

JULY/AUGUST 2021



VTX1 Companies

# COMPASS

VOL. 2, NO. 4

## A HAVEN FOR HORSES

Wings and Reins cares  
for equines in need



### EXPANDING THE NETWORK

Fiber internet service  
expands in Brownsville

### ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Broadband extends art  
beyond the theatre



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## Partnering to fend off cyberattacks

In recent years, we've learned even the biggest of corporations, including Microsoft, Target and Marriott, are vulnerable to cyberattack. Then, last year, the pandemic increased the number of remote workers, moving more technology from the office into homes.

"The pandemic gave cybercriminals the opportunity to discover new malware families, successful new tactics and 'double extortion' strategies," says Roxanna Barboza, our Industry and Cybersecurity Policy analyst. "And since then, they have further honed their skills to exploit fear, gather intelligence and attack."

If this sounds like the trailer for a horror film you have no interest in seeing, I promise you, the possible impacts of a cyber breach are much more frightening. So, NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association is working to support the security efforts of internet service providers such as yours.

NTCA initiated CyberShare: The Small Broadband Provider Information Sharing and Analysis Center as a pilot project five years ago. We now have a robust team focused on the critical topic of cybersecurity, and NTCA members are encouraged to join the effort to recognize, analyze and respond to vulnerabilities, threats and other risks.

Also, CyberShare partnerships link us to the owners and operators of critical infrastructure like electric and water systems. More than 90% of CyberShare participants say the information received through the program enhances their ability to combat cyber threats.

It is through programs like CyberShare that we help organizations like your service provider protect consumers by creating a safe, secure digital experience. 📧



Convenience and a seemingly endless supply of options drives online shopping, which is safe as long as you take a few precautions. The Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency offers a few straightforward tips to ensure that no one uses your personal or financial information for their gain.

### THE THREATS

1. Unlike visiting a physical store, shopping online opens the doors to threats like malicious websites or bogus email messages. Some might appear as charities, particularly after a natural disaster or during the holidays.
2. Vendors who do not properly secure — encrypt — their online systems may allow an attacker to intercept your information.
3. If your digital device and the vendor's systems aren't properly updated and protected, the risk increases.

### PROTECT YOURSELF

- Before providing any personal or financial information, make sure that you are interacting with a reputable, established vendor. In case of trouble, note phone numbers and physical addresses of vendors.
- When shopping, check the address bar of your web browser to be sure the address begins with "https:" instead of "http:" and that it has a padlock icon. These generally indicate a secure site.
- Remember, a legitimate business will not use email to request account information or ask you to confirm a purchase.
- Use a credit card for purchases, which limits your liability for fraudulent charges. Debit cards do not have the same level of protection.
- Keep a record of your purchases and copies of confirmation pages, and compare them to your bank statements. Report discrepancies immediately.
- Before providing personal or financial information, check the website's privacy policy to understand the storage and use of your information. 📧

# Summer reading on the go

**B**efore you jump online to order your top picks to round out summer reading, you might consider tapping into what could become your own personal librarian. And you might even keep more money in your pocket.

Most libraries offer free digital resources. So, all you need is a library card, an internet connection and a digital device. Here are a few other resources that could make the digital literary journey for you or the young reader in your family much easier.

## OVERDRIVE:

Most libraries buy the digital licenses to book titles they think you would enjoy. Then, you can use your library card to reserve those free e-books. OverDrive can work with apps like Libby so you can send your e-book to a Kindle or other reading device.

[overdrive.com](http://overdrive.com)

## LIBRARY EXTENSION:

If you're crunched for time and enjoy browsing for digital books, Library Extension offers a free browser plug-in so you can see your library's digital book offerings while skimming titles on sites such as Amazon.com.

[libraryextension.com](http://libraryextension.com)

## PROJECT GUTENBERG:

The oldest digital library features some of the world's most popular classic literary titles. With more than 60,000 e-books to browse, you can read your favorites online or download them to your device.

[gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org)

## TUMBLEBOOKLIBRARY:

This interactive reading program takes existing picture books and turns them into talking, animated e-books. It also offers read-along chapter books. And another neat feature is that each book is offered in English, Spanish and French. Many school and public libraries offer the service to students or card holders. There's also a new TumbleBooks app.

[tumblebooks.com](http://tumblebooks.com)

## SORA:

OverDrive's educational reading app offers students access to e-books and audiobooks in multiple languages through participating school and local libraries. The app allows teachers to track the amount of time students spend reading. Sora makes notes as students read and can share those notes with teachers and classmates.

[meet.soraapp.com](http://meet.soraapp.com)

## SCHOLASTIC SUMMER READING:

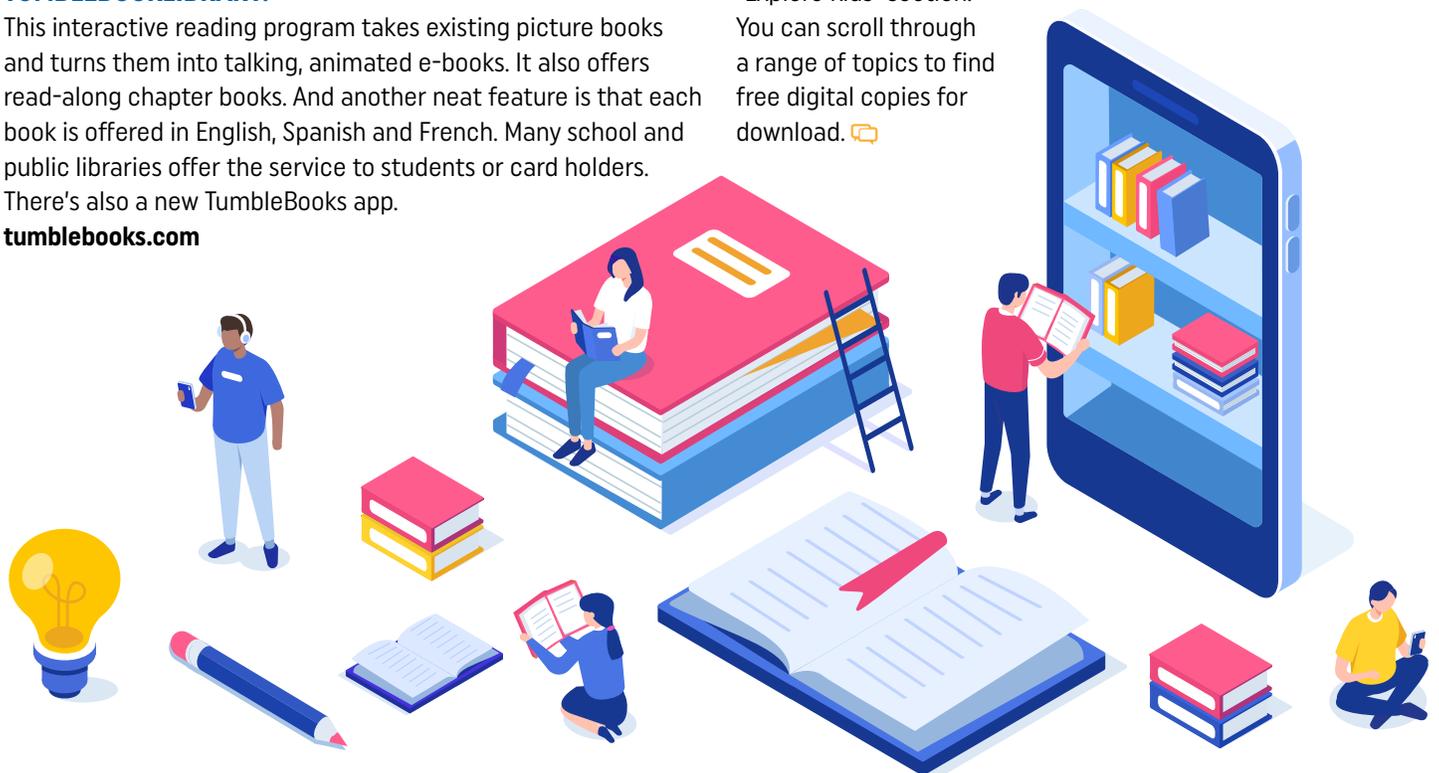
If your child needs a more structured summer reading experience, then you might want to check out the Scholastic Summer Reading Program. While mostly web based, it also offers some e-books. You'll have to create a Home Base account for your child through Scholastic. Home Base is a free, kid-safe, online digital community that offers fun reading-related activities.

[scholastic.com/site/summer/home.html](http://scholastic.com/site/summer/home.html)

## NOOK:

The Nook app is another option for finding free e-books for children. Just download it in the app store and look for the "Explore Kids" section.

You can scroll through a range of topics to find free digital copies for download. 📖



# Uniquely rural

## Robust internet service helps us keep the pace

The next time you are driving through our community, take a moment to reflect on where you call home. If you are anything like me, you appreciate the wide open spaces, the natural landscape, our unique towns and that you likely know your neighbor by first name.

Many of our urban neighbors aren't so fortunate. In fact, rural life is less common than you might think. Roughly 83% of our nation's residents live in urban areas. That is up from 64% in 1950, according to a 2020 report by the University of Michigan's Center for Sustainable Systems. If projections stay their course, by 2050 nearly 90% of the nation will live in communities considered urban.



**DAVE OSBORN**

Chief Executive Officer

What does that mean for communities like ours? In many ways, not much. Our way of life is tried, true and much loved. We know who we are, why we live here, and most of us want to be as far from the definition of city slicker that you can get.

There may be a change of the tide coming. A few years ago, the National Conference of State Legislatures noted an uptick in rural populations. The nationwide rural population increased by 33,000 more residents. Certainly not a monumental shift, but a change that could be a sign of things to come. The pandemic has many wondering if more

urbanites will consider leaving densely populated cities for communities like ours; that is a chapter we will have to wait to see how it unfolds.

Recent trends indicate that rural living is becoming increasingly rare. Typically, funding usually follows where the majority of the population resides. Federal and state governments gauge the population to determine where to invest in infrastructure. Private businesses look at demographics to decide where to locate stores, restaurants, and franchises. Where there are jobs, there is growth. We need every tool in our kit to balance the scales and need to pinpoint where we have the potential to excel. The answer is simple, the foundation of success is built on the fellow citizens in our community as you travel county roads, have a barbecue, pick up groceries, basically, those day-in and day-out moments of life.

How do I know this? Our community's daily actions make a company like ours possible. Our mission is to provide communications services to connect you not only to your neighbors, but to the world. We answer simply to you, our fellow citizens. We work diligently to bring the world to you in the most rural of settings.

We are continually focused on offering internet and phone services to build a bridge between you and the world of opportunities that rural areas have not always been as privy to. The infrastructure we bring to you may not always be noticed as you drive along our roads, but our presence is reflected in the connections being brought to you with every click you make.

As you enjoy the long summer ahead, take a few minutes to soak up that rural setting you call home and enjoy the conveniences of the world with the luxury of wide open spaces at your doorstep.

Sincerely,

Dave Osborn  
CEO, VTX1 Companies



VTX1 Companies

**Contact Us: 800-446-2031**

**Hours of Operation:**

- Business Offices:  
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Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-7 p.m.
- Technical Support:  
Mon. - Sun. 24/7

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Produced for VTX1 by:

**WORDSOUTH**  
A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY

On the Cover:



Wings & Reins Equine Rescue, founded by Jo Harp, has provided neglected and abused horses a safe place to heal since 1999.  
See story Page 12.

## Calling all shutterbugs!

Photo submissions for our upcoming 2022 calendar are now being accepted! If you are a current VTX1 Companies member or customer who enjoys capturing the beauty of the area where you live, we want to see your photographs!

We are seeking photos of landscapes, animals and everyday images featuring our service areas. Pictures of individuals will not be accepted. For areas that qualify for our contest, visit [vtx1.net/service-area](http://vtx1.net/service-area). The areas designated on the map in blue are part of Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc., and those in gray and red are part of VTX Communications LLC.

We will choose between three and twelve winners whose photographs will be featured in our 2022 calendar. Entrants can submit up to three photos, but only one photo per entrant can win. Photos must be sent digitally and must be high resolution. The contest began at 12 a.m. Central time on June 1 and ends at 11:59 p.m. Central time on Aug. 31. For additional details, entry form and the full contest rules, go to [vtx1.net/2022-vtx1-calendar-photo-contest](http://vtx1.net/2022-vtx1-calendar-photo-contest).



Congratulations to the members of VTX1 Companies' Marketing team, which was recently recognized as the second runner-up in the Broadcast Advertising Category of the 2020 Marketing eXcellence Awards. The awards were presented by NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association during its 2021 National Marketing and Sales Conference.



This national award is presented to NTCA member cooperatives to highlight the brightest and best marketing efforts within the industry. To sneak a peek at the award-winning entry, visit our YouTube page at this link: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9MQv0yaVAI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9MQv0yaVAI)

## We're a Gig-Certified Provider

Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. is now a certified Smart Rural Community Gig-Certified Provider. The distinction is only awarded to NTCA members capable of providing internet speeds of up to 1 Gbps.



The SRC Initiative is headed by NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association, and it highlights the efforts of broadband providers that deliver the highest broadband speeds to rural America. The infrastructure and robust networks provided by VTCI helps to power innovative economic development, education and telehealth services to our members throughout our South Texas service exchanges. All these efforts culminate in a better-connected South Texas.

## VTX1 IS MAKING HEADLINES

VTX1 Companies was recently featured in the May 2021 "Disruption Issue" of BOSS Magazine, a U.S.-based digital publication. Read the featured article, "Collective Connection," at [thebossmagazine.com](http://thebossmagazine.com) to learn what the present and future hold for VTX1 from the perspective of our CEO and executives. To read the article visit [vtx1.net](http://vtx1.net), click on the "About" section of our site and click on "Featured Articles" section of the page.

## HAPPY FOURTH OF JULY

VTX1 offices will be closed on Monday, July 5, to allow employees to spend the long Fourth of July weekend with their families. Have a safe and happy Independence Day!

Each year, more than 100,000 people visit Blanco State Park, known for its history and watery fun.

# SMALL & MIGHTY

A historic effort creates a legacy

Story by ANNE BRALY

As state parks go, Blanco State Park is not among the largest in Texas. In fact, in a state known for big things, Blanco encompasses just 1 mile along both sides of the Blanco River. But what it lacks in size at a mere 105 acres, it makes up with big fun in the great outdoors.

The park attracts visitors from all over, more than 100,000 annually. Among the favorite activities available are swimming in the shallow water and splashing down with a cannonball in the deeper water beyond the dam. There is camping along the banks of the Blanco, and many hiking paths crisscross the park. Anglers can fish for bass, catfish, rainbow trout and perch — no license required. You can also canoe, tube or kayak along the gentle current. It's all part of an average day of fun at Blanco.

## A PROUD WORKFORCE

But all of this wouldn't be possible without the work of the men who joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, known as the CCC, during the Great Depression. They did the backbreaking work required to create pavilions, picnic tables, walls and other structures on the land and dams on the river — all using stone quarried nearby.

The CCC, established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was a godsend to unemployed America after the Depression hit, sparked by the stock market crash on Oct. 24, 1929, a day that goes down in history as Black Thursday. By 1933, the unemployment rate in the United States stood at a staggering 24.9%.

"Imagine yourself with little food, less money and no job. This was the case for many during the Great Depression," says

Daniel Kellogg, park interpreter and volunteer coordinator at Blanco State Park.

In April 1933, the CCC began putting men to work across America, 50,000 in Texas alone. Blanco State Park became one of the first four Texas state parks to receive a CCC team — 177 CCC workers, all between the ages of 17 and 25, and a corps of engineers. The young men were paid \$30 monthly, most of which went home to their families, Kellogg says. In addition, they were provided clothing, food and medical care.

"The Civilian Conservation Corps was vital in the construction of state and national parks, the interstate system and many roads, bridges and dams across the nation," Kellogg says.

## BUILT STRONG

The craftsmanship of the men of the

CCC can be seen in many places around the park. They built two 7-foot-high dams of stone quarried from the riverbed. They constructed roads, two concrete bridges and a concession house made sturdy with 18-inch stone walls, pine timbers and shingles. There was also a “tree army” responsible for pruning trees and shrubs and planting shade and fruit trees.

Those trees still stand, and park structures were built so well that they remain in use some 90 years after the last stone was laid and the last nail was hammered. These include the CCC-built picnic area and pavilion, which may be reserved for group gatherings.

Glen Rose limestone in the park gives the terrain a stair-step appearance. The riverbed contains layers of limestone and softer marl — a natural mixture of clay and lime — that were formed when a shallow sea covered the area that is now the Hill Country.

Archaeologists have discovered fossil zones with ancient clams and oysters along the river, and on nearby property, dinosaur tracks have been preserved in the streambed. Today, you can grab your binoculars and look for deer, armadillos and a variety of birds living among the pines, hardwoods and other vegetation.

Blanco State Park offers a day — or a night or two — of ancient and modern history, adventures along the river and a break from the everyday. For a virtual tour of the park, visit [tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/blanco](http://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/blanco). 📱

## Citizens reshaped the landscape

From the depths of the Great Depression came one of the greatest investments in the American landscape. The Civilian Conservation Corps, known as the CCC, enlisted unemployed young men to work on land conservation and park development projects.

More than 50,000 CCC enrollees served in Texas. They worked six days a week under National Park Service and Army supervision. The CCC constructed parks from the ground up across the state, creating the Texas State Park system.

Some of the best examples of their work can be found at Blanco State Park, but other parks also showcase their efforts.

- **Bastrop State Park.** Native cedar, pine, oak and walnut were used in the construction of hand-carved mantels, roof beams and furniture for cabins made of native stone.
- **Davis Mountains State Park.** Of note is the CCC's 15-room pueblo-style lodge constructed in 1933 using handmade adobe bricks and wood cut from nearby. The ceilings were made of reeds collected along the Rio Grande.
- **Garner State Park.** Check out the massive fireplace in the mess hall that uses stone CCC workers extracted from a nearby creek.
- **Goliad State Park & Historic Site.** Between 1935 and 1941, the CCC conducted archaeological research at the park. Crews erected a grave marker at the site where Col. James Fannin surrendered to Mexican troops in 1836, and they constructed a stadium and auditorium.
- **Palo Duro Canyon State Park.** In addition to adding a water system and several bridges, the CCC quarried native stone to build El Coronado Lodge and six other cabins.



During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps built lasting structures with stone from nearby quarries.

Photos by Daniel Kellogg.

# CONNECTING A 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY CITY

## VTX1 partners with Brownsville to offer high-speed fiber internet

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

As the number of science- and technology-based businesses looking to operate in South Texas grows, so does the demand for broadband. The city of Brownsville is partnering with VTX1 to provide high-speed fiber to some of the city's most revered cultural institutions in what company and city officials hope is the first chapter of a long and productive relationship.

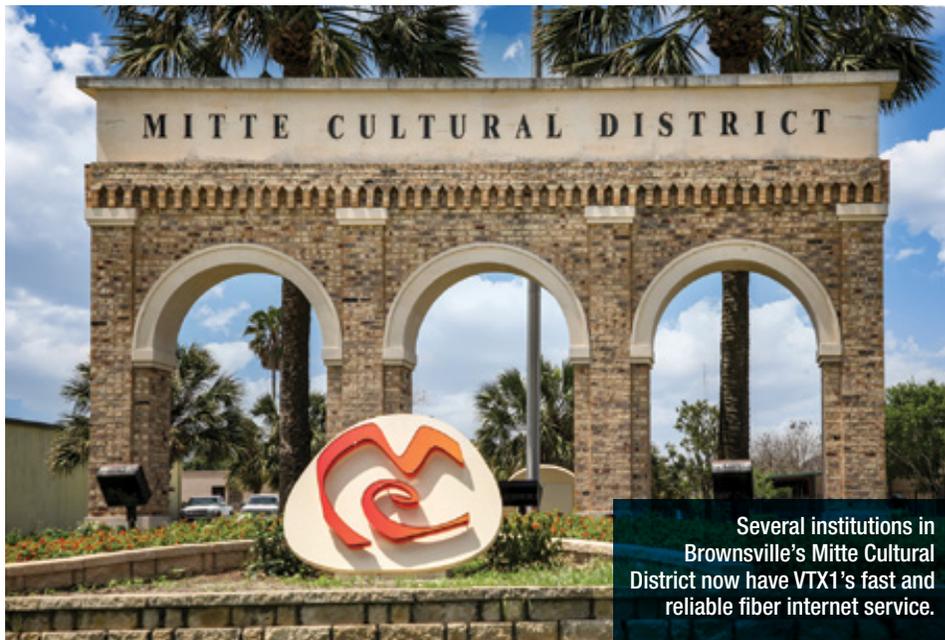
Brownsville is working to help meet the high demand for broadband by drafting a broadband master plan to implement fast and reliable internet service. "If you want to be a 21st century city, having great connectivity is something you need," says Ramiro Gonzalez, Brownsville's Director of Government and Community Affairs. "Any company that's looking to come into a community is going to ask about broadband capability. If you don't have that, you already have one arm behind your back."

### WHY FIBER?

Fiber optic technology, which sends information along glass strands as bursts of light, can move data across enormous distances and is less susceptible to interference. In addition to being capable of blazing speeds, fiber also has the bandwidth to allow for future technological advancements. In essence, it's future-proof.

Working with city officials, VTX1 mapped out an expansion of its fiber network into the Mitte Cultural District — all at no cost to the city. The initial rollout connected six locations, including the Gladys Porter Zoo, the Brownsville Museum of Fine Art and The Mitte Foundation.

"For us, it's a way to represent to the city of Brownsville that we're committed to being a partner and trying to help the community," says Jeff Patterson, VTX1



Several institutions in Brownsville's Mitte Cultural District now have VTX1's fast and reliable fiber internet service.

Sales Manager. "The people struggling with internet speed are going to struggle in the real world to keep up with people who have quality internet. If there's something that we can do to help, we definitely want to do that."

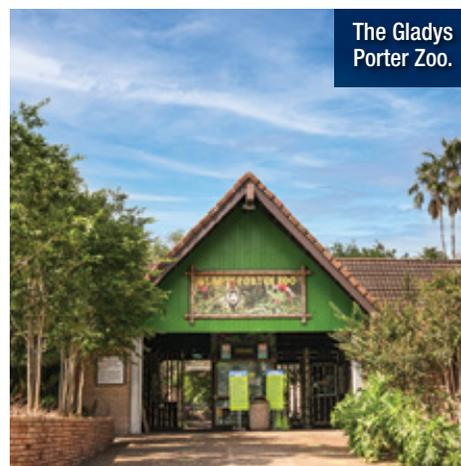
The first locations to receive fiber through this expansion went through a careful selection process to provide the biggest benefit to the greatest number of people and to serve as highly visible examples of what's possible with top-of-the-line broadband technology. "Having a fiber partner that is willing to invest or cost share is a critical component of addressing the issue," Gonzalez says. "VTX1 is a partner to solving, at least in this small project, a big issue."

### FIBER OPENS A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITIES

What is now the Mitte Cultural District began roughly 25 years ago when The Mitte Foundation funded the restoration of Dean Porter Park. Roy F. Mitte, one of the foundation's founders, grew up in Brownsville.



Brownsville Museum of Fine Art.



The Gladys Porter Zoo.

The Mitte Foundation doesn't operate any programs itself. Rather, it awards grants to other organizations' educational and cultural endeavors. The foundation's board members, who are scattered across the country, make funding decisions. Fast and reliable internet enables video conferencing and boosts efficiency. "Having this capability right in the location where we're funding is beneficial," says Coleith Molstad, the foundation's executive director. "We can walk outside and show board members what's going on. Having participants come to the office and be able to present to our board is helpful to the board members who aren't physically there."

The Brownsville Museum of Fine Art's previous internet provider was unable to provide consistently reliable and fast service. The extra bandwidth from VTX1 will allow the museum to expand its educational offerings and will make the facility a more attractive destination for area school boards and other organizations, which rent space in the building for meetings and other events. Those rental fees go back into funding the museum's programs and operations. "What we're doing here in the Mitte Cultural District is focusing on educational programs, making it inviting for the community and making Brownsville more of a destination for tourists," Executive Director Deyanira Ramirez says. "Sharing what we're doing on social media is the best way and easiest way to get access to those people. We're working really hard to promote Brownsville."

### LIFTING LIMITATIONS

News of the fiber rollout was cause for celebration at the Gladys Porter Zoo. "Everybody was just completely shocked in a positive way," says Sergio Garcia, the zoo's education curator. "It's something that has been on our dream list and is now possible."

Previously, about one-third of the 29-acre facility, which welcomes about 450,000 visitors a year, had no internet service. That lack of connectivity resulted in a wide range of constraints, which affected everything from where staff could process credit card payments to how they could present their educational programs. "The pandemic just underscored all those limitations," Garcia says. "We were painfully aware of what we could and could not do."

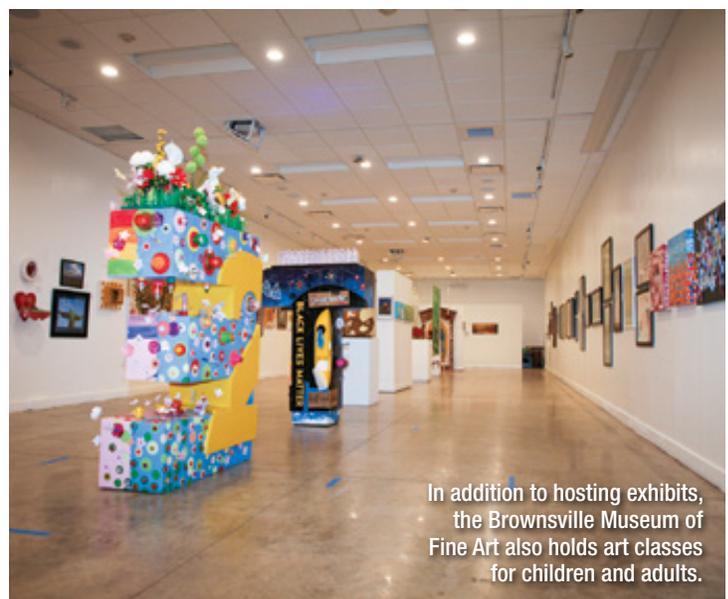
Now, with VTX1 fiber connecting the entire property to the internet, not only are those limitations gone, but a bright and exciting future is now in sight. "We have a list of things we want to be able to do and that includes being able to provide live distance learning opportunities that we've been planning for a while but not been able to do because of our limited bandwidth," Garcia says. "I do see some major changes in the services offered to the public at the zoo as well as in the community. I just can't emphasize enough what a tremendous opportunity this is for us. Because of where we're located and the high number of youth in this area, any improvement is a major improvement. We're looking forward to being able to apply and use our new gift." 📧



The zoo welcomes nearly 450,000 visitors a year.



Palm trees line the streets in the Mitte Cultural District.



In addition to hosting exhibits, the Brownsville Museum of Fine Art also holds art classes for children and adults.

# ON WITH THE SHOW

Virtual platforms keep performances going on and off the stage

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Less than a week before the Northeast Alabama Community College Theatre Department's virtual spring production of "Dear Edwina," the show hit a major snag. With just one dress rehearsal left before the musical's live debut, one of the lead actors had to drop out of the show, leaving assistant director Halle Huber to step in.

It was just one more twist in an already unusual season that saw NACC's Theatre Department in Rainsville, Alabama, put on two virtual productions. Much of the early preparation for "Dear Edwina" occurred over Zoom, an inconvenience that suddenly came in handy when Huber needed to brush up on her part fast.

"Because the video and choreography was already online, I was able to look at those and make sure I understood the correct movements," Huber says. "We even did the vocal rehearsals online, so we had some of those tracks to help me understand what part I needed to sing, as well."

Putting those remote practice sessions together was a challenge for performers used to playing off each other. For Director of Theatre Kayleigh Smith, it often required drawing the movements each

performer needed to make on the back of script pages and holding them up to the screen.

"It's crazy to block a show and do choreography without being on the stage," Smith says. "Once we did get on stage we realized one girl had learned everything backwards. So she had to flip everything around in her head on the fly."

## VIRTUAL ESCAPE

The cast's final performance didn't take place in front of an audience but in front of cameras. The entire show was filmed live and made available to stream on demand via the ShowTix4U platform. Additional learning materials for local middle and elementary school students and teachers were also available.

While the remote preparations were a challenge, they forced performers to take an even greater degree of responsibility for their parts. "One of the cast members told me they've never been in a show before where they were this ready and this prepared for the performance," Smith says. "I'm really hoping they carry that with them forever."

With one more virtual show on the schedule this summer, NACC



Photos courtesy of Trey Gilliland and Lauren Cantrell.

A production of "Dear Edwina" by the Northeast Alabama Community College Theatre Department went online to reach its audience.

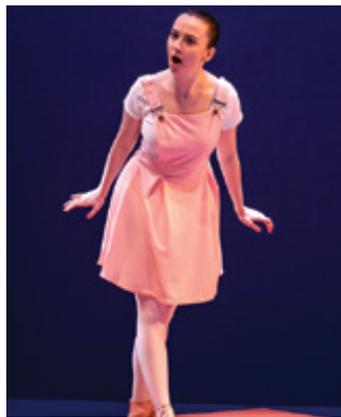
Theatre is on course for its first entirely virtual season. That wasn't the department's ideal plan for the last year but NACC President Dr. David Campbell is impressed with how creatively everyone involved has adapted.

"They have done some outstanding virtual productions that have given our students experience and a way to display their talents, while at the same time, keeping everyone safe through all the COVID-19 prevention techniques," he says.

In addition, the digital format opened the doors to greater accessibility to shows and new opportunities for students interested in film. Smith also hopes that it has provided a respite during the pandemic for people who haven't had the same access to the live experiences they enjoy.

"We were able to provide a little bit of art, and hopefully a virtual escape, safely," she says. "Theater has been healing for us doing it, but also for audiences. I do think it's an escape from what everyone's going through right now and it can be a healing thing." 🗨️

The NACC production of "Dear Edwina" is available to stream on demand through April 19, 2022. Visit [showtix4u.com](http://showtix4u.com) and search "NACC" for more information.



Photos courtesy of Trey Gilliland and Lauren Cantrell.

## NEW HORIZONS

For Texas Ballet Theater, digital performances provided an opportunity to expand the horizons of ballet beyond the traditional stage. In its two-part "The Poetry of Expression" series, company dancers choreographed their own pieces specifically for the digital medium, using the entire Dallas-Fort Worth area as their backdrop.

Dancers and choreographers collaborated with local businesses and nonprofits to bring community landmarks and locations with personal significance into the performances. The result was an innovative showcase filmed at familiar locations like downtown Fort Worth, Firestone & Robertson Distilling, the Benbrook Dam and the Kimbell Art Museum. The prerecorded performances were available for streaming in March and April in lieu of the nonprofit dance company's traditional spring lineup.

For more information, visit [texasballettheater.org](http://texasballettheater.org).

"We hope audiences enjoy a new kind of performance experience through these productions," executive director Vanessa Logan says. "They show us all how the beauty and art of ballet can be found anywhere, even in unexpected places."



Digital performances gave the Texas Ballet Theater a new outlet for expression.



## SOMETHING NEW

For more information, visit [mnopera.org](http://mnopera.org).

More than a year after it put live performances on hold, Minnesota Opera continued to find new ways to connect with its community with the premiere of "Apart Together" in April. The free virtual program featured original performances from members of the opera's Resident Artist Program and the orchestra, ranging from spoken word to piano pieces.

The goal of the project was to give artists a chance to step outside their traditional creative roles within the opera. Resident artists who typically perform pieces composed by others were given the opportunity to pursue their own visions, while audiences could see orchestra musicians perform in a more intimate capacity.

"I really think the future is on the internet, video and how you connect with people through this form we're not used to," says Joey Leppek, resident tenor. "I think getting these kinds of skills in how to create something that's effective on screen is helpful for us, and I hope all artists out there feel permission to get out there and try something new."



# A stable place to heal

Wings and Reins Equine Refuge offers safety and solace to animals in need

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

**T**he first night a traumatized horse spends at Wings and Reins Equine Refuge in Devine, Texas, is its first step toward a better life.

Founder Jo Harp spends that night in the barn alongside the horse, letting it know it isn't alone and starting to build the bond that's vital to its future. "That first night is the most important," she says. "The priority is always to rehabilitate the horse, whether that's physically or mentally. We've got to get it healthy."

Before she rescued a horse named Flame in 1999, Harp, a former professional show jumper, considered herself something of an equine expert. "That horse taught me that I hardly knew anything," she says. "She taught me more than any trainer ever did. There are so many things I've had to learn and adapt to depending on what's standing in front of me."

Once the horse's physical health has been restored, the retraining begins. Harp is the facility's sole trainer, and while she's working to teach a horse that humans can be trusted, she alone touches the animal. "It's a lot easier for them to learn that from one person than all of my volunteers," she says. "And I need to make sure they're safe. I'm not going to put my volunteers in with a horse I don't know very well."

Once she's convinced the horse is ready, Harp begins introducing other people to prepare the animal for adoption.

However, some horses are too traumatized and become permanent residents of Wings and Reins. And in instances when Harp can't take in a horse, Wings and Reins can still help. The organization runs a Facebook-based rehoming program that



Jo taking Flicka, left and Bella out through the flowers in the yard.

Photography by David Pike.



Flicka prancing through the grass.



Wings and Reins also rescues donkeys like Harley, who enjoys grazing on flowers.

## How to help

Wings and Reins couldn't fulfill its mission to rescue equines in need without the continued support of donors and volunteers — and more help is always welcome.

"The more volunteers we have, the more attention the horses get," says founder Jo Harp. "I will never turn down volunteers. Many hands make light work, and the quicker the work gets done, the faster we can get loving on those horses, which is what they need to counteract what's been done to them."

No specific experience is necessary. All that's required is an affection for horses, a little free time and the desire to lend a hand. Volunteers don't even need to be local. "You could live in Tennessee and volunteer for me," Harp says. "I need people to research and find things for me, make phone calls and do fundraisers."

Financial support and material contributions like utility poles and drilling pipe are also necessary, says Harp, who hopes for a corporate sponsor. She recommends anyone considering donating to any nonprofit organization use a vetting service like GuideStar, which details how charities spend their donations. "One hundred percent of Wings and Reins donations go to caring for the animals," she says.

For more information on Wings and Reins Equine Refuge, visit [wingsandreins.com](http://wingsandreins.com) or call Jo Harp at 210-471-1377.



works to connect people ready to adopt a horse with animals in need of a safe and loving home. "We have such a huge following that we've rehomed horses within 12 hours," she says. "Just because we can't take it in doesn't mean we can't help get it to a good home."

Regardless of where the horses end up living, Harp finds satisfaction and a sense of purpose in improving the lives of the animals. "The reason I love horses is because a horse is the only animal I know that doesn't care what species its best friend is," she says. "They'll make best friends with a cat. Horses are just amazing — they just see the truth about you."

### DISASTER RELIEF

Animals are often forgotten in the aftermath of natural disasters — but not by Wings and Reins. The need for help can last for months after the event is over. The animals still need to be fed and taken care of while their owners are repairing fences and rebuilding barns. "When Hurricane Harvey hit, we hauled 14 horses and four donkeys out of Rockport and took them to a safe place," Harp says. "We provided hay, food and vet care for three months."

All disaster relief services come at no

cost to the animals' owners. "They've already got to pay to rebuild everything. They can't afford all of that," Harp says.

### LIVES ARE ON THE LINE

Rock Solid Internet and Telephone's fast and dependable broadband service, a VTX1 Company, keeps Wings and Reins' lines of communication open 24/7.

Because cell phone service at Harp's 10.2-acre property is spotty, her phone is set up for Wi-Fi calling. Instead of connecting calls through a cellular carrier like Verizon or AT&T, her phone makes the connection through the internet, leaving Harp secure in the knowledge that she'll never miss a call.

She also uses the internet to post content and videos to Wings and Reins' social media and YouTube accounts, as well as to correspond with donors and send receipts for their tax-deductible donations. But she says Wi-Fi calling has really been a game-changer, especially in situations where every moment counts.

"If I didn't have the Wi-Fi calling, people who were calling for help or even me calling a vet if I needed help — those phone calls couldn't happen," she says. "Having the internet service that I have has literally been a lifesaver for me." 📞



## A fresh angle on redfish

### Catch the secret to a wonderful meal

**W**hen fishing the Gulf waters of the Lone Star State, you're likely to encounter a multitude of Texas fish species, but few are so highly regarded as redfish. Once an endangered species due to the introduction of blackened redfish on restaurant menus, the fad has since calmed down, and now redfish are found in abundance, including in area Texas fish markets.

How do you know if redfish is fresh and ready for the frying pan? Follow the same test method as with any other fish. It takes only seconds to determine the best.

The flesh should bounce back when pressed.

The eyes should be shiny and clear, and they should bulge somewhat.

And the smell should be mild — not overwhelming.

Like most white-fish fillets, redfish is excellent for frying and serving with hushpuppies and coleslaw, and there are an ocean of other ways to enjoy this favorite saltwater fish. Here are a few:



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

### CAJUN BLACKENED REDFISH

Chef Paul Prudhomme popularized blackened redfish, but it was the Cajuns who first made it. This recipe is from Publix.

- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon lemon pepper
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/4 cups Italian dressing
- 4 redfish fillets (4 to 6 ounces each)

Preheat the oven to 350 F. In a medium saucepan over low heat, melt the butter; let it cool to room temperature. Meanwhile, in a medium bowl, combine the seasonings. Set aside. Dip the fillets in the melted butter, then coat with the seasoning mixture.

In a large skillet over high heat, sear the fish on each side for 2 minutes or until slightly charred, then place them in a baking dish and pour the Italian dressing over each fillet. Cover and bake the fish in the preheated oven for 30 minutes or until flaky and tender.

## BLACKENED REDFISH TACOS

- 1 1/2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon brown sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 1/2 pounds redfish fillets
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 6 (6-inch) flour or corn tortillas
- 1/2 cup crumbled Cotija cheese
- Coleslaw for topping
- Sriracha or other hot sauce

In a small bowl, combine the smoked paprika, garlic powder, dried oregano, onion powder, cumin, salt, brown sugar and cayenne pepper. Generously coat both sides of your redfish fillets, and then rub the seasonings in.

Heat the oil in a heavy-bottomed pan over medium-high heat. Once heated, add the redfish fillets. Cook for 4-5 minutes on each side or until the outside is blackened and the fish flakes easily with a fork.

Remove the fish from the heat. Warm the tortillas in a non-stick skillet over medium heat, cooking for about 30 seconds on each side.

Break up the redfish into 2- to 3-inch pieces. Distribute the fish evenly between the tortillas, and top evenly with Cotija cheese and a little coleslaw and sriracha sauce.

## DEEP-FRIED REDFISH

- 1 cup of flour
- 3/4 cup of cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons of oil
- 1 1/2 teaspoons of baking powder
- 1 1/2 teaspoons of salt
- 1 egg
- 3/4 cups of water, or more if needed to make a thin batter
- 2-3 pounds redfish fillets
- Salt
- Peanut or canola oil (These oils heat hotter for quickly frying the fish.)

### Tartar Sauce:

- 1/2 cup mayonnaise (store-bought or homemade)
- 1 small dill pickle, chopped very small (3 tablespoons)
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice, plus more to taste
- 1 tablespoon capers, chopped, optional
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh dill or 1 teaspoon dried dill
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

For fish: Whisk together the flour, cornstarch, 2 tablespoons of oil, baking powder, salt, egg and water in a medium bowl and set aside. Cut the redfish fillets into the desired size and place them on a paper towel.

Salt the fish. Let it sit for about 20 minutes, then pat it dry with a paper towel, removing excess salt and any moisture. Place fillets in the batter, covering all sides the best you can.

Heat the oil — enough to fill a deep fryer or 8-quart pan about halfway up the sides — to 350-375 F. Place the fish into the hot oil with tongs or by holding them over the surface of the oil and laying them down gently, instead of dropping them in, to avoid splashing the oil.

Cook until the batter appears golden brown, then remove the fillets from the oil and place them on paper towels to remove any excess oil. Let them sit for 5 minutes before serving.

While the fish is resting, make tartar sauce: Combine the mayonnaise, chopped pickles, lemon juice, capers, dill, Worcestershire sauce and mustard in a small bowl and stir until well blended and creamy. Season with salt and pepper. Taste, then adjust with additional lemon juice, salt and pepper.

Serve the fish with tartar sauce.





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