild Train" that exhibited their work across the state. The Guild Train no longer runs, but the organization still brings artists, craftsmen, collectors, galleries and other interested parties together.

In recent years, the guild's transformation has seen it harness the power of the internet to build social media communities and host online collections, where visitors can view and purchase work from member artists. Greg Lakes, who joined the guild after he and his wife opened the Clover Bottom Bed and Breakfast in McKee, hopes organizations like the guild continue to see the value of online communities for their members.

"Those places are where you have to be now to be viable as a selling artist," he says. "We have a lot of great artists in the area who come to the guild, and I think the groups that are going to survive are the ones who develop their online presence."

For more information, visit kyguild.org.



CREATIVE VOICES

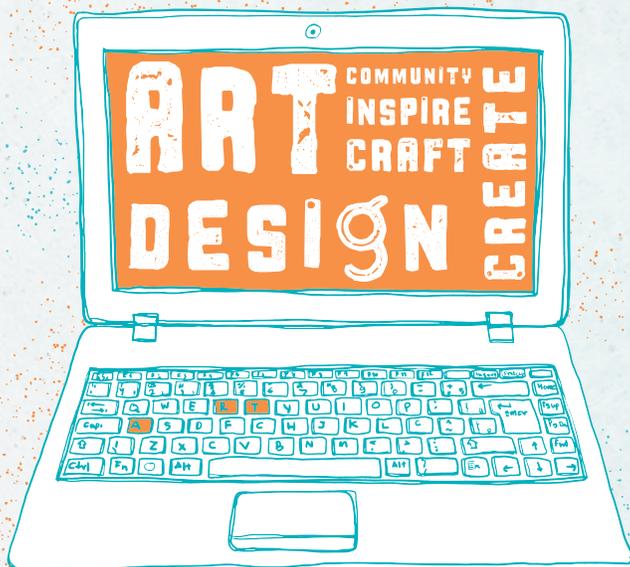
Access to fast internet services creates fresh opportunities for creators in rural communities throughout the nation.

"I've never had to advertise. I just use Facebook to let people know when the classes are, and people usually use that to save a spot."

— Tammie Franklin, owner and teacher at Tammie's Treasures Painting Classes in River, Kentucky

"It helps us stay connected, and we reach a larger audience. It's one of the best ways we have to spread the word about what we do."

— Debra Ruzinsky, director of the Appalachian Center for Craft in Smithville, Tennessee



Always ready to lend a hand

Envy Designs owner has strong ties to the community

Story by ANDREA AGARDY | Photography by DAVID PIKE



At Envy Designs, Ben Vera and his staff serve a variety of clients, including school districts.



All embroidery, screen printing and engraving is done on the premises.

Born and raised in Willacy County, Ben Vera is committed to his community. So when he decided to become his own boss after decades of working as a first responder, he chose a business that would allow him the flexibility to be available whenever his neighbors need help.

“I am a 28-year veteran of law enforcement and 30-year veteran of emergency medical services,” Vera says. “That’s what I’ve been doing my entire career. And I still do it.”

In 2008, he founded Envy Designs, a company that personalizes an array of promotional products through screen printing, embroidery and laser engraving. Vera wears many hats. “I’ve got some dual roles that I play, but everything seems to work out perfectly. I have the best of both worlds,” he says. “It’s unbelievable how blessed I am. I get to wake up and if I want to go do law enforcement, I go do law enforcement. If I hear an EMS call, I can respond to that call. If I have a lot of work here at the store, I plan my day around that. What better way to just get up and do what you love doing?”

TURNING A PASSION INTO A PROFESSION

Vera has always had an eye for color, creativity and design, so an artistic endeavor was a natural choice when he decided to hang out a shingle of his own. “I enjoy drawing and painting, and I thought this would be a good opportunity to open up a business,” the self-taught artist says. “I took a chance, and 12 years later we’re blessed to have an abundance of work.”

Located on 7th Street in Raymondville, Envy Designs has clients that include school districts, burgeoning local businesses, banks and more. All work — from screen printing T-shirts to engraving tumblers to embroidering baseball caps — is done on-site by Vera and his staff in their 20,000-square-foot facility.

Many customers come to Envy Designs with a logo prepared and ready to go, while others need a little assistance to come up with that perfect image. Vera



Aaron Cortez inspects the print-out from the inkjet printer at Envy Designs in Raymondville.



Aaron Cortez, left, and Ben Vera have worked together at Envy Designs for years.

offers his customers design services, spending as much time as it takes to craft a logo they'll love for years to come. By finding out what each client likes and wants to convey to their customers, Vera not only ensures all of his clients leave happy, but also forges bonds that last for years.

"We sit down with the customer and ask questions about their business, their preferences for shapes, colors and design elements," Vera says. "It's very time consuming for a starter company or a starter logo, but to me that's how you build the relationship to earn their business. You just sit down, take the time and go at their pace until you get it right. People remember that we take that kind of time."

CUSTOMER SERVICE COMES FIRST

While many of Envy Designs' customers are from the Rio Grande Valley, the company's reputation for quality and customer service has spread far and wide, attracting customers from hundreds of miles away.

"We take pride in that," Vera says. "People call and say, 'I'm from San Antonio. A friend of mine got some caps done at your place, and I want to know if you can help us out.' It's amazing! They have options of other companies to do this work closer to home for them. That's what

makes us feel so good around here." Vera understands that repeat business comes from satisfied customers who feel their patronage is appreciated and valued. With that in mind, he makes a point of ensuring each customer feels like a priority, whether the order is for a couple dozen T-shirts or a few thousand pens.

"We depend on our customers a lot, and we try to give them a service that nobody else can give them," he says. "That's what keeps our customers coming back to us. We just try to bend over backwards for everybody. They know we're sincere about what we're doing and they're not just a number."

BROADBAND BUILDS BRIDGES

A fast and reliable broadband connection from VTX1 Companies plays an important role in keeping Envy Designs at the top of its game. Vera uses the internet daily to communicate with his customers and vendors, place orders, brainstorm logo ideas and more. His cloud-based billing system maintains records for nearly 2,500 accounts.

"The internet is just a wonderful tool," he says. "Without the fast service I have, I wouldn't be able to get that. I recommend VTX1 to a lot of people. You're not going to get any better customer service."

The internet is also helping Vera plan his company's future. He recently

completed an online college course that will position Envy Designs to compete for state and federal contracts. "We look forward to a little bit of expansion. Physically, in clientele and equipment," he says. "We're hoping that as Envy Designs grows, we're going to have the people and equipment to grow with us." 



Check it out!

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Sunny side up?

Mix it up in the morning

Ham and eggs just go together — you rarely think of one without picturing the other. And they are so often seen together on an Easter menu.

But what do you do once the Easter lunch is over and you're faced with leftover ham and lots of eggs?

For starters, make sure that you've handled all the food safely. With a lot of cooks in the kitchen prepping so much food, sometimes safe food handling practices fly out the window. Make sure you're preparing — and storing — food properly, so all of your guests leave with a full tummy and not a sick stomach.

While you're boiling eggs to dye for Easter, boil some extras, and make sure you keep them in the refrigerator until you're ready to use them.

Don't serve or eat any eggs that have been at room temperature for more than two hours.

As for your ham, if it's ready to eat then, you simply have to warm it up. But if you have to roast it yourself, make sure the internal temperature reaches 145 F.



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

HAM AND EGG CASSEROLE

- 2 medium cooked potatoes, peeled and sliced
- 4 hard-boiled large eggs, chopped
- 1 cup diced fully cooked ham
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon pepper
- 1 large egg
- 1 1/2 cups sour cream
- 1/4 cup dry bread crumbs
- 1 tablespoon butter, melted

In a large bowl, combine the potatoes, eggs, ham, salt and pepper. Combine the raw egg and sour cream. Add to potato mixture and gently toss to coat. Transfer to a greased 11-by-7-inch baking dish.

Toss bread crumbs and butter. Sprinkle over casserole. Bake, uncovered, at 350 F for 20 minutes or until bubbly and cooked through.

CREAMED HAM AND EGGS

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1/2 teaspoon dry mustard
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 1/4 cups milk
- 1 cup diced cooked ham
- 4 hard-boiled eggs, chopped
- 4 biscuits

Melt butter in a large saucepan over low heat. Stir flour, mustard, salt and pepper into butter until mixture is smooth and bubbly. Remove from heat and add milk. Return to heat and bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Boil until mixture thickens — about 1 minute.

Stir ham and eggs into milk mixture and cook until heated through. Spoon creamed ham and eggs onto biscuits and serve.

PUFFY HAM AND EGG QUICHE

- 1 (17 1/3 ounce) box frozen puff pastry
- 8 ounces ham, chopped
- 4 hard-boiled eggs, sliced
- 8 ounces mozzarella cheese, shredded
- 1 beef bouillon cube
- 1/4 cup evaporated milk, warm
- 1 tablespoon parsley, chopped
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 4 tablespoons Parmesan cheese, grated

Preheat the oven to 375 F. Roll one sheet of puff pastry into a pie dish. Sprinkle ham on the bottom of the pie. Add a layer of sliced hard-boiled eggs and a layer of the mozzarella cheese.

Dissolve the beef bouillon in the warm milk and mix with parsley, beaten eggs and Parmesan cheese. Pour over ham, eggs and cheese. Cover the pie with the second puff pastry. Bake for 45 minutes or until golden brown. Let it sit for 5 to 10 minutes before cutting and serving.



Hard boiled eggs benedict

- 4 hard-boiled eggs
- 2 English muffins (split half)
- 4 slices ham
- Chopped parsley (optional)

Hollandaise Sauce:

- 4 large egg yolks
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/2 cup butter (very slightly softened, cut into 5 pieces)
- Pinch of salt
- Dash of cayenne pepper (optional)

Prepare hollandaise sauce by placing a heat-proof bowl over a pan of gently simmering water (about 1 1/2 inches of water). The bottom of the bowl should not be touching the water. Alternatively, a double boiler set can be used. Add egg yolks and lemon juice to the bowl and whisk vigorously until the mixture becomes shiny/glossy and thickens. Whisk in

one piece of butter until fully incorporated into mixture. Repeat with remaining pieces, one at a time. Whisk in a pinch of salt and a dash of cayenne, if using. If mixture is too thick, whisk in a bit of warm water, a tablespoon at a time. Remove from heat and use immediately.

In a hot skillet, over medium heat, heat the ham. Toast the English muffins until lightly browned. Cut each hard-boiled egg into fourths. Assemble by placing an English muffin half on a plate (cut side up), topping with 1 slice of ham, 1 egg (cut into fourths), and drizzle with 1/4 of the hollandaise sauce. Topped with chopped parsley, if desired, and serve warm.

Alternately, to make this dish a little easier, buy an envelope of Knorr's hollandaise sauce mix and follow package directions.



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