

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2021



VTX1 Companies

# COMPASS

VOL. 2, NO. 5

## SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS

Teach For America works for equitable education



**OUT ON THEIR OWN**  
Catching up with VTCL scholarship winners

**CREATIVE COMMUNITIES**  
Online connections inspire photographers



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## Building a connected future

As the nation’s leaders work to improve the infrastructure that supports our economy and our communities, there is a growing understanding of just how vital broadband service is to rural areas.

It’s important rural providers have the resources and regulatory stability they need to connect areas that often have no other options for service. The challenges those providers face go beyond simply building an internet network that must keep pace as the demands of users grow from decade to decade.

Recently, representatives of several cooperatives — among them, Golden West Telecommunications Cooperative, South Dakota; the Yelcot Telephone Company, Mountain Home, Arkansas; and Totelcom Communications, De Leon, Texas — made sure members of Congress heard this message.

Similarly, months of coping with a global pandemic proved the success of rural broadband. Countless households, businesses, schools and others leaned on their local internet providers during these challenging times. However, there is still work to do in deploying networks and delivering robust and affordable services.

This is where public policy can continue to play an important role, setting standards for broadband infrastructure and leveraging the know-how of community-based experts, like the company providing your internet service today.

I’ve been delighted at the bipartisan nature of these discussions and the understanding that broadband kept the American economy humming during the pandemic. Now, we just need to ensure the lasting investment needed to future-proof this powerful system. 📶

# ‘SIX PILLARS’ OF RURAL BROADBAND

Fast internet builds successful communities

Rural broadband’s influence extends throughout every community where fast internet networks are available. How many of these “six pillars” of rural broadband play a role in your daily life?



### 1. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Housing values increase and businesses move more product when rural communities have broadband.



### 2. PUBLIC HEALTH

Instead of driving 50 miles to a health center, a telemedicine visit can bring care into the home.



### 3. TELEWORKING

Remote work creates fresh opportunities.

### 4. EDUCATION

Educators from grade school to colleges and universities are reaching students remotely.



### 5. PUBLIC SAFETY

Broadband networks can improve the communications systems used by emergency responders.

### 6. QUALITY OF LIFE

Thanks to broadband, young people find rural communities more appealing.



These pillars of rural broadband are based on the work of Christopher Ali, an associate professor in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Virginia. He is also the author of “Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity.” 🗨️

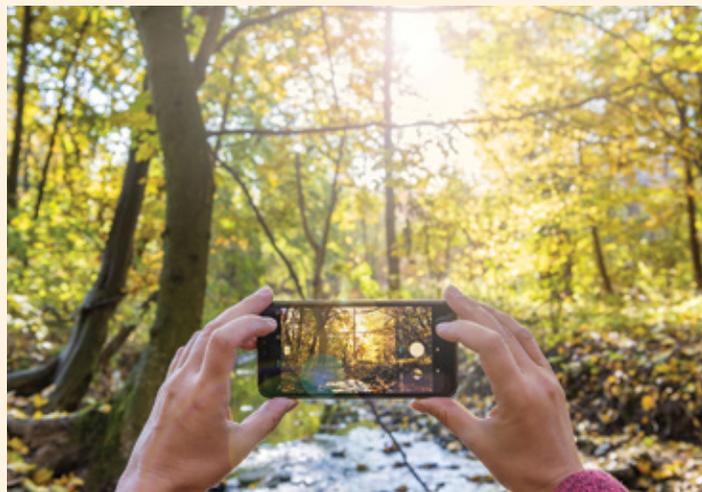


# Better-looking videos are just a few steps away

Thanks to smartphones, recording and sharing videos has never been easier. Whether you're capturing precious moments to share with friends and family, showcasing your talents or documenting a moment the rest of the world needs to see, a high-quality video helps get your message across loud and clear.

## Here are some tips to help make sure your next video is your best one yet.

- **Clean the lens** — Sometimes it's easy to overlook the obvious. We're touching our phones constantly. We're taking them out of our pockets and purses multiple times a day, so they're bound to pick up a few fingerprints and smudges along the way. Take a second and give the lens a couple of swipes with a moistened cleaning wipe. No wipes? No worries — a quick breath and a swab with your shirttail can get the job done, too.
- **Orientation** — Make sure to turn your phone horizontally when shooting videos. Shooting horizontally, also called landscape orientation, results in a more aesthetically pleasing experience for viewers, and it looks great across multiple platforms, especially on wide screens. Shooting this way also allows you to capture more of the surroundings in the video.
- **Stabilization** — Nothing is harder to watch than a shaky video. A simple way to make your video better is by using two hands to hold the phone steady. Instead of extending your arms, tuck your elbows in close to your sides and hold the phone closer to your chest. If a professional-quality video is what you're after, consider investing in a tripod or a gimbal to give your arms a rest. Also, many newer phones now include image stabilization features that can correct for inadvertent movements during shooting.
- **Composition** — Take a moment to compose your shot before pressing the record button. For example, if you are making a video in a controlled environment, perhaps filming a tutorial in your home, look around and make sure the background is clear of anything you wouldn't want people to see.
- **Lighting** — When recording indoors have the subject face a window if possible. If there is no natural light, consider purchasing an LED light ring. Light rings have become very popular and are an inexpensive way to make your video look professional. Avoid backlit settings, which can erase a person's features on video and replace them with a dark figure instead.
- **Zoom cautiously** — While the digital zoom option is a nice feature to have, using it while recording can result in an awkward-looking video. Instead, to keep the image crisp, take the time to frame the shot before recording and avoid using the zoom. Unless you're planning to use the zoom distortion as an effect, get as close to the subject as you safely can to preserve the image quality.



# Competing for jobs

## Broadband service puts us in the game

The Broadband Industry is fiercely competitive. Even more competitive is the race to create jobs and attract talent to live within the communities we serve. The competition isn't just in the next county; every community is in the game.



**DAVE OSBORN**

Chief Executive Officer

Broadband service in our communities gives us a leg up being competitive for job creation. It is essential and critical because it's important to businesses of all types and sizes.

Small manufacturers benefit from speedy broadband service because resources such as accounting and customer support depend on broadband. Similarly, video calls are now just a normal part of business life. For communities hoping to recruit employers such as these, fast broadband access is mandatory.

Changes related to remote work were on the rise even before the pandemic. Remote work is becoming much more commonplace, and if broadband is readily available in our community it is highly attractive to such workers. After all,

the big-city pace isn't for everyone.

Rural America has stepped up its game, the West Virginia Tourism Office promised to pay remote workers \$12,000 to relocate to the state. This proves the stakes are high, attracting workers where broadband is available. I'm not suggesting we should pay people to relocate to our community because I believe our communities are enough of a draw.

We live in friendly, affordable and beautiful surroundings. We offer a fast, reliable network required to make remote work more than just a possibility. The speed and affordability of our broadband service is comparable to — and often greatly exceeds — service in major cities. In many ways, we are a better place for remote work than metropolitan areas.

This is about more than just jobs; we are also building for the future. Our students can learn the skills they need to be competitive. The majority of colleges and universities now offer online courses. Students about to enter the workforce can broaden their knowledge and skill sets through online learning.

People looking to grow professionally now have similar resources available to continue their education and open new doors for advancement or fresh new careers. Many of these classes are best experienced through live video, which relies on a high-speed broadband connection.

Our affordable living costs can give young businesses an edge, allowing them to keep overhead lower than their competitors. They can move large amounts of data, share information and hold online meetings to operate. Thanks to fast broadband access, even home based-startups can link to a worldwide market, once only accessible to enterprise business in big city offices.

Throughout South Texas, there are signs of vitality in rural economies and broadband service is the foundation making it all possible.

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.
- Technical Support:  
Mon.-Sun. • 24/7

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On the Cover:



Teach For America corps members have a positive influence on students like Julian Barrera, a freshman at Yale University.  
*See story Page 12.*

# MANDATORY 10-DIGIT DIALING



Ten-digit dialing will become mandatory this fall. Here's what that means for you:

## What is 10-digit dialing?

All calls will require you to dial the area code + telephone number.

## Who will be affected?

Anyone with a telephone number from the 956, 361 and 830 area codes.

## When does it start?

Ten-digit dialing becomes mandatory on Oct. 24, 2021. Afterward, any calls dialed using seven digits will not be completed, and a recording will play stating the call cannot be completed as dialed.

## How can I prepare?

Start dialing 10 digits now to get into the habit, and by the time the change is required, it'll be second nature.

Any equipment that is programmed to dial out — fax machines, security systems, medical monitoring devices, call forwarding services, etc. — will need to be reprogrammed to 10 digits.

Ensure that anything with your personal contact information on it, like websites, stationery and personal and pet identification tags, is updated to include your area code.

## What won't change?

- Your phone number
- Your coverage area
- The cost of a call
- You will continue to dial 1+ area code + telephone number for all long distance calls
- Dialing three digits to reach Relay Services — 711 and Emergency Services — 911
- Any 211, 311, 411, 511, 611 or 811 services available in your community can still be reached by dialing their three-digit codes
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can still be reached by dialing 1-800-273-TALK (8255)



## Congratulations, Roy

Congratulations to VTX1 Companies' Chief Human Resource Officer, Roy Sheneman, Ph.D., who was named one of the Top 10 Influential HR Leaders for 2021 by Industry Era Magazine, a Human Resources industry publication.

Over the course of his 18-year tenure with the company, Roy has implemented training and development for the company's leaders. According to Roy, a successful leader must continually develop their self-awareness and self-confidence.

When referencing his HR Team and what they have worked to create, Roy emphasizes "Together, we have established a culture that has reinforced the ideal that all employees will be challenged to continually learn and hone their skill set."

With a clear vision and purpose such as this, there is no doubt that Roy is leading the way for VTX1 Companies' growth that is undoubtedly set for future success.



**GO GREEN!**  
with Paperless Billing

Paperless billing has now launched for internet members and customers. As part of VTX1's Go Green initiative, digital billing is environmentally friendly, gets bills out more quickly and eliminates lost or delayed mail. To opt out of this service, contact the Customer Experience Department at 1-800-446-2031.



*Labor Day*

VTX1 offices will be closed on Monday, Sept. 6, for Labor Day.

# A nutty celebration

## Pecan Fest touts Seguin's famous crop

Story by ANNE BRALY

Seguin celebrates its famous nut and the many cultures that make up the town each October.

In a typical year, Pecan Fest draws 5,000 attendees who come and break out of their shells for food, fun, fellowship and everything pecan, including a pecan-shelling contest, tours of Pape Pecan House and its Nutcracker Museum, and pecan treats galore. This year's festival is set for Oct. 30. For the latest information, go to [seguintexas.gov](http://seguintexas.gov).

The history of pecans is deeply rooted in Texas. This is especially true in Seguin, a town that touts itself as the Pecan Capital of Texas — and for good reason.

As early as the 1500s, the Guadalupe River winding its way through Seguin was known as the River of Nuts. “Even today, pecan trees line the Guadalupe River,” says Kyle Kramm, director of Seguin’s Convention and Visitors Bureau as well as Seguin Main Street, a program that celebrates and promotes the city’s historic downtown.

### THAT'S ONE BIG PECAN

Seguin can take bragging rights as home to the largest pecan, manmade, in the world. But it's something that proved to be a very competitive claim, Kramm explains.

In 1962, the World's Largest Pecan — about 5 feet wide and made of concrete — was erected in downtown Seguin. It still sits in front of the Guadalupe County Courthouse. But in the 1980s, Brunswick, Missouri, built a larger, 12-foot-wide

pecan and stripped Seguin's monument of its coveted title.

Not a city to be outdone, the leadership class from the Seguin Chamber of Commerce took it upon itself to reclaim the World's Largest Pecan title for Seguin in 2011. Today, the record holder is located at the Big Red Barn at the Texas Agriculture Education and Heritage Center. The whopper of a nut is 16 feet long, 8 feet tall and made of fiberglass.

Additionally, Seguin is home to the World's Largest Mobile Pecan. It's 10 feet long and sits outside Pape Pecan House. Inside the store is the Nutcracker Museum, where the vast nutcracker collection of Kenneth Pape, one of the area's major pecan growers, is on display.

Pape and his relatives own 200 acres dotted with native pecan trees along the Guadalupe River. Pape says his grandfather, Gus Fisher, started it all back in 1890 as a way to make a living. Pape's pecans come from 500-year-old native trees, as well as planted and grafted trees.

### NATIVE NUTS

Pecans are one of the major tree nuts native to North America, and by the early 20th century, the Texas pecan industry was such a success the state legislature declared the pecan tree the official state tree. According to the Texas Pecan Board, in a good season Texas pecan trees produce around 50 million pounds of nuts, making it one of the most



Photo courtesy of the Seguin Main Street Program and Convention and Visitors Bureau.



important industries in the Lone Star State. And Guadalupe County, where Seguin is located, is one of its largest pecan-producing counties.

The Seguin area is perfect for pecan trees thanks to its position near the river. “The river and river bottom soils are ideal for pecan trees, as they are deep-rooted and need well-drained soil,” says Bob Whitley, executive director of the Texas Pecan Board.

There are more than 1,000 different varieties of pecans grown in the United States, and Texas has many of them, according to Whitley, a pecan grower and former extension agent for Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Some of the more popular varieties are Desirable, Pawnee, Caddo, Sioux and Kanza.

“I judge a lot of shows every year, and we will have about 30 different varieties entered in individual shows and upward of 100-150 varieties in the state show in July,” Whitley says.

### ON THE MENU

Pecan trees are not only grown in area orchards. They are a common sight along roads, in parks and scattered around yards. And the nuts they produce are prominent on the menus of area restaurants, too, which take advantage of the town’s place in the world of pecans.

“We pride ourselves in supporting our local farmers,” says Catrina Chesworth, manager of Court Street Coffee Shop in downtown Seguin.

Court Street gets its pecans from Felty Farms, which belongs to the restaurant’s owner, Heather Felty. She uses her nuts in every recipe calling for pecans, such as the popular strawberry pecan salad and a made-from-scratch banana bread that tastes even better served with a warm cup of pecan coffee.

“We’re always looking for more ways to use them,” Chesworth says. ☺

Seguin claims the title of Pecan Capital of Texas, a well-earned distinction celebrated each October.

## A PECAN FEAST

There are several restaurants in Seguin that take advantage of the local pecan harvest. Here are a few places to enjoy the tasty nuts:

- **Seguin Brewing Co.** brews its own honey pecan ale, which is great paired with its honey pecan wings.
- **1916 Bar & Bistro** serves pecan-crusting salmon.
- **Court Street Coffee Shop** serves pecan coffee, as well as a mouthwatering strawberry pecan salad.
- **Sweet Treats** is the local bakery, and its signature cupcakes include pecan pie and bacon bourbon pecan varieties.
- **Seguin Coffee Co.** serves an interesting pecan pie coffee drink.
- Saddle up with a pecan old fashioned at **Schultz Saloon**.
- Or, for a good-old slice of pecan pie — declared the official state dessert in 2013 — stop by one of Seguin’s barbecue joints, such as **Davila’s** (418 Main St.) and **Johnny’s** (6036 Highway 123).

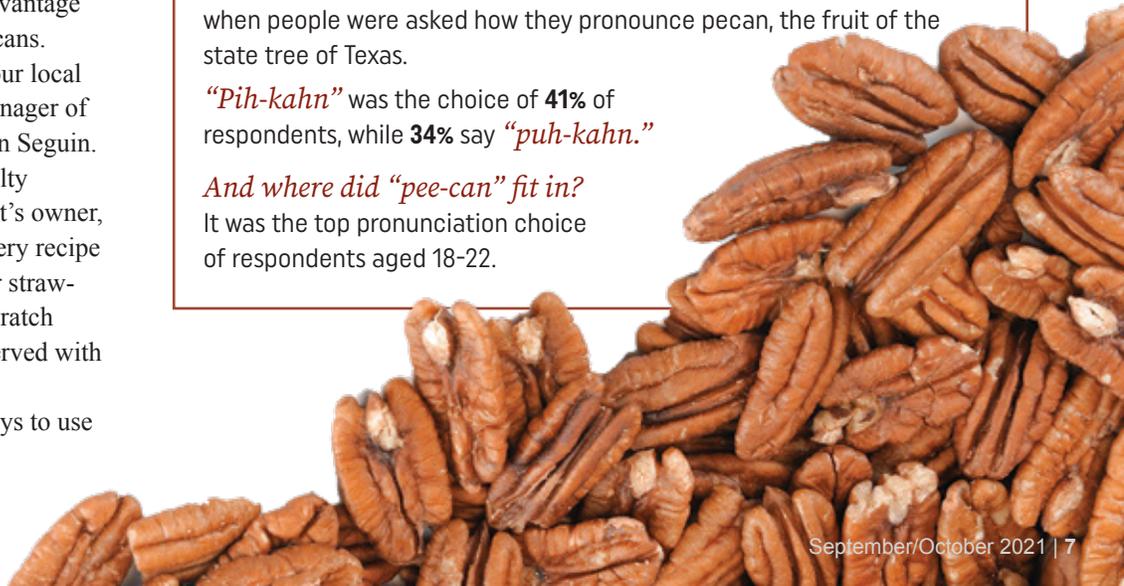
### How do you say pecan?

A survey from the Texas Pecan Board revealed some interesting answers when people were asked how they pronounce pecan, the fruit of the state tree of Texas.

“*Pih-kahn*” was the choice of **41%** of respondents, while **34%** say “*puh-kahn.*”

*And where did “pee-can” fit in?*

It was the top pronunciation choice of respondents aged 18-22.



# Which service do you need: INTERNET OR STREAMING?

The answer is  
**BOTH!**

Movies, TV, music and much, much more can stream right to your devices. Listen to music on a tablet. Start a movie on your computer and then finish on your television. The flexibility and choices seem endless, and it's all thanks to your VTX1 internet connection.

But did you ever think about what's happening, how these services work together and why quality internet service is the essential companion to streaming services?

With your Internet service from VTX1, you will have access to all the content and services the internet has to offer.

## What's The Difference?

### INTERNET SERVICE FROM VTX1

- Your connection to unlimited free and paid content
- The pipeline that brings online services into your home

*Your internet connection from VTX1 is the first step toward accessing a world of content and services!*

### STREAMING & ONLINE SERVICES

- Entertainment such as Netflix, Hulu, YouTube TV, Spotify, gaming
- Telehealth, remote learning, online shopping, work from home & other capabilities

*These services and more are available to you across your VTX1 internet connection!*

## Making the connection — three simple steps for you:

1

Upgrading your home to the internet — that's the first step. VTX1 is ready to serve with a fast, reliable network and helpful support to answer your questions.

2

Choose your streaming services. There are plenty of paid options and a wealth of free choices, too.

3

The last step? Enjoy. Thanks to VTX1, you can bring the best streaming services to your computer, Smart TV, gaming console and more.

# Forging their futures

## VTCI scholarship winners are seizing opportunities

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. knows education benefits individuals and strengthens communities. Since 1998, VTCI has helped 296 students continue their education by awarding more than \$2 million in scholarships to the children of cooperative members.

Compass recently caught up with two past scholarship recipients to learn how the cooperative's support is helping them achieve their goals.

### TIMBERLY TREVINO

Timberly Trevino's freshman year of college didn't go as planned. Because of the pandemic, the 2020 Lasara High School graduate spent hours in her bedroom taking classes online.

She's looking forward to her first taste of campus life this fall at Texas State Technical College in Harlingen, where she's working toward a career as an oncology nurse. When Trevino was in elementary school, her mother was diagnosed with cancer. She's now cancer free, and Trevino wants to help other families in similar situations. "Looking back on that, I didn't even know what the word cancer meant," she says. "As I got older, I wanted to work with people who have cancer and help kids who don't know what it is."

The eldest of three siblings, Trevino tries to be a role model for her brothers. The VTCI scholarship is helping her set that example. "I didn't think there was any way I was going to get the scholarship, because there were other students

here who applied for it," she said. "When I actually got the email that I had gotten it, I was very excited!"

### AMANDA SNOWDEN

Returning to her hometown after college was never part of Amanda Snowden's plan, but she couldn't be happier. After graduating from Cotulla High School in 2007, she attended the University of Texas San Antonio, earning her Bachelor's degree in 2010 in Communications with a concentration in social interaction.

Today, she and her husband, Tye, are raising two children and running Scratch Pad Printing & Graphics, a business they co-own with her parents, Charles and Diann Brown. "I explain this whole business as a mom-and-pop one-stop shop," Snowden says. "We can cover any kind of printing or advertising or any kind of promotional materials. You name it, I think we've done it."

She's active in her church and the community, serving as secretary of the LaSalle County Fair Board, an organization that's



Timberly Trevino

been part of her life since childhood. "It's where I got so much of the community involvement that helped me earn scholarships," she says. "This is very near and dear to my heart, and I want to see it continue." 📧



Amanda Snowden lives in Cotulla with her husband, Tye, and their children, Oliver and Emma.

# NEW PERSPECTIVES

## Jason Stitt sees rural Texas through a different lens

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Jason Stitt has always seen the world a little differently. Through the lens of his camera, he likes to find new views of the places other people might pass every day without a second thought.

“Photography helps me to view the world in ways most people don’t get to. To look at things from different angles, different perspectives and to see things in a way that others may not,” he says. “Mostly, it’s an outlet for me to be creative and to show the world the beauty of God’s creation, whether that be people or nature.”

Now, with the help of the internet, he can encourage others in his community to find their own individual perspectives. Social media has been a place for Stitt to grow as a photographer by sharing his work, asking questions and engaging in critiques with other professionals. He even runs his own Facebook group, Tyler Area Photography, with more than 600 members dedicated to growing the

photography community in Tyler, Texas. “I’m still learning and growing and will never stop,” Stitt says. “We don’t have lots of photography shops like you might find in bigger cities. So almost all of my continuing education and growing the craft relies on the internet.”

Stitt caught the photography bug 18 years ago while living in California. Working as a graphic designer, he started submitting his shots to a stock photo website before becoming a full-time photographer two years later. After moving back home to New Zealand with his family, Stitt discovered his passion for landscape photography. But it was only a few years before the cost of living caught up with them. They didn’t want to give up the opportunity to have his wife, Ruth, home-school their children. So, Stitt took his newfound talent for capturing natural beauty to Tyler, where he could continue pursuing his career while supporting his family.

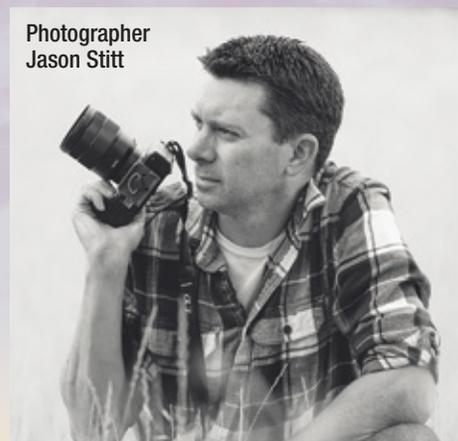
“I am an introvert by nature,” he says. “So I really enjoy the quiet solitude of being out in nature with just my camera gear.”

### IN FOCUS

When Stitt and his family were deciding where to relocate on their move back to the States, there was one must-have for his business: a strong internet connection.

“That was one of the most important factors in choosing a place. It had to have a reliable and fast internet connection,” Stitt says. “Ninety-nine percent of my business I get through either my site or social media. So without the internet, I lose all of that.”

Photographer  
Jason Stitt



He isn't exaggerating. About a year and a half after moving to Tyler and gradually building momentum as a professional photographer, Stitt and his family visited New Zealand for five weeks to see his parents. Stitt stayed away from social media during the trip and returned to find business had ground to a halt.

"I felt like I had just lost all the momentum I had built while we were gone and had to start all over again," he says. "Now, ideally, I try to post something every weekday to keep business relatively steady and keep getting inquiries. If I'm not posting regularly, those inquiries just stop happening." 



## Getting the shot

Whether you're just starting out or a seasoned pro, Stitt offers some pointers to make your photos stand out.

- **Shoot, shoot, shoot** — As with any learned skill, the best way to hone it is to do it. Get out and take as many photos as you can to develop a better idea of your interests and style.
- **Be intentional** — Ansel Adams said, "You don't take a photograph, you make it." Photography is art, and good art requires forethought and planning. Think about what you want to capture and how you want to photograph it.
- **Study the greats** — Look closely at the work of photographers you admire. Figure out what it is about their work that appeals to you and then try to emulate it.
- **Master the light** — Light is the single most important factor in photography. More than determining how bright or dark your photos are, controlling light also decides the tone, mood and atmosphere of your images.
- **Learn to edit** — Don't neglect learning how to use your editing software. In today's world, the ability to edit well is one of the elements that makes for a great photographer.
- **Find your community** — Locate a local camera club or Facebook photography group to join. These can be great places to meet like-minded people from whom you can learn and grow.

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The internet is full of resources for aspiring photographers and professionals alike. Whether you're looking to manage your shots or learn a new skill, there's something for everyone.



- **Education** — Even the best photographers have something to learn. For professional courses, Stitt turns to sites like CreativeLive and Improve Photography. If you're looking for something to peruse at your leisure for education and inspiration, he recommends Scott Kelby's blog.
- **Editing** — With Adobe's Photography package, anyone can get access to professional-grade software like Photoshop and Lightroom to edit and organize your photos on any device — all for little more than some streaming subscriptions.
- **Website builders** — Every photographer needs a place to share their work with the world. Popular website builders like Squarespace and Portfoliobox make it easy to show off your best shots and even to sell your work.
- **Storage** — As all those photos pile up, you'll need somewhere to keep them. Flickr offers a substantial 1 TB of free storage, while services like Dropbox and Google can provide up to 16 TB of space as your portfolio grows.



Teach for America corps member Taylor Lifka, back row, center, served as student council advisor at Roma High School.

# THREE COUNTIES, ONE COMMUNITY

## Teach For America–Rio Grande Valley works toward equity in education

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

**T**each For America–Rio Grande Valley puts energetic, enthusiastic and engaged teachers in classrooms across South Texas as it works to level the educational playing field.

“Talent and ability are equally distributed across economic and ethnic differences, but opportunity is not,” says Marilyn Osborn, a Teach For America board member. “These students we serve will have the chance to develop their potential.”

Founded in 1991, the nonprofit organization currently has approximately 55 first- and second-year teachers, called corps members, serving in 10 school districts across Starr, Hidalgo and Cameron counties. “We have a small corps in comparison to the other regions in Texas, but

here in the RGV they impact nearly 5,000 students daily,” says Executive Director Ana Gonzalez.

### BOUND FOR YALE

One of those students is Julian Barrera, a 2021 Roma High School graduate now studying at Yale University in Connecticut. Several Teach For America corps members taught and mentored Barrera over the years, including Roma High School English teacher Taylor Lifka, who was also the student council advisor. The relationships Barrera formed with those teachers broadened his worldview and encouraged him to pursue opportunities that might once have seemed out of reach.

“Most of my closest connections have been with Teach for America teachers,”

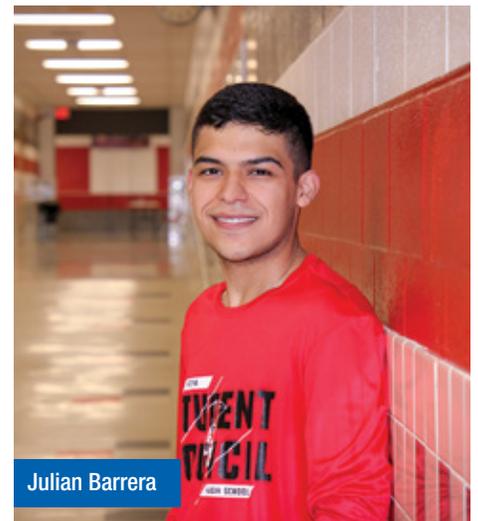
Barrera says. “They bring such a different perspective. They get involved as soon as they get here. They want to improve our community. Honestly, if it wasn’t for Ms. Lifka and other Teach For America teachers, I wouldn’t have applied to Yale or out-of-state schools. They helped me so, so much. It’s just amazing!”

While he does not yet know what he will major in — he’s leaning toward a career that blends medicine with public service — Barrera wants to carve out a path where he can make a positive impact. “I also want to make sure I do something that I love and not just something for the money,” he says. “I just want to enjoy my work.”

### RECRUITING

Most corps members are recent college graduates who come from across the country. For many of them, teaching wasn’t originally part of their plan. “They may be on the career trajectory to be doctors, lawyers or journalists, but they have a special mindset that we look for in terms of leadership,” Gonzalez says. “They’re equity-minded. Our kids deserve the brightest future, and they deserve the best leaders in classrooms to help them get there.”

Teach For America helps corps members obtain all the certifications required to work in a classroom. The program also provides an intensive summer-long training program before the first year for corps members, as well as continuing education, support and professional development throughout their tenures.



Julian Barrera

The students aren't the only ones who benefit from Teach For America's efforts. Many corps members find the experience life-changing, too. Although they commit to teaching for two years, many of them, like Lifka, end up staying longer. After her first year teaching, the Illinois native decided to see her first class of freshmen through to graduation.

"What inspired me to keep going were my students," Lifka says. "I think it's really important for them to see young adults who are committed and dedicated not only to them but to our community. Teaching is a really challenging profession, and I felt like I owed it not only to my students but to myself to stay and grow in my own teaching disposition over the course of four years."



Taylor Lifka chose to teach in South Texas because she wanted to experience something new, and she quickly fell in love with the community.

## SUPPORTING THE CAUSE

VTX1 is a proud supporter of Teach For America thanks in large part to Osborn's passion for the organization. A retired educator, Osborn — the spouse of VTX1 CEO Dave Osborn — saw firsthand the benefits of Teach For America and shared her insights with her husband. VTX1 has a strong commitment to helping organizations that work to better the communities it serves, specifically through education and youth. Teach For America exemplifies that spirit.

Marilyn Osborn serves as VTX1's representative on Teach For America's board, and the company sponsors three corps members' summer training each year, as well as a table at the annual fundraising gala. "Teach For America is a nonprofit organization, and so many of the operations are possible because we have exceptional donors like VTX1," Gonzalez says. "VTX1 has been a great partner to ensure that our more rural communities are receiving the infrastructure and broadband so that our kids can access educational materials."

Teach For America officials, corps members and partner districts all recognize that building better schools — and ultimately stronger, healthier and prosperous communities — is a long-term process that requires the active participation of all stakeholders.



Julian Barrera hugs teacher Taylor Lifka. The pair worked together on student council.

Photos courtesy of Taylor Lifka.

"We're really working towards building equitable schools, and that means as leaders we are working on ourselves. Our mindsets and skill sets of what it means to work towards equity in schools and to break down barriers for all kids, especially children growing up in low income communities," Gonzalez says. "This is a lifelong commitment. It's never about two years. We all have a place, whether it's at Teach For America or in other sectors." 

## LEARN MORE ABOUT IT

For more information on Teach For America, including how to apply to be a corps member or volunteer, go to [teachforamerica.org/rio-grande-valley](https://teachforamerica.org/rio-grande-valley) or [@teachforamericargv](https://www.facebook.com/teachforamericargv) on Facebook and [@teachforamericargv](https://www.instagram.com/teachforamericargv) on Instagram.

# Palate pleasers

## Pears make perfect sweet and savory dishes

**P**ears add a dose of seasonality to dishes this time of year with a sweetness that's nuanced and subtle yet plentiful. But understanding which type of pear is best for what use will help you choose wisely from the fruit you'll see in the produce section of your local market.

Any type of pear is good to eat as long as it's ripe enough to bring out its sweetness. But when it comes to using pears in cooking, the variety you choose matters. Do you want the pear to retain its shape when poached? Or do you want it to melt into a sauce? Just remember your pear ABCs — Anjou, Bosc and Comice.

Anjou is an all-purpose pear that can be grilled, roasted or eaten as a snack.

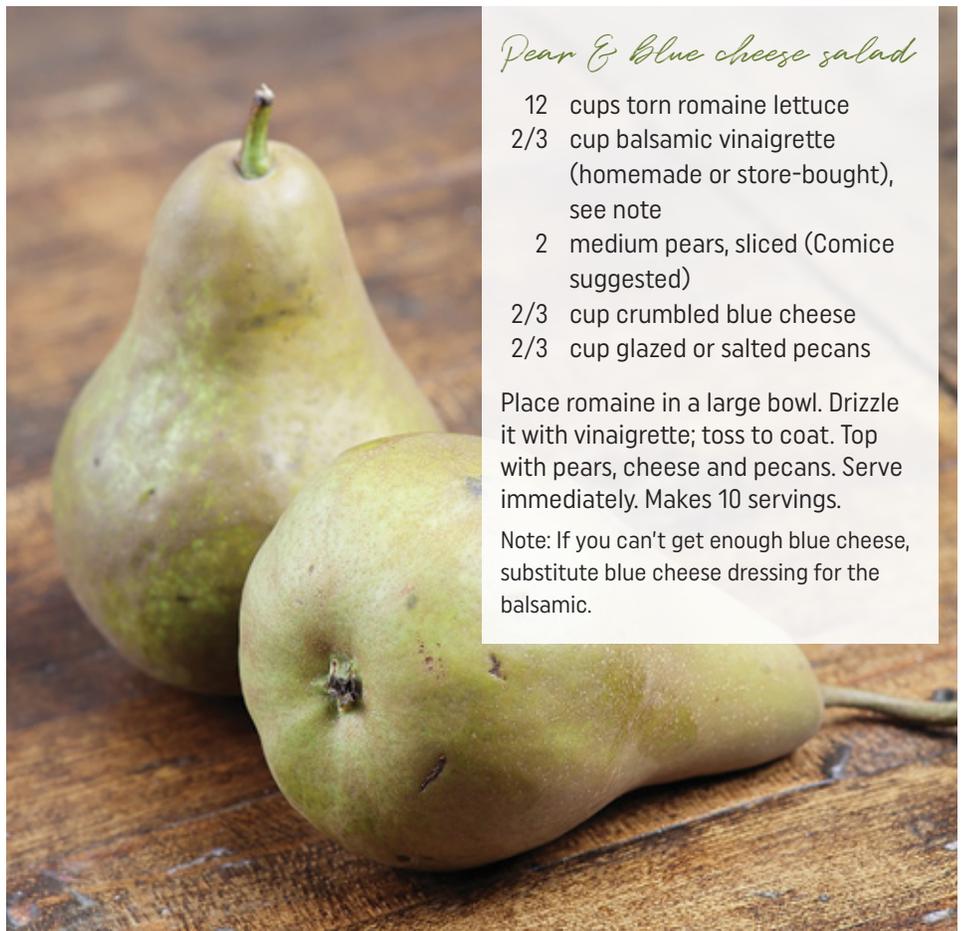
Bosc pears are best for poaching, as they maintain their shape well when cooked.

Comice pears are best used raw, as their tender flesh will not hold up well under heat. They are a sweet pear to pair with cheese.

The best way to ripen pears is on the counter at room temperature, a process that requires patience, since the fruit can take up to a week to reach its sweet peak. Once fully ripe, pears may be stored in the refrigerator for up to a week, if they stick around that long before being used in any of the following recipes.



FOOD EDITOR  
**ANNE P. BRALY**  
IS A NATIVE OF  
CHATTANOOGA,  
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### *Pear & blue cheese salad*

- 12 cups torn romaine lettuce
- 2/3 cup balsamic vinaigrette (homemade or store-bought), see note
- 2 medium pears, sliced (Comice suggested)
- 2/3 cup crumbled blue cheese
- 2/3 cup glazed or salted pecans

Place romaine in a large bowl. Drizzle it with vinaigrette; toss to coat. Top with pears, cheese and pecans. Serve immediately. Makes 10 servings.

Note: If you can't get enough blue cheese, substitute blue cheese dressing for the balsamic.



## PEAR & GORGONZOLA PIZZA

- 1 (16-ounce) package refrigerated pizza crust dough
- 4 ounces sliced provolone cheese
- 1 Bosc pear, thinly sliced
- 2 ounces chopped walnuts
- 2 1/2 ounces Gorgonzola or blue cheese, crumbled
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives

Preheat the oven to 450 F. Spread the pizza crust dough on a medium baking sheet. Layer provolone cheese on the crust and top the cheese with Bosc pear slices. Sprinkle walnuts and Gorgonzola cheese over the pears.

Bake for 8-10 minutes, or until the cheese is melted and the crust is lightly browned. Remove the pizza from the oven, top it with chives and slice to serve.

## PEAR PANCAKES

- 1 1/2 cups baking mix (such as Bisquick)
  - 1 medium ripe pear, peeled and finely chopped
- 2/3 cup old-fashioned oats
  - 2 tablespoons packed brown sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
  - 1 cup milk
  - 2 tablespoons butter or margarine, melted
  - 1 egg
- 1/2 cup butter or margarine, softened
  - 2 teaspoons powdered sugar
  - Maple syrup, if desired

Heat a griddle or skillet over medium heat. Grease it with butter or vegetable oil if necessary.

In a large bowl, stir the baking mix, chopped pear, oats, brown sugar and 1 teaspoon of the cinnamon until blended. In a medium bowl, beat the milk, melted butter and egg with a fork or wire whisk. Add the milk mixture to the dry ingredients, stirring just until moistened.

For each pancake, pour about 1/4 cup batter onto a hot griddle. Cook the pancakes until bubbles form on top and the edges are dry. Flip, then cook the other side until golden brown.

While the pancakes are cooking, make cinnamon butter: In a small bowl, mix 1/2 cup butter, the powdered sugar and the remaining 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon. Serve the pancakes with cinnamon butter and syrup.

## BAKED PEARS WITH WALNUTS

- 2 large ripe Bosc pears
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 cup crushed walnuts
- 2 teaspoons honey
- Vanilla ice cream or whipped cream, optional

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Cut the pears in half and place them on a baking sheet. You may want to cut a sliver off the uncut side so that they sit upright.

Using a measuring spoon or melon baller, scoop out the seeds. Sprinkle the pear halves with cinnamon, top them with walnuts and drizzle 1/2 teaspoon honey over each one.

Bake for 30 minutes. Remove from the oven, let them cool slightly and serve the pears topped with ice cream or whipped cream, if desired.



## PEAR CLAFOUTIS

*Think pear cobbler, only easier.*

- Salted butter for the dish
- 2 ripe but slightly firm Anjou pears (about 1 pound total)
  - 1 cup half-and-half
  - 3 eggs
  - 1/3 cup plus 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
  - 1 teaspoon orange zest
  - 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg
  - 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
  - 1/2 cup flour
  - Powdered sugar

Peel, core and slice the pears lengthwise about 1/3-inch thick. Preheat the oven to 350 F. Butter a shallow 3-quart baking dish and arrange the pears over the bottom — they will rise to the top as the batter bakes.

Put half-and-half, eggs, granulated sugar, vanilla, orange zest, nutmeg, salt and flour (in this order) in a blender and whirl until very smooth and frothy, 1 minute. Pour the batter over the pears.

Bake until the clafoutis is well browned and a little puffed, about 50 minutes. Let it cool on a rack about 15 minutes. Serve warm, sprinkled with powdered sugar.



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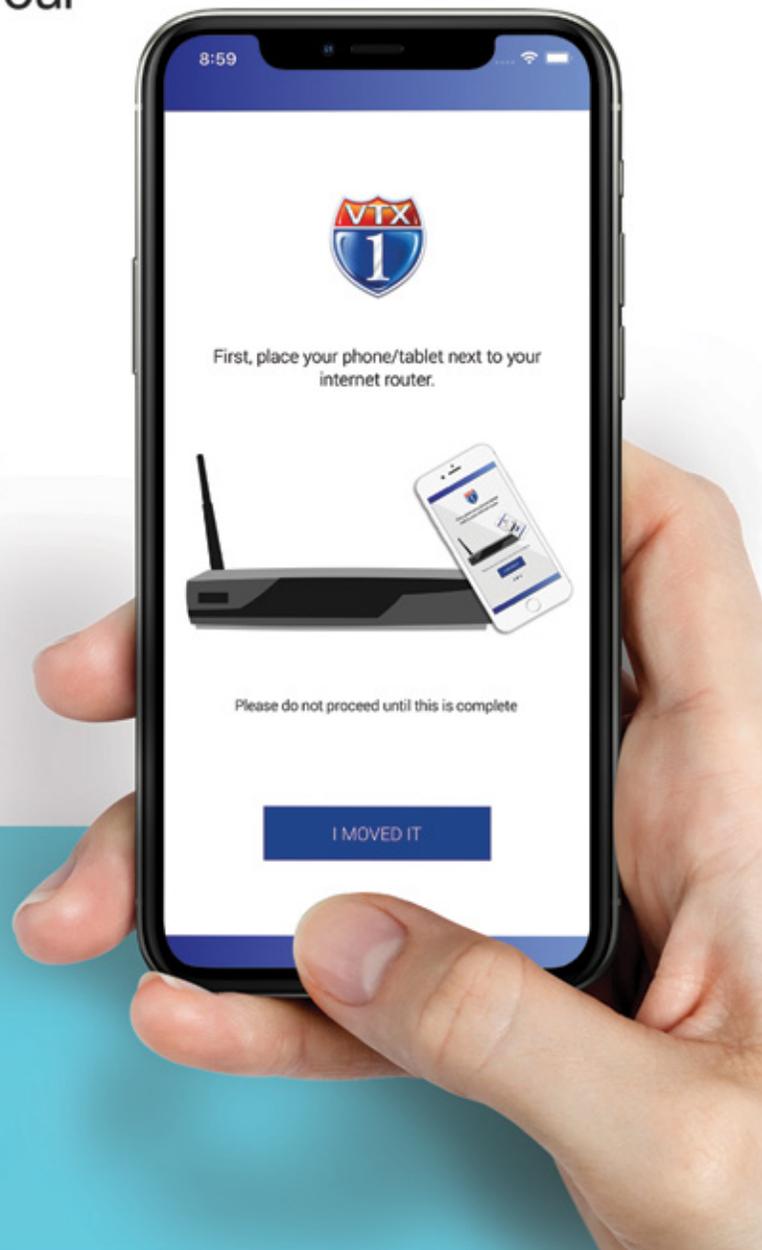
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