



VTX1 Companies

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2021

COMPASS

VOL. 2, NO. 6

TASTY TREATS

Lara's Bakery makes holiday traditions sweet



FAMILY CRISIS CENTER

Agency focuses on creating safe homes for all

NOVELS IN NOVEMBER

Broadband boosts rural writers



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Committed to a fiber future

For several years, NTCA has encouraged policymakers to think with a hand in the present but an eye toward the future. But in Washington, D.C. — where every technology and every interest has lobbyists and political champions — that mission is easier said than done.

Many of the nation's internet providers believe in a fiber-or-bust approach. As long as it's physically possible, which is not always the case in rural areas, fiber should be the goal. As lawmakers weigh infrastructure investments, why should internet providers settle for less?

Many NTCA members are working diligently to extend fiber optic networks, despite challenges like slow supply chains limiting access to the materials needed to build these robust networks. They are making strides.

In our most recent broadband survey, 70% of NTCA members' customers enjoyed fiber to the premises. It's a technology that makes it possible for internet providers such as yours to easily scale their services to meet demand.

Fiber infrastructure is also a key component of building a better future that includes higher-performance services, real-time applications, smart communities, precision agriculture, 5G superiority and better access to health care and education. To achieve our goals as a nation, we need a strong foundation of fiber connectivity.

Connecting rural communities to the rest of the nation and to the resources they need to excel matters. Broadband matters, because its speed and capacity are the new baselines for working, learning and growing the economy — from wherever we might be. Investment in fiber optic internet ensures rural America will not be relegated to second-class status. It's more than a worthy investment in infrastructure development, it's an investment in our nation's future. 📧

SOS

FBI program helps keep kids safe online

The holidays often bring new gadgets and devices, as well as some free time for kids enjoying a break from school. This time of year is a good opportunity to remind younger technology users of the risks of being online and to share strategies to keep themselves safe.

The FBI offers tools to help build a digital defense to protect kids online. These tools include the agency's free computer literacy program, Safe Online Surfing, or SOS. Designed for children in grades three through eight, it's available to teachers, administrators and parents, who can introduce children to the concepts one-on-one.

The program engages children through a series of online games that mix fun with education on a variety of topics, including online etiquette, managing cyberbullying, the importance of strong passwords and double authentication, and more. Visit sos.fbi.gov to access the guide. 📧

The FBI offers a few additional tips for parents:

- Discuss with your children what kind of information, photos and videos are appropriate to post online — and what's not.
- Emphasize that kids should limit the information they post on social media platforms, such as their full name, date of birth and school information.
- Teach that, while free software and apps seem enticing, using them may open phones and computers up to malware or worse.



Tech the halls

GIVE GREAT GADGETS

Great tech gifts don't have to be expensive. There are plenty of options under \$50 that will make the holidays merry. We've got some suggestions, whether you're shopping for a more budget-friendly gift for that gadget-crazy person on your list or a fun stocking stuffer that won't break the bank.

\$29.99

MSRP at us.tomy.com



KIIPIX PORTABLE PHOTO PRINTER

This one's a neat gadget that reproduces images from your smartphone without the need for Wi-Fi or even batteries. You just place your phone on top of the KiiPix, and it takes a picture of your screen and prints a photo in minutes. Reviews point out that the device can be finicky with ambient light, and the quality will be closer to those instant Polaroid pictures from the '70s than a professionally printed photo, but the retro look is part of the fun. Available in pink, blue and black.

8BITDO SN30 PRO+

Any gamer would appreciate the SN30 Pro+, a customizable controller compatible with a variety of systems. Featuring rumble vibration, motion controls and 20 hours of play off a four-hour charge, the controller can also be used wired through USB or wirelessly via Bluetooth. Compatible systems include Windows, macOS, Android, Steam, Nintendo Switch and Raspberry Pi. Free software allows you to customize buttons, adjust stick and trigger sensitivity, and create macros with any button combination. The controller is available in black and in color combinations reminiscent of the classic Nintendo Entertainment System and the Super Nintendo.

\$49.99
amazon.com



POWERUP 2.0 PAPER AIRPLANE CONVERSION KIT

Even if your design skills are more Wright brothers than Boeing, you can still transform a regular paper airplane into a dream flying machine, while kids can learn about basic principles of physics and working with simple electronics. The POWERUP 2.0 kit includes two sheets of high-quality paper to get you started, a charger, a carbon fiber propeller shaft and an ultratough rear propeller — for those inevitable crash landings. The POWERUP 4.0 model, which is \$69.99, comes with stabilization technology and can be controlled with your smartphone. Either way, get ready to take to the skies!

\$69.99

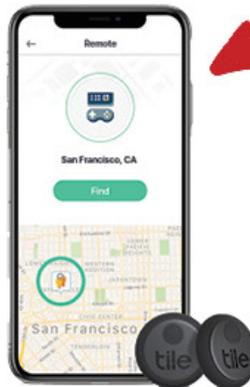
poweruptoys.com



TILE

The best Bluetooth finder on the market, the Tile line of products can be attached to your keys, backpack, purse or TV remote — anything that can be lost or misplaced. A free app for iOS or Android can then be used to find the missing Tile within 150 to 400 feet — depending on the Tile size — or you can ask Siri, Google Assistant or Alexa for help. When outside of Bluetooth range, the app will show the Tile's most recent location, which is updated whenever another Tile user comes within range of your device. You can also subscribe to Premium service, which includes free battery replacement and smart alerts that warn you when you've left something behind, or Premium Protect, which reimburses you up to \$1,000 if Tile can't find your things.

\$24.99
thetileapp.com



Giving thanks

Find reasons for appreciation in day to day excellence

As the year winds down, this is the season when the pace of everyday life seems to pick up. Family gatherings, sporting events, and shopping – the list of commitments and celebrations gets long. It's always a whirlwind, and 2021 is no different. While time is at a premium during the holidays, I think it's important to find a few minutes for reflection, to make time to give thanks.



DAVE OSBORN

Chief Executive Officer

There's plenty to be thankful for. I could list the projects accomplished, the services and all the work VTX1 Companies has done this year. I am thankful for all of them, but I would like to offer thanks for the often unsung day-to-day interactions, services and VTX1 team members who are the core of who we are as a company. When top-quality performance is the norm, it is easy to take that for granted.

For example, I am thankful for our team of customer experience representatives, whose role is to makes your lives and the business you do with us seamless. They answer questions, resolve issues, and initiate new service – seemingly basis tasks that make a tremendous difference.

We have another VTX1 team that rarely get noticed. On any given day, our technical teams are hard at work somewhere near your hometown maintaining the physical infrastructure that allows us to provide the services that you rely upon. Often, they work in inclement weather, on holidays, and under the most trying conditions. After a storm, they lead the effort to restore service so you can get back to living your life and conducting business as quickly as possible.

At our VTX1 offices, other teams such as billing, accounting, and regulatory teams keep our house in order and do the painstaking work needed to keep us financially and organizationally sound. There are also human resources, marketing, sales and many more. Thank you to our VTX1 team, their efforts are much valued and appreciated.

Our Board of Directors also contributes time and expertise creating the oversight needed, and helps define us as a part of the community. We do not service outside investors, instead our board is the link to you, charged to ensure your needs are kept at the forefront.

The last time you picked up the phone, did you consider the miles of cable, innovative hardware, and expertise needed to make that call? When you connected your computer to the internet, did you think of the complexity of the network needed to link your home to the online world? We wouldn't expect you to; that is our job to worry about! The services we provide should be out of sight and mind. They should just work. Our VTX1 team makes that possible.

Because everyone on our team works toward this goal daily, it's easy to take this work for granted. Often it isn't flashy, but every day their work benefits many and life would be a whole lot more difficult for us all.

When you are helping others, there is no better reason to be thankful. From everyone at VTX1, we are thankful for you. Enjoy the holidays! 📺

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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George West Office

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Board of Directors:

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- District 2 – George Bennack (Stillman)
- District 3 – Matthew Kiefer (Lasara)
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- District 5 – Dr. Adalberto Garza (San Isidro)
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- District 7 – Christopher R. Meyer (Annarose & Artesia Wells)
- District 8 – John Barnes (Fowlerton & Millett)
- District 9 – James Mann (San Miguel & Tilden)
- District 10 – Frank Weaver (Concepcion & Miranda City) – TREASURER

Produced for VTX1 by:



On the Cover:



Since 1963, Lara's Bakery employees like Christina Trevino have provided delicious treats for families' holiday meals.
See story Page 12.

Coming soon!



Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. members: the end of the year is approaching, and that means it's time for the 2022 VTX1 directory and calendars to be on their way to you. They will be delivered to the mailing address we have on file for your VTX1 account.

We look forward to providing the updated directory to you and also unveiling the 2022 calendar photo contest winners!

*Displayed in photos are last year's calendar and directory.

Congratulations, scholarship winners!

Earlier this year, VTCI Scholarships were awarded to graduating seniors from local high schools. These students are now finishing up their first semester of college, and we are happy to play a small part in assisting with the cost of furthering their education and enriching the family life of our cooperative members. We wish them all continued success in the future!

2020-21 VTCI Scholarship Recipients

Bruni High School

Mayany Galindo
Joyce Garcia
Hildegardo Garza
Emily Martinez

Lyford High School

Connor Chappell
Gayleb Klostermann

Roma High School

Marco Santistevan

San Perlita High School

Maria Flor Martinez
Zuniga

San Isidro High School

Edward Alaniz
Bryan Benavides
Zachary Hernandez
Nicole Marquez
Leslie Martinez
Karina Perez

Premont Collegiate High School

Josef Gutierrez

Lasara High School

Rogelio Huitron
Janelle Tamez
Ronny Trevino

Rio Grande City High School

Rebecca Ramirez



Welcome to the board

VTX1 Companies is pleased to introduce Christopher R. Meyer as the newest member of our Board of Directors, representing District 7 (Annarose and Artesia Wells).

Meyer is a longtime resident of Cotulla, and is no stranger to taking on new and exciting ventures. A graduate of Cotulla High School and Angelo State University, he's applied his educational background to various business ventures. He is currently the owner of Ranch Equipment and Hardware Inc., where he manages and operates an Ace Hardware cooperative store. He is also a partner in CCM Cattle Co. LLC, operating the cattle company with his son for different properties.

There is no accomplishment greater for Meyer than his family. He and his wife of 40 years, Jackie S. Meyer, have four children and six grandchildren. He is an avid hunter, fisherman and golfer. He contributes to his community with his involvement in organizations such as the Winter Garden Groundwater Conservation District, where he currently serves as a board member, the Texas Farm Bureau and as an education instructor with Texas Parks and Wildlife.

"The greatest thing about a cooperative is its people, both members and employees," Meyer says. "All business is centered around people."

Meyer knows the core of what has made VTX1's cooperative succeed for 69 years and what will continue to make it flourish. We are happy to have him join the board and welcome him warmly to the VTX1 family!

Holiday office closures

VTX1 Companies offices will be closed on the following dates to allow our employees to spend the holidays with their families:

Thanksgiving	Christmas	New Year's Day
Thursday, Nov. 25 and Friday, Nov. 26	Friday, Dec. 24 and Monday, Dec. 27	Monday, Jan. 3

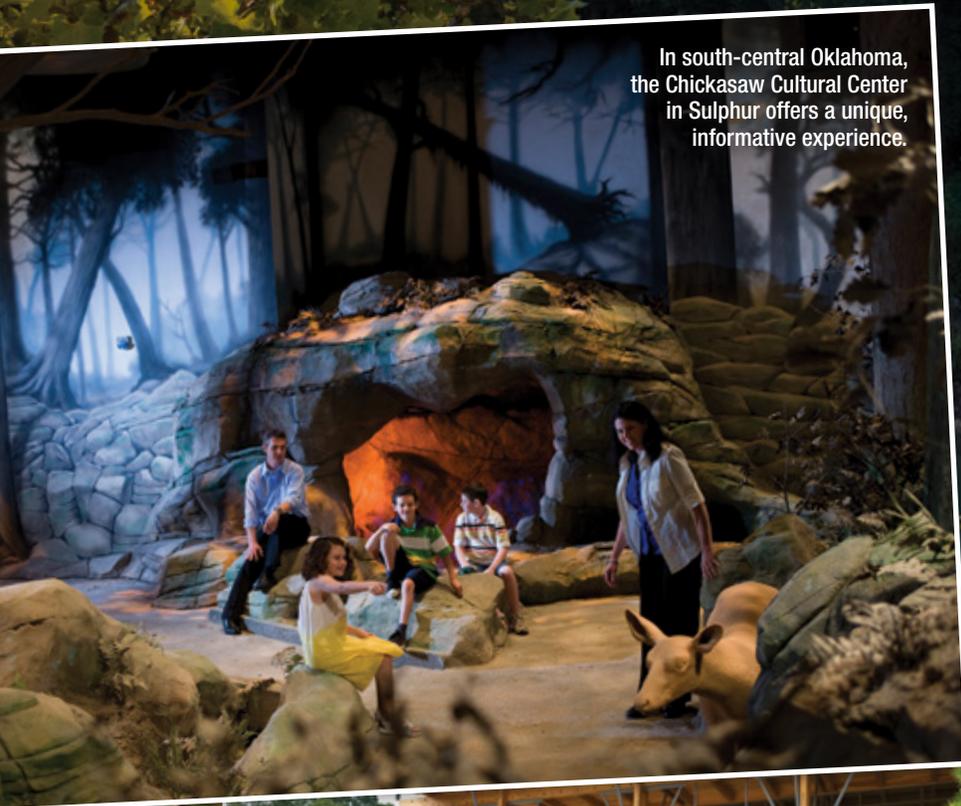
Our technical support team will be available for assistance by calling 1-800-446-2031 or by visiting vtx1.net, clicking on the "Contact" category and filling out the "By Form" fields for inquiries.

Explore Chickasaw Country

A convenient playground
for adventure

Story by ANNE BRALY

In south-central Oklahoma, the Chickasaw Cultural Center in Sulphur offers a unique, informative experience.



On the grounds of the Chickasaw Cultural Center, the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Center offers lessons, stories and technology.

Like many states in America, Oklahoma has a variety of “faces” — different regions with topographies that range from flatlands to mountains. But rather than calling them regions, many Oklahomans call them “countries.” And a particular one that visitors flock to year-round is Chickasaw Country, home to waterfalls, scenic views, charming towns and cultural and historical sites.

Thirteen counties in all make up the nearly 8,000 square miles of Chickasaw Country in south-central Oklahoma, home to towns such as Ada, Ardmore, Davis, Pauls Valley, Sulphur and Tishomingo. And this Sooner State territory is also a favorite destination for Texans. It’s less than a three-hour drive north of Dallas and a comfortable train ride. Amtrak’s Heartland Flyer runs a 418-mile daily round trip from Oklahoma City to Fort Worth, Texas, with an almost perfect on-time record.

The most obvious place to begin a journey through Chickasaw Country is at the Chickasaw Cultural Center in Sulphur, which is the gateway to the Chickasaw National Recreation Area. The center tells the story of the Chickasaw people through interactive experiences and exhibits in a state-of-the-art complex. The facility combines natural elements — wood, stone and copper — with modern technology to explore and experience Chickasaw culture and its people.

The Chickasaw Cultural Center occupies 184 acres and offers living history events, exhibits, a library, a traditional village, a fine arts gallery, a theater, shops and dining. At Aaimpa Cafe, the menu echoes the flavors of traditional Chickasaw foods, such as fry bread, buffalo burgers and chili, tacos, a traditional Chickasaw corn soup called pishofa, and the classic dessert grape dumplings. The Spiral Garden, on center property, provides vegetables for many of the menu items, so each dish is fresh and true to its roots.

HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

Chickasaw Country will come alive with the holiday spirit for 2021 with a number of awe-inspiring celebrations.

The Chickasha Festival of Light illuminates the night sky in celebration of the season. This year's festival is scheduled for Nov. 20 through New Year's Eve in Shannon Springs Park, which will be transformed into a 43-acre wonderland of lights. And that's not all! You can enjoy the sights as you're gliding across the ice-skating rink or while seated high atop the Ferris wheel or even as you take a leisurely carriage ride through the park. There will be food trucks and more at this year's event. For more information, visit chickasha.festivaloflight.org.

Ardmore Festival of Lights, a 1.5-mile drive through vibrant Christmas scenery, is one of the largest holiday light displays in southern Oklahoma. More than 150 animated displays in a beautiful winter setting are sure to delight visitors of all ages. Make your way to Ardmore Regional Park, tune your car stereo to a favorite Christmas music station and meander through rows and rows of lights as holiday cheer comes to life. Admission is free, but donations are much appreciated. For schedules and more information, visit explore.ardmore.com.

The Chickasaw Cultural Center's Celebration of Lights is a drive through a festive land of lights featuring dozens of displays with traditional Christmas themes, as well as cultural additions. Stay in your car and follow the signs along the specified route. Bring the entire family and immerse yourself in the holiday spirit without leaving your car. Scheduled for Nov. 26 through New Year's Eve, visit chickasawculturalcenter.com for more information.

ELSEWHERE IN CHICKASAW COUNTRY

Though Chickasaw Country wears a different face during the winter months,

its beauty is no less breathtaking. For more information about any of the following parks, visit www.chickasawcountry.com.

The Chickasaw National Recreation Area in Sulphur is Travel + Leisure magazine's choice for the best campsites in Oklahoma, such as those found at Buckhorn Campground, Central Group Camp, The Point Campground and Cold Spring Campground. There are more than 30 miles of trails with waterfalls, creeks and lakes. Historic buildings and picnic areas were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s with native travertine stone. Travertine Creek and Travertine Nature Center is the park's main educational center and has a pleasant picnic area. Bicycling — rentals are available — is permitted in the park but not on trails east of the nature center.

Turner Falls Park, a 1,500-acre getaway in the Arbuckle Mountains just outside Davis, is the oldest park in Oklahoma. Investigate its natural caves, hike its trails, and marvel at its magnificent waterfall with a 77-foot drop cascading into a large swimming area for the hot summer months. The park is also home to the ruins of Collings Castle, a magnificent structure made of stone during the 1930s. Turner Falls has received national publicity for its likeness to the Grand Canyon and Black Hills of South Dakota.

As Oklahoma's largest state park, Lake Murray in Ardmore is the ideal getaway for outdoor enthusiasts. It has a terrain that's exciting and diverse, well-groomed trails and historic sites, including structures from the CCC era. Golf, horseback riding and, in warmer weather, boating and swimming its 5,700 surface acres of water are among the many activities offered. The Lake Murray Lodge, with its cozy fireplace in the lobby, includes 52 guest rooms and suites, as well as 56 cabins. In addition, there are campgrounds for recreational vehicles and tent camping.



The annual Chickasha Festival of Lights brilliantly celebrates the holiday season.

The Blue River runs through the historic town of Tishomingo, named in honor of Chickasaw Chief Tishomingo. The river is best known for its abundance of trout, small-mouth bass, black bass, crappie and blue catfish. It's also the site of two annual trout derbies, which take place on Veterans Day weekend in November and again on Presidents Day weekend in February. Both derbies draw anglers from all over Chickasaw Country for cash prizes, awards and trophies. Those wanting to wet a line in one of the tournaments or any other time of year will need a fishing license. You can get one at the nearby Chickasaw Nation Information Center. 🗨

Fast facts about the CHICKASAW NATION

- ▶ With more than 66,000 citizens, the Chickasaw Nation is the 12th-largest federally recognized tribe in the United States.
- ▶ The Chickasaw Nation has an annual economic impact of \$3.18 billion in Oklahoma. The tribe has more than 13,500 employees.
- ▶ The Chickasaw Nation is a democratic republic with executive, legislative and judicial departments. The tribe's jurisdictional territory includes all or part of 13 counties in south-central Oklahoma.

LEAVING THE DARKNESS BEHIND

Family Crisis Center helps clients break the cycle of domestic violence

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

People living in households affected by violence have a beacon of hope to help guide them toward safe, new lives. What began 40 years ago as a volunteer-staffed hotline is now the Family Crisis Center — an agency working to help more than 200 families each year in Cameron and Willacy counties.

The center started at a time when domestic violence and sexual assault rarely came up as topics of discussion. “Even today, it’s that subject nobody really likes to talk about,” says Executive Director Laura Martinez. “It was very difficult back then. It was hard to get people on board, but they did.”

Today, Family Crisis Center has offices in Harlingen and Raymondville and operates a shelter in a separate location.

Those turning to the center for help begin with an assessment.

“Everybody sits down with an advocate, and they’re listened to,” Martinez says. “That’s one of the things that we try to stress around here — that we listen to them and find out what their needs are. If they need to make a police report or need medical attention or shelter, we’ll coordinate that. Then we dig a little bit deeper to see what else they need.”

SUPPORT AND SERVICES

All services are free of charge. The center assists with everything from applying for benefits and protective orders to filing police reports, crisis intervention, counseling and more. It also helps

survivors establish new households of their own through temporary assistance with rent, utilities and gasoline, as well as donations of clothing and household necessities.

If a client hits a rough patch or just needs someone to lean on, support is always just a call away. “If we can’t do it in-house, we will refer them out, but we will be there to help them,” Martinez says.

Services are available to everyone. The majority of the center’s clients are women 25-50 years old, many of them mothers who take their children with them when they leave. The reasons for seeking help vary, and it’s not uncommon for someone to return to an abusive home several times before finally getting out for good.

“A lot of times, if they have children and the abuse turns to their children, that’s their breaking point,” Martinez says. “Sometimes, it takes them into their elder years. We’ve had clients who are 60 or 70 years old who have endured the abuse for 30 or 40 years and have finally come forward and decided they’re going to leave and live a life free of violence.”



VTX1 employees, from left, Wesley Willis, Carmen Kolenda and Yolanda Silva present a donation to Family Crisis Center Executive Director Laura Martinez and Treasurer Leandro Pedraza.

OUTREACH

The center, which receives the majority of its funding from state grants and contributions from local sources, also takes proactive steps to stop domestic and sexual violence before it starts. The center's community educator visits community and day care centers, clinics, salons and other locations to provide informational brochures and presentations.

"We go into the schools and talk to the kiddos about bullying and sexual abuse. We go into Boys and Girls Clubs and do presentations there," Martinez says. "Head Start calls us in the spring for presentations to the parents to educate them on domestic violence and where they can look for help."

Home should be a safe place, and Family Crisis Center's staff and volunteers are dedicated to getting that message out there and ensuring everyone has a peaceful place to live. "The most important thing to know is that there is help out there," Martinez says. "They shouldn't be ashamed to ask for help or because they were a victim. They should reach out so that they can become a survivor. The bravest thing they can do is to make that first call." 🗨️



Executive Director Laura Martinez.



Victim advocate Oralia Jaure takes a call from a client.



With a staff of 24 supplemented by volunteers, the Family Crisis Center offers its free services to everyone.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

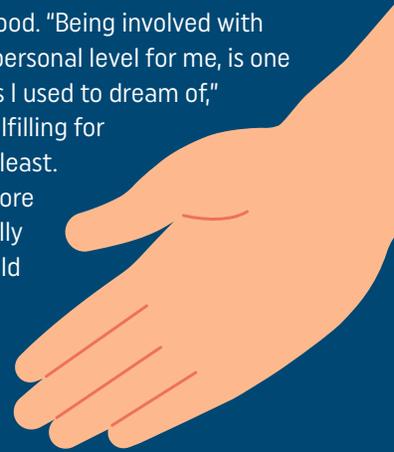
VTX1 Accounting Supervisor Leandro Pedraza volunteers as treasurer of the Family Crisis Center's board of directors. He's fulfilling a promise he made to himself years ago.

"The reason I got involved was partially because I grew up in an abusive home," Pedraza says. "I always told myself if I ever won the lottery, this was something I wanted to do. I haven't won the lottery yet, so this was the second-best thing."

Pedraza learned the center existed when he read an article about a burglary at its Raymondville office several years ago. He reached out to offer help and learned the facility really needed a security system. "I talked to Dave Osborn, our CEO. He's always very open to helping the community any way we can," Pedraza says. "He gave the OK, and we went and installed a security system for them."

VTX1's support didn't stop there. The company continues to support the center's mission, donating more than \$50,000 and even improving the facilities. "A few years back they adopted the Raymondville location, and they did a makeover," Executive Director Laura Martinez said. "They donated and volunteered their time to do that."

Pedraza is proud to be a part of the effort to end the violence that affected his own childhood. "Being involved with this, just on a personal level for me, is one of those things I used to dream of," he says. "It's fulfilling for me, to say the least. It's so much more than I ever really thought it would be."



REACH OUT

616 W. Taylor St., Harlingen,
956-423-9305

192 N. 3rd St., Raymondville
956-689-5150

24-hour hotline: 1-866-423-9304
Familycrisisctr.org



NaNoWriMo

November challenge helps writers write

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Growing up in rural East Tennessee, Dani Honeycutt dreamed of writing for a living. She devoured books and wrote poetry as a teen. She'd even study the encyclopedia to pack as much knowledge into her brain as she could. Writing was the natural next step. It was a place to put all her thoughts — a place to create.

Then she learned about NaNoWriMo, a nonprofit organization that grew out of an international creative writing event of the same name. Short for National Novel Writing Month, NaNoWriMo gives participants a goal of writing a 50,000-word manuscript during the month of November.

"I liked the challenge," says Honeycutt, who grew up in the small town of Rogersville and now lives in Greeneville, Tennessee. "Even though 50,000 words is more like a novella, I liked the challenge of saying, 'OK, you have 30 days to do this.' I felt like there was an accomplishment there."



Writers gather at a local NaNoWriMo write-in at a Florence, South Carolina, coffee shop.

Dani Honeycutt and Ashley Long

For a few years, she participated in the event but couldn't quite reach the 50,000-word goal. Until she did. So far this year, Honeycutt has published three nonfiction books through Amazon Self-Publishing.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

NaNoWriMo events primarily take place online — especially during

pandemic times — but official subgroups are generally paired off regionally within states in the U.S. Honeycutt volunteers as a municipal liaison for one of NaNoWriMo's East Tennessee groups. In that role, she markets the program regionally, organizes in-person and online events, and generally serves to support other writers in her group.

Ashley Long, another municipal liaison who lives in a small community near Morristown, Tennessee, says she first tried the NaNoWriMo challenge in 2010. “I wasn’t very successful,” she says. “I didn’t go to meet-ups, and I didn’t take advantage of all the resources the nonprofit offered.”

But in 2011, things changed for Long. “I was able to write 50,000 words in 30 days,” she says. “It wasn’t a full novel, but it was a good beginning.”

Since then, Long has written two rough drafts for two different stories, she says. “NaNoWriMo helps with motivation,” she says. “Writing is a very solo thing. But with this, there’s a collective energy when you do a virtual or in-person event.”

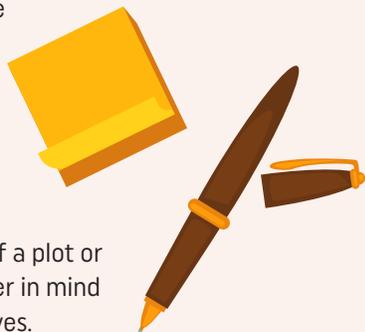
THE BENEFITS OF TRYING

While writing 50,000 words in 30 days sounds like it could be difficult, Long believes the event itself can be freeing for burgeoning writers. “NaNo is about getting the words on the page,” she says. “You write as much as you can in those 30 days. It’s about getting something that’s valuable in front of you that you can actually work with instead of having it run around your brain.”

NaNoWriMo is also a great way to make lasting friendships, Long says. She and Honeycutt became friends after meeting through the organization. “You get to meet like-minded people with the same goals and interests as you,” Long says. “Some of my best friends now are people I’ve met through NaNo over the years.” 🗨️

Writing tips for National Novel Writing Month

- **Just write** — Don’t worry about editing, reading and rereading your words. Just get them down.
- **Don’t listen to THAT voice** — You know the one — that overly critical voice of doubt that tells you nothing’s good enough. While constructive criticism is important, there’s no place for THAT voice.
- **Read** — Reading what other writers write can help you structure and build your own words. It can also free up your imagination and allow you to see how they develop characters and move a plot.
- **Prep** — Whether you’re what NaNoWriMo calls a “plotter” or whether you’re a “pantser” who flies by the seat of their pants, it’s generally best to have a scrap of a plot or even a vague character in mind before November arrives.



Finding the muse

NaNoWriMo and the Great American Novel

Writing is hard. It’s time-consuming and solitary, and it can fill a person with more doubt in their intelligence and abilities than they’ve ever known. But it can also help stretch the limits of the imagination and bring a sense of accomplishment like nothing else.

Chris Baty, the founder of NaNoWriMo, realized this after struggling to write his own book. So, back in 1999, he and a group of friends with similar goals decided to focus on getting words on the page. They gave themselves one month to write a novel. “That was the genesis of the movement,” says Tim Kim, programs director at NaNoWriMo. “Then, word just spread.”

Internet spreads the word

As the internet grew, so did NaNoWriMo. In 2006, the annual writing event also became a nonprofit, Kim says. “We were seeing so much energy behind National Novel Writing Month, and so many people wanted to give back. So, we started thinking about how we could do so much more.”

Now, in addition to National Novel Writing Month for adults, the nonprofit offers a Young Writers Program that serves about 100,000 students and educators across the world in about 2,000 classrooms. In addition, the organization offers Come Write, which helps libraries, bookstores and community centers to double as creative writing centers.

Since its beginning, many books that got their start during National Novel Writing Month have gone on to become bestsellers, including “Water for Elephants” by Sara Gruen, “Fangirl” by Rainbow Rowell and “The Forest of Hands and Teeth” by Greenville, South Carolina, native Carrie Ryan.

One of the things the NaNoWriMo organizers are proudest of is how it’s helped writers from all walks of life to find their voices, Kim says. “In places like New York City or Los Angeles, there are so many resources for people being creative and writing novels,” he says. “But we’ve seen with our programs that writers are coming from all over the U.S. — urban places and rural places, and across the world, as well.”

Getting started

National Novel Writing Month challenges people to write 50,000 words in 30 days. Some finish, some don’t. But everyone involved makes more progress than they may have otherwise. It happens every November and is open to everyone. Find more tools, pep talks, help with structure and a writing community near you at nanowrimo.org.

Sweet success

Treats from Lara's Bakery are a treasured part of holiday celebrations

Story by FERNANDO CARRASCO

The holidays are a busy time of the year at Lara's Bakery as people coming home for the season make their requisite pilgrimage to the Raymondville mainstay.

When they walk through the door, the smells of fresh-baked bread, cinnamon and sugar greet them, and they can take in the sights of festively decorated cupcakes and Christmas cookies. But it's the basics, including Lara's famous pumpkin empanadas and Mexican sweet breads — molletes and conchas — that have kept folks coming back for more since 1963.

Back then, downtown was bustling, remembers owner Jorge Lara, 70, whose parents opened the bakery. "On Saturdays and Sundays, people were shoulder to shoulder," he says. "Everybody would come to have a good time, shop for food and go to the movies."

As with many small towns, the once-vibrant farming community has evolved over the years. But through the highs and lows, Lara's Bakery has been around to make life a little sweeter.

FAMILY BUSINESS

Lara's grandfather came from Mexico and set up shop in San Benito, south of Raymondville. Hardworking and industrious, he was one of the first Hispanic business owners to get a contract with the government, Lara says. He made bread for the Harlingen Air Force Base.

Lara says his own parents sought to instill that same work ethic in their children. He recalls one Christmas when his father gathered him and his brothers and told them there would be no toys that year. "Our dad said, 'OK, boys, you're 11, 12 and 13 years old. You're no longer babies. This year, we're going to buy you tools.' He bought us a drill, a circular saw



Lara's Bakery owner Jorge Lara creates his treats using recipes that have been in his family for generations.

and a set of Craftsman tools, and he said, 'You're going to learn how to take care of things.'"

So Lara and his brothers learned about plumbing, carpentry and electrical work. "Anything goes wrong in the bakery, I fix it," he laughs.

Of course, his education also included the family trade. "Since we were old enough to stand in front of the bench to make bread, we were making bread," Lara says. A fifth-generation baker, he still uses recipes that have been handed down in his family.

Still, he has always looked for ways to improve. He not only learned baking through his parents, but he is also professionally trained. "I know the chemistry and the methodology of the baking business," he says. "I've always worked with either the ingredients or the technique because there are certain ways of doing things that give you a better result."



Commitment to offering only the best to his customers is the secret to success, he says. When Lara took over the bakery, he was only in his early 20s, but he knew that what keeps people coming back is the quality of the product, something he would never compromise.

“I told myself, ‘Even if I’m the most expensive bakery in town, I’m still going to keep the quality high,’” he says. “That has proven to be the best thing — the best decision I ever made.”

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

That dedication has earned Lara’s Bakery a place at many a dining table in Raymondville and beyond, as well as a place in the heart of the community and its residents, many of whom worry about what the future may hold. “Everybody knows that I’m getting on in years,” Lara says. “They ask me, ‘Have you prepared anybody to take over the business? Do you have anyone that knows how to make your recipes? Because we don’t know what we’re going to do if we don’t have a Lara’s Bakery in town.’”

Lara understands and appreciates their concern. He wants to retire in two years, and while he would like to keep the business in the family, both of his children are professionals involved in other fields. For him, their professional happiness is as important as the bakery’s longevity.

“I have so many customers that are so loyal,” he says. “I’m not one of those people that’s so hung up about having my legacy continue. I just want to be able to have the business continue.”

To that end, Lara plans to sell his bakery to two young brothers who have worked with him for years and gained his trust. He believes they are committed to keeping the quality of the bread and the level of customer satisfaction that makes Lara’s Bakery special.

He has seen what happens when bakers take shortcuts. Over the years he has trained others and watched them go on to open their own bakeries, but they inevitably fall short. “Everybody wants to cut corners, you know — especially when it’s hard, they want to cut corners,” Lara says. “It’s hard to carry that line, but it’s worth it.”

Even after he sells the business, Lara will be around in an advisory capacity, he says. He wants to ensure that whoever is working the ovens will live up to the reputation his family has built over the decades and that the customers of Lara’s Bakery can enjoy its irresistible empanadas for many holidays to come. 📞



Christina Trevino greets the bakery’s customers with a smile.



Lara’s Bakery has been part of the Raymondville community since 1963.



Lara's Bakery
150 N. 5th St., Raymondville
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A tasty tuber

Sweet potatoes offer a holiday treat

Sweet potatoes evoke strong feelings, bringing back tasty memories for some and not-so-good memories for others. It all depends into which camp you happen to fall — pro-marshmallow or anti-marshmallow.

Those white, fluffy confections are the go-to topping for many cooks. But have you tried a savory version? Sweet potatoes aren't necessarily sweet until you begin adding all that sugar and butter to the mix. Instead, consider some recipes that take your holiday sweet potatoes in a different direction.

Try adding cream cheese and chipotle peppers to your sweet potatoes, along with onions and celery. Or jazz them up with garlic, herbs and a sprinkling of parmesan. And don't forget to bake a couple alongside your turkey — mashed and mixed with the turkey drippings, they make an incredible, gluten-free gravy.

No matter the recipe, sweet potatoes are one of nature's superfoods, loaded with an alphabet of vitamins — A, C, B1, B2, B4 and B6 — not to mention fiber, potassium and other minerals important to our diets.

Here are some recipes for putting savory into your sweet potatoes this season. 📖



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

Roasted Parmesan Sweet Potatoes

- 2 1/2 pounds (about 3 medium) sweet potatoes, peeled and diced into 1-inch cubes
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3-4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 1/2 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme leaves
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 cup melted butter
- 1/3 cup finely grated parmesan cheese
- 1 1/2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley leaves

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place diced sweet potatoes on a baking sheet. In a small mixing bowl, stir together olive oil, garlic and thyme. Then pour the mixture over the potatoes. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and toss to evenly coat. Spread into an even layer.

Roast in the oven until tender, tossing once halfway through, about 30 minutes total. You may want to broil the potatoes during the last 1-2 minutes for more golden-brown, crispier potatoes. As soon as you remove the potatoes from the oven, drizzle and toss them with the melted butter, sprinkle them with parmesan and parsley, and serve. Makes 4 servings.





SAVORY MASHED SWEET POTATOES

- 1 stick butter
- 2-3 stalks celery, diced
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese
- 1-2 chipotle peppers, chopped, or to taste
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 6-7 sweet potatoes, peeled, cooked and mashed

Melt butter in a skillet and add the celery and onion. Saute until tender. Add cream cheese and stir until melted. Add chipotle peppers a little at a time. You don't want the mixture too spicy. Add salt and pepper to taste, then combine the mixture with the mashed sweet potatoes. Serve warm. Makes 6-8 servings.

TWICE-BAKED GOAT CHEESE & BACON SWEET POTATOES

- 4 large (about 3 pounds) sweet potatoes, scrubbed and halved lengthwise
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 ounces bacon, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 tablespoons evaporated milk or heavy cream
- 1/2 teaspoon each salt and pepper
- 5 1/2 ounces fresh goat cheese, divided
- 3 tablespoons maple syrup, divided
- 1 tablespoon chopped chives

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Prick the cut side of the potatoes with a fork in a few places. Rub the potatoes all over with oil and put them on a baking sheet, cut side down. Roast the potatoes until they're tender when pierced with a fork, about 45 minutes. Let them cool until you can handle them easily — about 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, cook the bacon in a large frying pan over medium-high heat, stirring often, to very crisp. Drain the bacon on a paper towel, and then roughly chop half of it.

Scoop the sweet potato flesh out of the skins and into a bowl, and reserve the skins. Mash the flesh with a fork until smooth. Add the chopped bacon, milk or cream, salt, pepper, half the goat cheese and 1 tablespoon maple syrup to the mashed potatoes. Stir just until blended. Spoon the mixture into the reserved sweet potato skins, dividing evenly and using all of it. Chill.

When ready to serve, bake the potatoes at 350 F until they are warm in the center, 15 to 20 minutes. Sprinkle the warmed potatoes with the unchopped bacon, crumbles of the remaining goat cheese, drizzles of the remaining maple syrup and the chives. Makes 8 servings.



Sweet potato rolls

- 1 cup mashed sweet potatoes, unseasoned
- 3/4 cup milk, divided
- 2 1/4 teaspoons active dry yeast
- 1/2 teaspoon plus 1/4 cup granulated sugar, divided
- 4 1/4 to 4 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 2 large eggs
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, partly melted
- 2-3 tablespoons melted butter (for brushing)

If using a whole sweet potato: Peel the potato, chop it into 1-inch cubes and put the cubes in a small saucepan with water to cover. Cook over medium-high heat for 20-30 minutes or until fork-tender. Drain. Mash the potatoes with a few tablespoons of milk. Measure out and set aside 1 cup of the mashed sweet potatoes.

Heat the rest of the milk to 115-120 F. Dissolve the yeast and 1/2 teaspoon sugar in the warm milk. Allow to proof for 5 minutes.

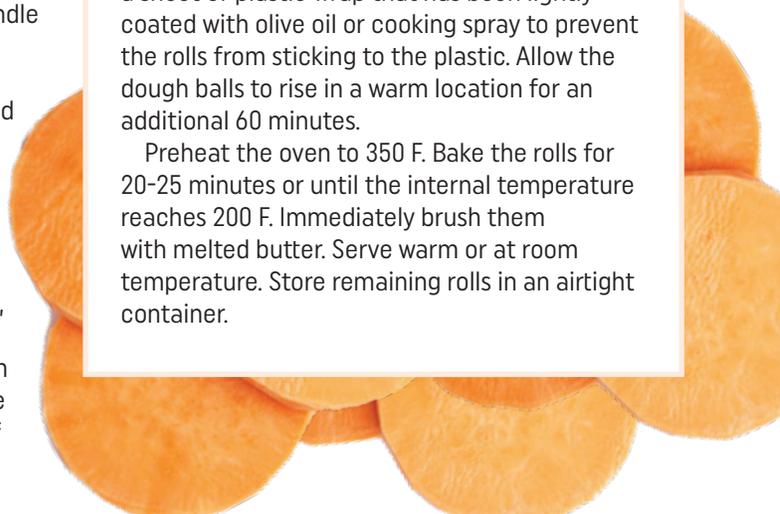
Meanwhile, combine 1/4 cup of sugar, 4 cups of flour and the salt in the bowl of a stand mixer. With the dough hook attachment in place, turn the mixer on low. Add the eggs, one at a time, followed by 6 tablespoons of butter, the mashed sweet potatoes and the yeast mixture. Increase the mixer speed, mixing until the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. If necessary, add up to an extra 1/2 cup of flour.

Transfer the dough to a lightly greased large bowl. Cover, and allow the dough to rise in a warm location until doubled in size, 1 to 1 1/2 hours.

Grease a 9-by-13-inch pan. Set aside.

Divide the dough into 12 equal portions and shape each portion into a ball, pinching the seams together. Place each ball, seam-side down, into the prepared pan. Cover the rolls with a sheet of plastic wrap that has been lightly coated with olive oil or cooking spray to prevent the rolls from sticking to the plastic. Allow the dough balls to rise in a warm location for an additional 60 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Bake the rolls for 20-25 minutes or until the internal temperature reaches 200 F. Immediately brush them with melted butter. Serve warm or at room temperature. Store remaining rolls in an airtight container.





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