

MAY/JUNE 2021



VTX1 Companies

COMPASS

VOL. 2, NO. 3



LEADING THE WAY

Executive team prepares for a bright future

AN ARTISTIC EYE

Kirk Clark celebrates color and creativity

SCREEN TEST

Online tools help filmmakers break boundaries



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Broadband is critical for working from home

Nearly all of us have spent at least some time this past year working from home. And while remote work surged during the pandemic, it certainly isn't a new idea. Between 2005 and 2017, according to Statista, there was a 159% increase in remote work. Today 11.2% of Americans are working from home, up from 5.7% in 2019. And many are growing to prefer it — 22% of workers say they'd like to work from home permanently. I believe full-time remote work makes it difficult to create and maintain a collaborative work culture, but I do think that work is likely to have a new face when we get back to "normal."

The Foundation for Rural Service recently published a white paper entitled "Rural America's Critical Connections." (You can download it for free at www.frs.org.) The report cites a Global Workplace Analytics report that states, "Our best estimate is that 25-30% of the workforce will be working from home multiple days a week by the end of 2021."

What does this mean for broadband, that critical connection that helps us work remotely? It certainly means our country needs to continue the work to get broadband to everyone — and that in doing so we must build robust networks using technology proven to support the speeds and synchronous connections that working from home requires. Regardless of the work patterns and flexibility we see in the coming year, one thing is for certain: NTCA members, such as your provider, will continue to be at the forefront of connecting rural America. [📧](#)



A free online resource helps female entrepreneurs

About 45% of businesses are owned or co-owned by women. Spanning a range of industries, most of these businesses are small with potential for growth. The federal Small Business Association wants to provide support.

The free, information-packed online Ascent program offers a range of helpful resources.

TAKE A JOURNEY

Experts in women's entrepreneurship created informational Journeys. Participants can choose any Journey, opting out of sessions with information they already know. Each Journey includes Excursions filled with resources needed to master a topic.



Exercises and tools



Fireside chats



Infographics



Success stories



Discussion guides



Videos



Key insights



Self-assessments

DO YOU NEED HELP WITH YOUR BUSINESS?

Visit ascent.sba.gov

Secure your Internet of Things

The Instant Pot, a pressure cooker, is one of the most popular small kitchen appliances of recent years. Naturally, there's a model capable of connecting to the internet via Wi-Fi — an example of the Internet of Things, or IoT.

Smart thermostats, door locks and security cameras are just a few devices on the IoT spectrum. Refrigerators, toys and a range of whimsical gadgets are all on the bandwagon. And businesses and industry, including agriculture, manufacturing and medicine, take advantage of connected devices.

Like the connected Instant Pot, which lets a cook control it via a smartphone app, IoT devices provide convenience, useful data and new ways of using technology. Cisco, a leader in networking systems, estimates that more than 75 billion such devices will be in use by 2025.

The utility of what is sometimes described as the fourth industrial revolution is balanced by the need for mindful caution. These devices offer people with bad intent potential doorways into private homes and businesses that use the internet-dependent gadgets.

Meanwhile, companies are finding new ways of leveraging these systems. One example is Amazon Sidewalk, which rolled out earlier this year. Here's how Amazon described the innovation: "Amazon Sidewalk is a shared network that helps devices like Amazon Echo, Ring security cameras, outdoor lights and motion sensors work better at home and beyond the front door."

Essentially, Sidewalk links your Amazon devices to those of your neighbors through a specialized network. Why? Well, imagine your internet goes down while you're out of town, making your security-focused Ring Doorbell useless. With Sidewalk, however, your internet-connected doorbell would keep right on working, relying on the internet connections of your neighbors to power the system. Everyone on the Sidewalk

system gives up a little bit of their internet bandwidth to this network. Instead of a smart home, Sidewalk can create a smart neighborhood.

Amazon released a detailed white paper outlining the system's security features. And while security experts have been quoted praising the company's efforts, others have expressed concern about privacy and the potential for hackers to target the system. Amazon Sidewalk can be turned off in the settings section of the company's smartphone app.

As IoT devices proliferate and offer new, practical ways to leverage the power of the internet, knowledge and a few practical security steps can offset possible risks. In the past, the FBI noted the need for IoT caution. "Unsecured devices can allow hackers a path into your router, giving the bad guy access to everything else on your home network that you thought was secure," Beth Anne Steele wrote for the Portland FBI office. 

Security tips for IoT devices

- Change the device's default password. Consider a different device if instructions for changing the password aren't readily available.
- Long passwords — as long as possible — work best. Make them unique to each IoT device.
- Many IoT devices connect to smartphone apps. Take a few minutes to understand the permissions granted to these apps. An internet search will help here, too.
- If possible, have a separate network for devices, such as an internet-connected refrigerator and a laptop containing sensitive information.
- Regularly update the devices, and turn off automatic updates.



A legacy of service

Together, we've created a foundation for the future

Connecting a rural community such as ours to the world has never been easy. Decades ago, crews first strung telephone lines across a landscape that large nationwide companies chose to ignore, deeming the places we call home too rural and unworthy of the effort.



DAVE OSBORN
Chief Executive Officer

Naturally, we never felt that way. After all, no one understands the importance of our rural communities better than we do. The countless hours of work put in to create the first telephone lines for our cooperative proved invaluable, opening new doors for businesses and residences. All of that effort gave us a foundation for the future.

As new technologies appeared, we continued that original commitment to serving you by bringing you those innovations. Today, our internet services rival — and often greatly exceed — those found in metropolitan areas. Just as those first crews did when they engineered a telephone system, we've built and maintained a robust internet network.

The depth of my appreciation for the men and women who make these essential services possible only increases from year to year. No matter the challenge, they adapt and overcome. I'd like to, humbly, suggest that you benefit daily from those efforts.

Can you imagine not having an option to link a computer or mobile device to the internet? Work, entertainment, medical care, education and more rely on rock-solid service. In just a few decades, we've gone from marveling at the idea of being able to speak one-on-one to someone miles away via phone to having a world of information at our fingertips. In fact, internet services are as essential for many of us as water and electricity.

Despite our best efforts, though, no communications and technology company such as ours avoids adversity. It's how you overcome adversity that matters most. Across the nation, we've seen tornadoes, hurricanes, fires and other natural disasters leave communities without the utilities many of us take for granted.

Every season of the calendar brings the possibility of an event capable of disrupting our network and infrastructure. Our team maintains detailed plans to both avoid disruptions and to respond quickly if they do occur. Often, long hours of work are required to restore services after an outage. The environment in the field after an event like a severe storm may be dangerous. Yet, our crews always answer the call. Our office staff willingly puts in long hours to support the efforts. They do it gladly, because they understand how much you rely on the services we provide.

Our investment in not only expanding our services, but also in maintaining existing infrastructure is significant and ongoing. The mission that began with construction of the first telephone lines continues. We believe in you, and our community. We prosper together. Regardless of the challenges, we embrace our commitment to serving you.

Everyone at VTX1 Companies is proud of our heritage, a sentiment we wish to carry over to future generations that will continue to provide you the communication tools needed to thrive. Thank you for letting us be part of this community.

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.
- Tech Support:
Mon.-Sun. • 24/7

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On the Cover:



VTX1 executives - Back row: Sebastian Ivanisky, Roy Sheneman, Patrick McDonnell. Front row: Vanessa McPhee, Dave Osborn and Wyndi Klostermann. *See story Page 8.*

Calling all shutterbugs!

The VTX1 Companies Calendar Photo Contest will be accepting entries soon, so grab your cameras, head outside and start snapping. The winning photos will be featured in our 2022 calendar. VTCI members and VTXC customers are invited to submit their favorite shots of landscapes, animals and images of everyday life from the areas they reside and thrive in. Photos of individuals will not be accepted.



Details and rules for this year's contest will be announced soon. Follow VTX1 on Facebook or check vtx1.net for the latest updates.



THANKS, MOM AND DAD!

Don't forget to show your parents some love this spring. Mother's Day is Sunday, May 9, and Father's Day is Sunday, June 20.



Are you ready for hurricane season?

May 9-15 is National Hurricane Preparedness Week. Here's a list of steps you can take now to ensure you and your family are ready. Hurricane season begins on June 1 and continues through Nov. 30.

- » **Make an evacuation plan:** Find activated evacuation routes at DriveTexas.org or by calling 800-452-9292. To learn if you live in an evacuation zone, call 211.
- » **Sign up for emergency alerts:** Make sure your device is able to receive Wireless Emergency Alerts, or WEAs.
- » **Prepare an emergency supply kit:** Go to ready.gov/kit for a list of vital emergency supplies and tips for building and maintaining an emergency kit.
- » **Review your home insurance policy.**
- » **Register with the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry – STEAR:** Visit stear.tdeam.texas.gov or call 211 if you live in an evacuation area and you have a disability or medical needs and do not have a vehicle to use in evacuation or if you have a disability/medical needs and do not have friends or family who can help you during an evacuation. All registry information collected by STEAR is confidential.

Hurricane preparedness online resources:

- » **Texas Division of Emergency Management –** dps.texas.gov/dem
- » **Texas Department of State Health Services –** texasready.gov
- » **American Red Cross –** redcross.org
- » **U.S. Department of Homeland Security –** ready.gov
- » **Office of the Texas Governor Greg Abbott –** gov.texas.gov



The Crescent Hotel, a landmark in the heart of the Ozarks, has served visitors since the late 1880s.

Eureka!

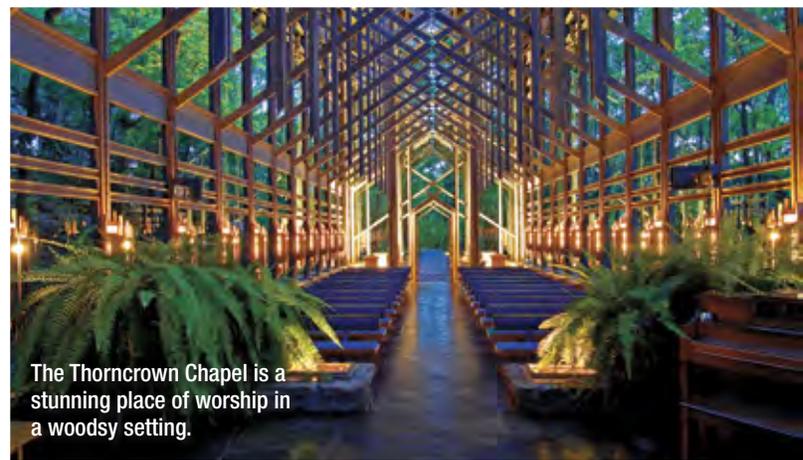
AN ARKANSAS TOWN PROVIDES A GREAT ESCAPE

Story by ANNE BRALY

Texans have a love affair with Eureka Springs. Call it a backyard playground, an escape from the Texas heat or just a simple getaway that offers great food, mountain trails to explore and history to discover.

The Arkansas town is the top location for visitors from the Lone Star State, says Gina Rambo, publicist for the Eureka Springs City Advertising and Promotion Commission. “It’s close enough to drive in one day or a quick flight,” she says. “Texans love Eureka Springs because it’s not like any other city they’ve ever visited. The city is filled with something for everyone, whether it’s shopping, fun events, outdoor adventures, or just some quiet and relaxation.”

Walk through the historic downtown and see its old buildings that now house art shops and gift stores. Visit some of the healing springs that brought people to the heart of the Ozark Mountains in the early 1800s to enjoy the experience. The springs, discovered by the Osage Indians who used to hunt the area, are no longer in use, but visitors can still look at them.



The Thorncrown Chapel is a stunning place of worship in a woody setting.

SEE AND DO

- **Thorncrown Chapel:** Witness the miracle that went into building this mountainside chapel. The story goes that landowner Jim Reed ran out of money halfway through construction, got down on his knees, prayed and, within a few days, got the money he needed to complete his dream. Regardless of whether or not it was a miracle or just good luck, the chapel — with 425 windows and hundreds of tons of native stone — is a masterpiece of design, having won many national architecture awards. Services are held on Sundays, but any day of the week, you can stop in, sit and commune with God and nature. Admission is free, but donations are appreciated.

• **Eureka Springs Historical Museum:**

Learn about the town and its place in American and Arkansan history. Most exhibits have been donated by local citizens and give an idea of what Eureka Springs was like in decades gone by. This is a good place to start a tour because you learn a bit about the city before you walk around or hop on and off the excellent trolley system that runs around town. Trolley tickets are \$6 for the entire day.

• **Crescent Hotel:** The oldest standing structure in town is also called the most haunted hotel in America. It opened in 1886 during the heyday of Eureka Springs, when folks descended on the town by the thousands, believing its mineral waters would cure all that ailed them. Once the popularity of the healing springs had waned, the hotel became a finishing school for girls. It then became a “hospital” when a man who claimed to have a cure for cancer purchased it. The numerous people who died here now supposedly haunt the place, and ghost tours are available. If you don’t believe in ghosts, you can enjoy some livelier spirits at the bar and have a pizza or calzone up on the fourth floor next to the observation deck that is the highest point in the Ozark Mountains. The view, with the colossal, 66-foot-tall Christ of the Ozarks statue cradled in the faraway mountains, is breathtaking.

• **Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge:**

If you’re standing in downtown Eureka Springs and the wind is blowing in the right direction, there’s a chance you may hear a lion’s roar. It’s not an uncommon occurrence, as less than 10 miles away is one of the largest big-cat sanctuaries in the U.S. The 459-acre refuge, a top-10 attraction in Arkansas, is home to lions, tigers, bears, bobcats and other mammals rescued from zoos and people who could no longer care for them. Take a guided tour, or you may even choose to stay on the property in one of the safari-themed lodges or a glamping tent.

• **Myrtie Mae’s:** It’s rare that a restaurant in a chain hotel can achieve the stellar reviews to place No. 1 on tripadvisor.com’s “best restaurants in Eureka Springs” list, but Myrtie Mae’s has done that. Its down-home cooking brings locals and tourists by droves. This comfortable eatery, located off the lobby in the Best Western Inn of the Ozarks, serves bodacious breakfasts and sandwiches, along with fried chicken that has achieved cult status.

• **Local Flavor:** Cuisines from around the world meet Eureka Springs at this popular restaurant. The decor of local art and vintage lamps matches its place in downtown’s historic district. Dine in or al fresco and breathe in the mountain air. The menu features beautiful salads and sandwiches at lunch, adding heartier fare — steaks, pastas and such — for dinner. Sundays bring the crowds for brunch favorites, including huevos rancheros, eggs Benedict, quiche and scrumptious gingerbread waffles. This is a restaurant where you’ll want to take your time and savor every bite, particularly the sesame-encrusted goat cheese that adorns the arugula salad.

• **Bavarian Inn Restaurant:** An Alpine exterior and warm interior — along with a menu of Jaeger schnitzel, brats and the house favorite, sauerkraut soup — make you feel as if you’ve stepped into the heart of Bavaria. And don’t forget the apple strudel made from scratch. 🍏

A TASTE OF EUREKA

Eating is a theme of any trip, and in Eureka Springs, you won’t go hungry. Although it’s a small town — population of under 3,000 — there are surprising, delicious eateries from which to choose that offer many options. Here are some favorites of locals and tourists alike.

• **Bombadil’s Cafe:** This casual cafe with an upscale, farm-to-table menu features local meats, such as a big strip steak with spicy harissa rub. Seafood Pontchartrain, the house favorite, is brimming with shrimp, crawfish, crab and scallops. Or try a down-home dinner like fried catfish with homestyle potatoes. The wine list is enticing, food presentations are nothing short of artistic, and the servers know their business.



Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge is a big-cat sanctuary.



Bombadil's Cafe.

If you go:
Whether it's writers conferences, theater productions, art gallery strolls, car shows or food events, there's always something going on in Eureka Springs. For more information, as well as suggestions for overnight accommodations, visit eurekasprings.org.

LEADING THE WAY

Executive team poised to guide VTX1 into a bright future

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

VTX1 Companies has a long history of connecting South Texas to the world. In 1952, as Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc., it offered the first telephone service available in Willacy County. Today, the company provides phone and internet services to over 26,000 customers over a 42,500-square-mile service area.

Throughout the decades, the mission has remained consistent: to provide rural communities with the latest and most reliable communications services at a fair price.

To accomplish that mission, VTX1 has built a dynamic team of executives, tasked with ensuring the company has the strategies, plans, personnel and financial wherewithal to keep its customers connected to the resources and people who matter most.

“This team is fairly new, and already they work well together,” says Chief

Executive Officer Dave Osborn. “These people are innately collaborative, and I think their teamwork is likely the most important thing going forward.”

PATRICK MCDONNELL

Patrick McDonnell became Chief Operating Officer last September. As COO, he ensures the operation runs smoothly and efficiently.

“I’m looking at how each department impacts the operation and the end customer,” he says. “It’s about how we can streamline processes and procedures and how we can better serve our customers.” From McDonnell’s perspective, VTX1 is well positioned to meet current customer needs and expand its reach in rural areas. While the company’s roots are as a rural telephone cooperative, it has expanded outside that footprint into subdivisions on the outskirts of larger cities.

“If we get in with fiber to the premises in those more urban areas, we can provide services there,” McDonnell says. “The costs to serve are lower, revenue opportunities are greater, and it allows us to have money to expand our rural network.”

ROY SHENEMAN

As Chief Human Resources Officer, Roy Sheneman, an 18-year VTX1 veteran, takes care of the people who take care of customers. “I’m here to support the management team and ensure they are successful,” he says. “I help them support their people more efficiently and effectively. That includes everything from addressing payroll issues to benefit-related questions and concerns up to, and including, dealing with difficult situations as they occur.”

By taking a proactive approach to everything from strategic planning to continuing education and beyond, VTX1 is providing its employees — and by extension, its customers — with the support they need to keep the operation running smoothly, now and for years to come. “We want to make sure that every employee knows that we value them. We have a great workforce here. Our people are good at what they do, and they work



VTX1 is led by an executive team that includes, clockwise from top left, Vanessa McPhee, Roy Sheneman, Wyndi Klostermann and Patrick McDonnell.

very hard for our customers,” Sheneman says.

WYNDI KLOSTERMANN

“It’s a very exciting time here,” says Chief Financial Officer Wyndi Klostermann, who has been with the company for 14 years and started out as a staff accountant. “We have a great opportunity to make some big changes and stay ahead of the competition. Yes, we live in a rural place, but that doesn’t mean we should have to sacrifice our services.”

As VTX1 grew by acquiring other providers, the company took care to ensure the high level of service was consistent across the network. “Just because we might be able to reach somebody, if it’s not up to our technical standards, then that’s not something we’re going to choose to pursue,” Klostermann says.

Thanks to careful financial management, VTX1 is ready for whatever the future has in store. “We watch where we spend, and that’s enabled us to have a solid financial background to allow us to invest in these areas and get better technology and more customers to serve,” Klostermann says. “We’re financially able to keep doing that for the long, foreseeable future.”

SEBASTIAN IVANISKY

Eighteen years ago, Sebastian Ivanisky answered an ad for a computer technician, and today he’s helping chart VTX1’s future as the Chief Technology Officer. “While the other members of the executive team are looking at plans for revenue and sales and forecasting things, we come behind and put the right technology in place to make those things happen,” he says.

Ivanisky keeps up with the latest technological developments, assesses which will best address VTX1’s needs and plans, and makes recommendations on how the company can get the most bang for its buck. Timing also plays an important role.

“The company has always made early investments in new things, even going



back to the first piece of fiber cable we laid. It was quite a bit ahead of its time for the region,” he says. “Our recipe has always been to make the investment early, even when it seems like it’s not quite there yet, and we’ve always managed to reap the benefits of being there first.”

VANESSA MCPHEE

Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer Vanessa McPhee, who was born and raised in Kenya, lived in six countries scattered across four continents before joining VTX1. When she arrived in Raymondville last November, she hit the ground running, launching an extensive market analysis that examined the company’s customer base, organizational structure, competition and market trends.

“We have done the research and the analysis. Now we are using this intelligence to identify what needs to be done to continue to improve the overall customer experience,” McPhee says. “That’s my foundation. I’m the type of person who always thinks there’s a huge amount of opportunity out there that we’re not tapping into. I’m seeing opportunity already.”

One thing is crystal clear: customers want more reliable bandwidth at a reasonable cost. “Everyone wants the same thing,” McPhee says. “They want reliability, sufficient bandwidth, 100% up-time at an affordable price.”

McPhee believes VTX1 is equipped to take the steps necessary to provide the best service at competitive prices. “We’ve got the right balance of skills to take it to



the next level,” she says. “Under Dave Osborn’s leadership, I think that we are very well positioned.”

The executives have a very busy couple of years ahead of them as they work to reduce costs, improve margins and operating efficiency, and to grow the customer base. Osborn is certain the team is up to the task.

“This is a very competent group of people,” he says. “Right now, this team, given their collaborative nature, their skill sets, expertise and experience, is very capable of accomplishing just about anything we would want to undertake.”



Final cut

How the freedom of the internet is transforming filmmaking

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Some filmmakers learn their craft by making home movies in the backyard. Others go to film school. Madelaine Turner likes to say she got her education on YouTube.

“That’s essentially where I got my film degree,” she says. “Movies were my first love, but filmmaking wasn’t something I pursued for a long time. Until quarantine started.”

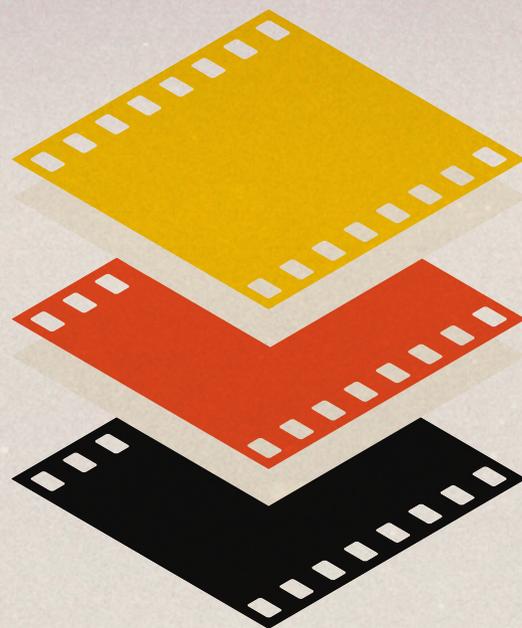
At 27 years old, the California native considers herself a senior by the standard of apps like TikTok. Of the app’s 500 million active users, nearly half are estimated to be in their teens and early 20s.

Originally, Turner’s quick videos were just a way to stay connected with her younger siblings. But she began to view the platform as a way to genuinely flex her creative muscle after a positive response to her Wes Anderson tribute video, “The Anderson Guide to Surviving a Global Pandemic,” filmed using only objects she had in her apartment.

“It gives you really specific boundaries with the content you’re allowed to create, which is 59 seconds,” she says. “So the challenge and excitement as a storyteller, director and creator is getting your point across and making those 59 seconds really enjoyable for your audience.”

Within those confines, Turner has explored her wide-ranging creative interests, from short films paying homage to Jane Austen costume dramas and French heist movies to abstract dream sequences and a cyberpunk take on “The Wizard of Oz.” Each new style gives her a chance to learn more about the filmmaking process both during and after filming.

“I’d never really used a green screen or After Effects before,” she says. “Now, taking on a new genre is really exciting because it allows me to push the boundaries of what I know how to do and challenges me to figure out how I can convey this effectively without having a whole production crew.”



Her growth as a filmmaker hasn’t gone unnoticed. As a freelance screenwriter, Turner has been able to point to her online portfolio and hundreds of thousands of followers to build connections within the movie industry. And thanks to the algorithms of apps like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, more people are discovering her work every day.

“It allows you to come across content from someone with virtually no following,” Turner says. “And from my perspective, I was putting my stuff out there and very quickly engaging an audience that gave me the permission to go bigger, further and more creative.”

That audience is one of the reasons Turner doesn’t expect she’ll ever stop making short-form videos online, even as she pursues her larger filmmaking dreams. The real-time feedback she receives on those platforms has already shaped her as a filmmaker and may come to shape the industry itself.

“A traditional filmmaker might go years in between films, whereas on TikTok you get this microenvironment of trying new things and getting that quick feedback,” she says.

“So I think I’ve been lucky to hyper-develop my style as a filmmaker because of that feedback loop. Hopefully I can be part of a generation of filmmakers that is able to bridge that gap between the internet and the mainstream.”



Madelaine Turner puts her spin on genres ranging from French heist movies to cyberpunk.



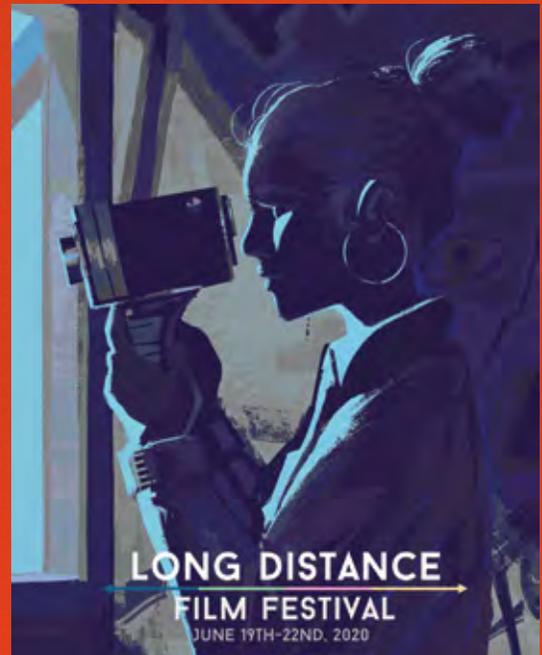
Long distance

For every film festival that was able to pivot to digital in 2020, there were many more that had to be canceled altogether. With so much of the industry on hold, a team of five cinephiles in Brooklyn started the entirely online Long Distance Film Festival, harnessing the power of broadband to give rural and urban filmmakers around the world an outlet for their creativity.

"There was a certain freedom to starting an all-online festival," says Festival Director Elias ZX. "It was much cheaper than doing it in person. We didn't sell tickets and had unlimited capacity so friends, family and fans of the filmmakers were able to join from around the globe and watch the festival in its entirety."

To pull it off, the team partnered with the independent Spectacle Theater and Kinoscope to stream its 15 selected short films to hundreds of viewers around the world. Plans for a second edition of the festival are already underway, with submissions open for 2021.

For more information, visit longdistancefilmfestival.com.



Industry standard



Oxford Film Festival Executive Director Melanie Addington was making last-minute arrangements for the Mississippi-based event when the state's governor banned gatherings of more than 100 people. Using Eventive's brand-new online festival platform, she quickly pivoted to take the event virtual.

"We were one of the first virtual festivals with Eventive and had to learn a lot very quickly, mostly that a lot of our community doesn't have good internet access," she says. "That was restricting in some ways, but it also expanded who could see them to a new audience."

Moving forward, Addington anticipates the festival will have a hybrid format, combining the accessibility of a virtual festival with the in-person experience of a live event.

"This will be what we do from here on out," she says. "Not everyone can travel to Oxford, but they can still take part in the experience. It makes absolute sense for this to become a standard in our industry."

For more information, visit ox-film.com.



Renaissance man

Kirk Clark blends his passion for painting with a bustling family business

Story by FERNANDO CARRASCO



Photo contributed by Kirk Clark.

Kirk Clark sold his first painting when he was 10. That same year, he went to work in the parts department at his family's Chevrolet dealership in McAllen. Sixty-five years later, he is still balancing his life as a businessman and an artist.

Clark has kept the Rio Grande Valley's oldest dealership, now in its 87th year, going strong, even as he has continued to grow as a painter. "The fascinating thing about Kirk is he is a car guy through and through," says Michelle Sparks, marketing director at Charles Clark Chevrolet. "He's third generation and loves the car business. But he loves the art world equally."

Clark came by both passions through his parents, who passed on their ownership of the family business, as well as their love of art. Over the past two decades, Clark has had dozens of exhibitions, including in the United States, Mexico and Italy. He works in nonobjective art, a type of abstract in which geometric shapes are the building blocks. In some of Clark's most striking paintings, thousands of colored dots stream and swirl around the canvas, dancing to an inaudible rhythm.

Charles Clark, seen here in 1975, passed the family's car dealership on to his son.

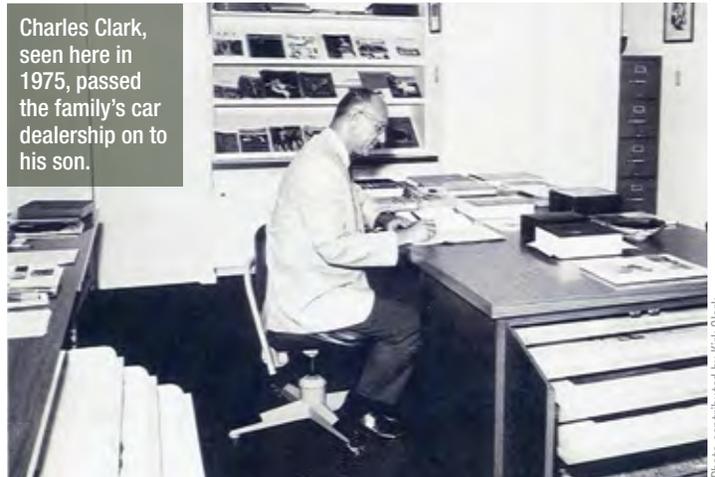
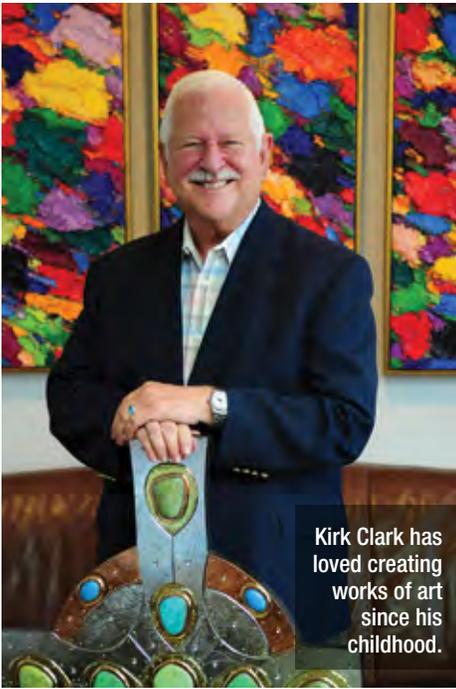


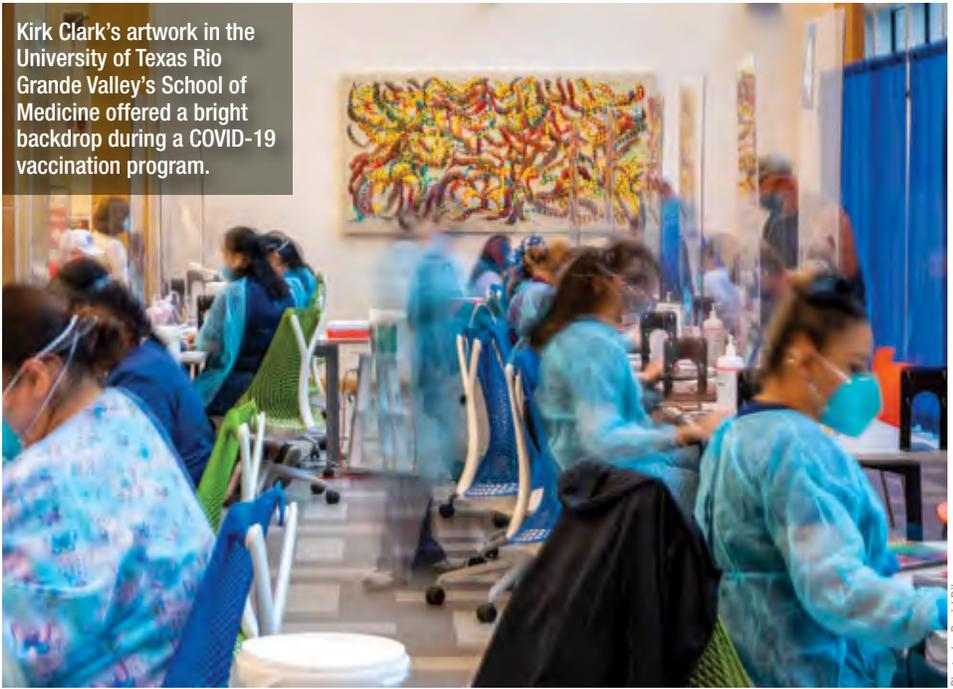
Photo contributed by Kirk Clark.

For Clark, those dots are more than simple blobs of color. "The dots represent molecules of sound that are being transformed into photons and waves of light, which, for me, is the closest I can get to wrapping my head around God commanding the universe to begin," he says.



Kirk Clark has loved creating works of art since his childhood.

Photo contributed by Kirk Clark.



Kirk Clark's artwork in the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's School of Medicine offered a bright backdrop during a COVID-19 vaccination program.

Photo by David Pike.

Some would say that's pretty heady stuff for a car dealer, but those are just pretentious art snobs talking, says Joseph Bravo, a fine arts expert who has curated three exhibitions of Clark's work. "Some people look at Kirk Clark and see a car dealer. That's not what I see. I look at Clark and I see a professional artist who happens to own a car dealership."

SOUND EXPERIENCES

To Bravo's trained eye, Clark is one of the most significant nonobjective abstractionists working today. Clark's focus on abstract art ignited about 21 years ago when he attended a series of lectures by musician Bernie Krause, who spent years recording the sounds of wildlife habitats. It was a transformative experience for the artist.

"What amazed me was that, as I heard these sounds, these recorded sounds, I could see the shapes of the sounds, and as the octave levels changed, I saw different colors," Clark says. He wouldn't find out until a few years later that he has synesthesia, a neurological condition that blends the senses. People with synesthesia may hear colors, feel sounds or even taste shapes.

Clark memorized the series of wildlife sounds that so entranced him.

They're in his subconscious now, and he uses them to paint. "When I paint, I don't paint an image," he says. "It's all very spontaneous: squirting paint out, overlapping, taking a silicon spatula and almost splashing and moving the paint."

Watching Clark work as he makes his "marks" — the dots that cover his paintings — is like watching a high wire act that demands absolute focus. Clark must be completely in the moment to successfully capture what he sees in his mind's eye. "If the phone rings, or if you just have an errant thought or become self-conscious, that mark goes south," Bravo says. "And there's no painting your way out of it. It doesn't recover from that one-second loss of concentration."

While it may take a connoisseur like Bravo to speak to the precision and visual formalism that Clark's art possesses, a viewer doesn't need to be an art expert to appreciate the work, much like they don't need to know the ins and outs of an engine to appreciate a beautiful vehicle. "Whether somebody is a sophisticated practitioner of the arts or a complete novice, Kirk's art withstands both experiences and both kinds of audiences," Bravo says.

Clark says he can't imagine not having his job at the dealership and also pursuing art. He enjoys talking to people and



Kirk Clark art at South Texas College Library

Photo by David Pike.

interacting with customers, and his art has always provided a release valve from the stresses at work.

The internet also lets him keep a foot in both worlds. The fast and reliable broadband connection from VTX1 Companies allows him to stay in touch with his customers and to showcase his art to admirers around the world.

Clark has spent his life loving what he does, whether in a showroom or a gallery, and he has no plans to slow down. "This year I'll do more paintings than I've ever done before," he says. "I'll probably do 150 paintings. It's a volume operation — not intentionally — but it's just such a passion for me that I've just got to pursue the passion." 🗨️



Perfectly pleasing peas

Enjoy a surprisingly flexible legume

If you're denying yourself the simple beauty of peas, it's time to rethink your weekly menu. Full of healthy benefits and flavor, they should be a part of everyone's diet.

Peas' nutrition profile includes manganese, protein, fiber, vitamin A and folate, with lots of lesser vitamins to boot. And their neutral flavor allows them to go from smoothies at breakfast to salads for lunch and pot pies for dinner. They're inexpensive and add a lot of texture and color to any plate.

Try tossing them with pasta and a creamy Alfredo sauce. Or use peas as a topping for a baked potato with cheese and sour cream. You can also make an incredible pesto sauce for buttery rounds of crusty bread. Simply add a bag of

frozen peas to a handful of mint leaves and a half cup of Parmesan cheese, blend them together in a food processor and add olive oil as the machine is running until you get a smooth, thick consistency.

If you're lucky enough to have a garden full of the green pods filled with fresh peas, you've done yourself a favor. Just go outside and grab a handful of taste and nutrition. If not, grab a bag of frozen peas — they're just as good for you.



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



PEA SALAD WITH SMOKED ALMONDS

- 2 (16-ounce) packages frozen peas
- 6 ounces smoke-flavored almonds, finely chopped
- 1/2 a sweet onion or more, to taste, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise (reduced fat OK)
- 1/2 cup sour cream (light OK)
- Ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 cup shredded cheddar cheese

Place frozen peas in a colander and rinse them under cold water until thawed. Drain and transfer them to a large bowl. Add the almonds and onions. Mix well. Fold mayonnaise, sour cream and black pepper into the pea mixture until evenly coated. Transfer to a serving container and top with shredded cheese. Cover and refrigerate until serving. Before serving, you may want to blend cheese into the mixture, or leave it on top for a prettier presentation.





GREEN PEA BANANA SMOOTHIE

- 1/2 cup frozen green peas
- 1 frozen banana
- 1 cup spinach
- 4 mint leaves or more, to taste
- 1 1/2 cups almond milk
- 1 tablespoon almond butter, optional

Combine all ingredients in a blender. Blend until smooth, about 1 minute. Add more almond milk if needed to achieve your desired consistency.

CREAMY CHICKEN POT PIE

Peas add taste, color and texture to this creamy dish.

- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup cold unsalted butter, cut into cubes
- 1/2 cup cold buttermilk
- 1 or 2 tablespoons cold water
- 1 large egg, beaten, for the egg wash

For the pot pie filling:

- 1/4 cup unsalted butter
- 1/3 cup diced onion
- 2 medium carrots sliced (about 1 cup)
- 1 stalk celery sliced (about 1/2 cup)
- 2 cloves garlic minced
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 1/2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh Italian parsley
- 1 3/4 cups chicken broth
- 1/2 cup heavy cream
- 3 cups shredded chicken or turkey
- 1 cup frozen peas

First, make the pie dough. Combine the flour, sugar and salt in a large bowl. Add the cubed butter and toss to coat.

Dump the mixture out onto a clean surface and use a rolling pin to roll the butter into thin sheets, combining it with the flour. Use a bench scraper to scrape the rolling pin and to bring the mixture back into a pile as necessary. Continue until all of the butter is incorporated into the flour. The mixture will be very flaky. Return the mixture to the bowl and place it in the freezer for 15 minutes to chill the butter.

Remove from the freezer and add the buttermilk. Use a spoon, and then your hands, to stir the mixture until it comes together into a ball. If the mixture is too dry, add the water a tablespoon at a time. Divide the dough into 2 parts and flatten them into disks. Wrap each disk in plastic wrap and chill in the fridge while you make the filling.

To make the filling, heat the butter over medium-high heat in a large skillet. Add the onions, carrots, celery and garlic and cook until tender, stirring occasionally. Whisk in the flour, salt, black pepper, thyme, parsley, chicken broth and heavy cream. Whisk until there are no flour lumps, then simmer over medium-low heat for 10 minutes or until the sauce has thickened. Stir in the shredded chicken or turkey and frozen peas. Remove from heat and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Remove the pie dough from the refrigerator. On a lightly floured surface, use a rolling pin to roll out the dough into a 12-inch circle. Dough should be about 1/4 inch thick. Transfer the dough to a 9-inch pie pan. Pat with your fingers, making sure it is smooth. Trim the extra overhang of dough with a knife and discard.

Pour the filling into the dough-lined pie pan. Roll out the second disk of dough and carefully cover the pie. Trim the extra overhang off the sides. Seal the edges by crimping with a fork or your fingers. With a sharp knife, slice a few small slits in the center of the top crust. Using a pastry brush, brush the crust and edges with a beaten egg.

Bake for 45 minutes, or until the crust is golden brown. Cool for 10 minutes, allowing the filling to settle and thicken a bit. Cut into slices and serve.





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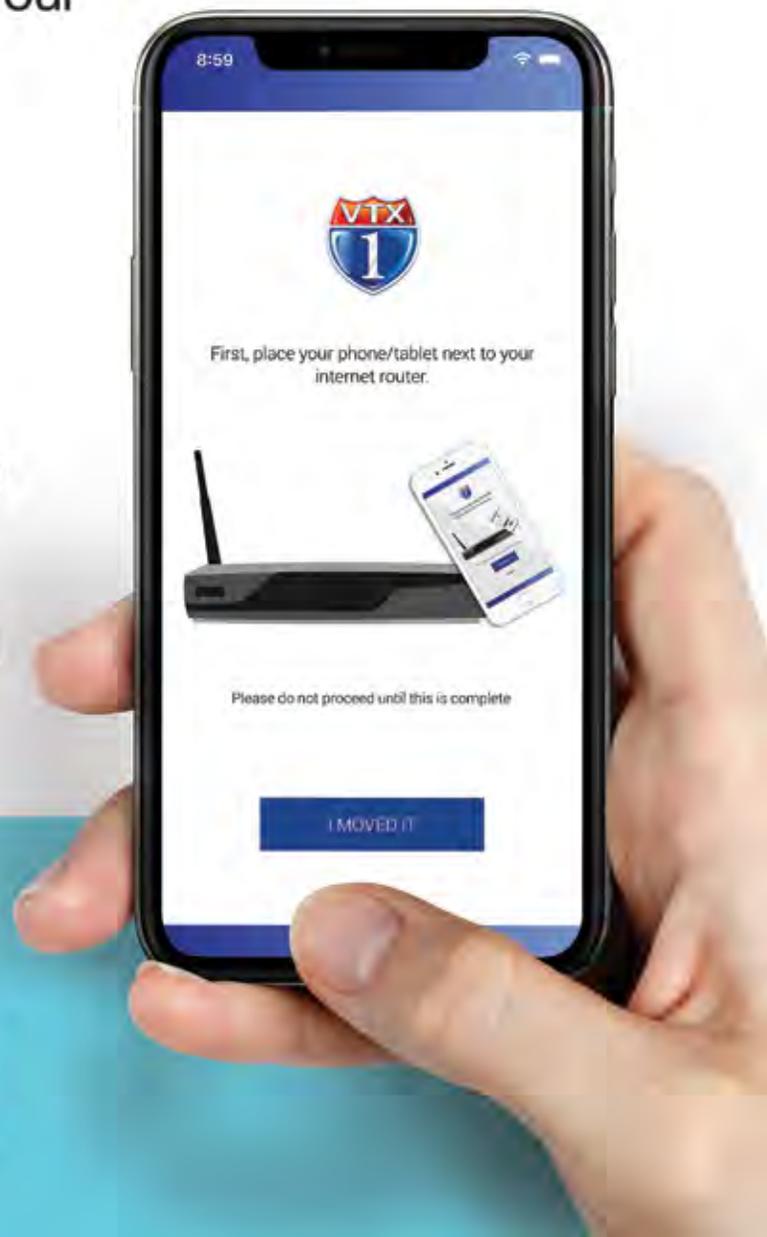
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