

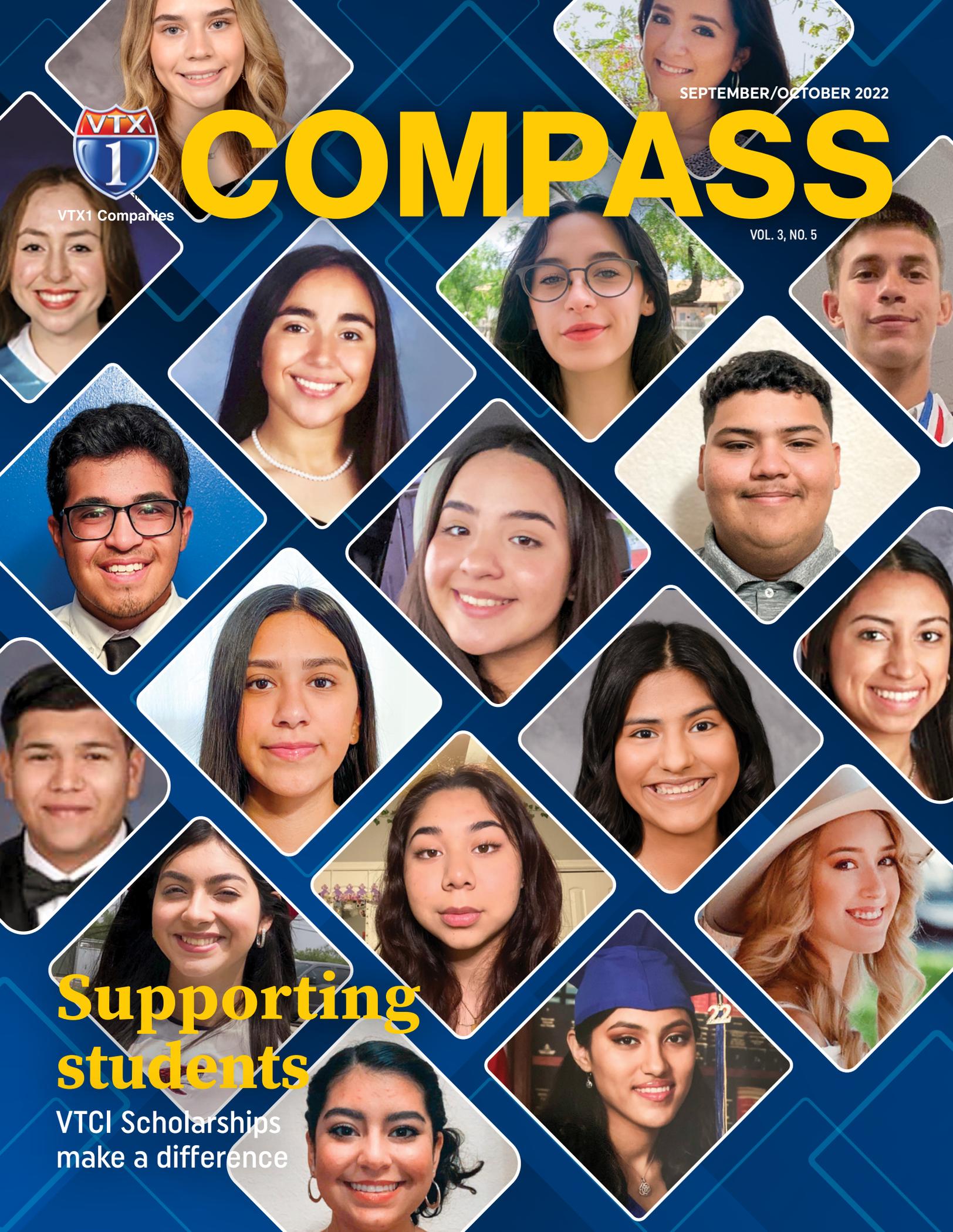
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2022



VTX1 Companies

# COMPASS

VOL. 3, NO. 5



## Supporting students

VTCL Scholarships  
make a difference



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## Faster broadband benefits rural America

As the chief executive officer of NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association, I am proud to represent 850 small, independent broadband providers who are offering some of the highest possible broadband speeds to some of the most remote parts of the country. Thanks to NTCA members, many rural Americans have higher internet speeds than I have where I live just outside Washington, D.C.

We currently have a once-in-a-generation opportunity through billions of dollars of funding recently made available by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and other federal programs to bridge the digital divide and bring broadband to those who still lack it. As broadband is deployed thanks to this funding, we must ensure that recipients are using it to provide the best possible services.

Recently, Federal Communications Commission Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel initiated a process to redefine what it means to have broadband-speed internet, raising the standard. This move continues us down the path needed to give rural residents the internet service they not only need but also deserve as they connect to vital resources like telemedicine, online education, employment opportunities and much more.

A new, more realistic, standard provides a range of benefits, including clarifying the true needs of rural areas and the funding required to serve them.

We have long advocated that, as a nation, we need to aim higher and do better when it comes to setting broadband objectives. We applaud Chairwoman Rosenworcel’s efforts. We look forward to continuing to work with the FCC and other agencies to bridge the digital divide. 🗨️

# A bridge to the future

## Your communications provider is your link to vital resources

The digital world increasingly weaves its way into our lives, replacing formerly physical resources, tasks and tools. Consider restaurants, for example. For some, scanning a QR code with your phone to view the options online has replaced physical menus.

Rapid expansion of digital resources was a trend before the pandemic, but it’s only accelerated in the years since.

In an article this year for Wired — “The Digital Divide Is Coming for You” — Bhaskar Chakravorti, dean of global business for The Fletcher School at Tufts University in Massachusetts, described having broadband and mobile internet as table stakes. Without those services, you don’t exist digitally, he says.

Your rural internet service provider is committed to bridging the digital divide between you and vital resources like these:

<p><b>BANKING</b></p>	<p><b>STREAMING TV</b></p>	<p><b>HEALTH CARE RECORDS</b></p>
<p><b>GOVERNMENT RESOURCES</b></p>	<p><b>EVENT TICKETS</b></p>	<p><b>WEATHER ALERTS</b></p>
<p><b>GAMING</b></p>	<p><b>HOME SALES AND PURCHASES</b></p>	<p><b>COLLEGE APPLICATIONS</b></p>

# What's the password?

## How to build — and remember — strong passwords

It's difficult to do anything online without piling up a few passwords. Using the same one for multiple sites can leave your private information vulnerable to cyberattacks, and devising strong passwords full of random letters and symbols can make them impossible to remember.

A good password doesn't have to be unintelligible, but it does need to be random enough to avoid any clear patterns. Here are a few helpful tips for building passwords that will keep your online accounts secure without forcing you to hit the "Forgot my password" link every time you want to log in.

**At least 12 characters** — the longer your password, the more difficult it will be to crack. In general, you should create passwords with a minimum of 12 to 14 characters. But more is always better.

**Change it up** — using a mix of different characters like numbers, symbols, capital and lowercase letters makes your passwords stronger.

**Avoid full words** — using your favorite team's name as a password

doesn't cut it anymore. In fact, you should avoid using any full words you might find in the dictionary. That goes for any common phrases, too.

**Diceware** — one exception to the above rule is the Diceware method. By stringing truly random words together, you can build a secure passphrase that is easier to remember than a jumble of letters and numbers. To help with this process, search for the Diceware Password Generator. It can randomly select between two and eight words to build your passphrase.

**Avoid obvious substitutions** — "Password" doesn't become stronger if you change it to "P@ssword." Avoid substituting obvious symbols for letters. If it has occurred to you, it has probably occurred to a hacker.

**Go to the manager** — if you're having trouble keeping track of all your logins, a password manager can help. Programs like Dashlane, LastPass and Keeper manage your passwords across numerous sites and devices, making it easier to avoid repeats. All you need to remember is one strong password, and you're set. 🗝️



## Tired of passwords?

### Apple may have the answer

At its Worldwide Developers Conference earlier this year, Apple demonstrated a new "passkeys" feature that may spell the end for passwords.

Rather than inputting a password for every site you visit, passkeys would use a biometric sign-in like the Touch ID or Face ID that currently exists on iPhones and iPads. Websites and apps on non-Apple devices would provide a QR code that sends authentication to the user's phone or tablet.

Just a month earlier, Apple joined with Google and Microsoft to support the development of new passwordless logins on both mobile and desktop devices. So, even if passkeys don't crack the code, you may not need to juggle passwords for much longer.

# The power of a cooperative

Your voice guides our mission

When it comes to a for-profit business, some would say a company is what it sells. The nature of a product defines a company's culture, the interactions with customers and how the message is spread.



**PATRICK MCDONNELL**  
Chief Executive Officer

The day-to-day realities of the many job roles and policies needed to make that product possible can shape how a business operates, how consumers view it and even how employees view themselves. For VTX1 Companies there's no doubt about our products or the expertise needed to make them innovative. Simply put, we know about rural communications and how to meet the needs of our communities. We began as a telephone cooperative in the 1950s, introduced and expanded our broadband network in the 1990s-2000s and have become the largest rural service provider in South Texas.

Today we are on the cutting edge of technological developments for all of our customers' communication needs.

Our high-speed internet and phone services connect you to the rest of the world. Streaming television and music, telemedicine and online learning, movies and social media — we make it possible for you to connect to all these modern necessities and luxuries.

We train our staff to not only anticipate the questions you may have about your services, but also to have the knowledge to provide clear answers.

At a very basic level, the services we provide do define VTX1 Companies — at least in part. You see, we're more than simply a telecommunications company. We are also part of a community of organizations whose mission is to bring services to the rural areas that larger companies will not serve.

Unlike businesses that put profit or stock values above all else, cooperatives proudly go a different direction. We are member-owned — yes, you own a part of this company — and we put your needs and the needs of the communities we serve first.

Does that mean we're not worried about income? Of course not. We're vigilant stewards of the cooperative's finances. In a world of escalating costs and ever-changing technology, that's no small task.

As a cooperative, though, we're also governed by you through a board of directors elected by you. Other communications companies can't say the same, particularly the large national providers. We are part of the community, devoted to making life here better for everyone. In fact, that's a central principle of every cooperative — concern for the community.

We support local organizations and businesses through donations, scholarships and more. The members of our team live here, shop here and enjoy our rural way of life just as you do.

Together we've created Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. and VTX1 Companies. We couldn't be more proud to serve you, our friends, our family and our neighbors. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Patrick McDonnell  
CEO, VTX1 Companies



**VTX1 Companies**

**Contact Us: 1-844-GET-VTX1**  
(438-8891)

**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

**Raymondville Corporate Office**

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**Dilley Office**

1489 W. FM 117 • Dilley, TX 78017

**Falfurrias Office**

300 N. St. Mary's St. • Falfurrias, TX 78355

**George West Office**

510 Bowie St. • George West, TX 78022

**Jourdanton Office**

511 Main St. • Jourdanton, TX 78026

**San Antonio Office**

6884 Alamo Downs Pkwy • San Antonio, TX 78238  
888-651-6080

**Board of Directors:**

- Chief Executive Officer — Patrick McDonnell
- District 1 — J.T. Mayo Jr. (Port Mansfield & San Perlita) — VP
- District 2 — George Bennack (Stillman)
- District 3 — Matthew Kiefer (Lasara)
- District 4 — Margie Pollock (Encino & Hargill) — SECRETARY
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- District 6 — Idalia (Dolly) Villarreal (El Sauz & McCook) — PRESIDENT
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- District 10 — Frank Weaver (Concepcion & Mirando City) — TREASURER

Produced for VTX1 by:



On the Cover:



Twenty students from local high schools were awarded \$3,000 VTCI Scholarships. The scholarship program dates back to 1988. See story Page 8.



*Celebrating*  
**THE COOPERATIVE SPIRIT**

**OCTOBER IS NATIONAL COOPERATIVE MONTH**

*Together we create...*

- » Better communities
- » Richer lives
- » Strong businesses

**It's possible because of YOU – our members!**

*Happy Labor Day!*

VTX1 offices will be closed on Monday, Sept. 5, in observance of Labor Day. Have a safe and happy holiday!



**RATE US!**

**Google**

Reviews ★★★★★

Scan the QR Code to write a Google review, and let us know how we're doing.

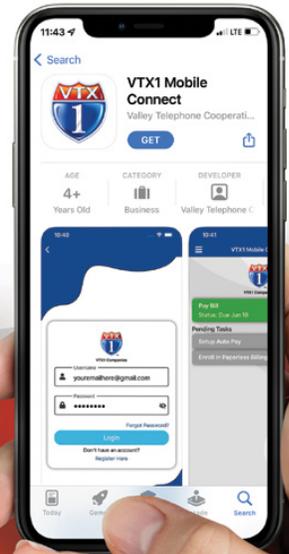


# BILL PAYMENT MADE EASY!

VTX1 Mobile Connect provides a wide range of options for managing your billing account.

Enroll in **Auto Pay** and never worry about missing a payment again.

- » Pay Your Bill
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**Put technology in your hands. Download the app today.**



Pay your bill safely and securely over encrypted channels.

# A night on the farm

Agritourism is booming deep in the heart of Texas

Story by ANNE BRALY



In the Lone Star State, where vistas go on for miles unending and ranches extend into the sunset, there may be no better place to unwind and get away than a farm or ranch. Farm stays are a big thing these days with agritourism now an alternative to big theme parks and resorts.

It's a win-win for both guests and farmers. For guests, it gives them a few days off the beaten path.

"It's a way for farmers to show the inner workings of their farms, what it takes to grow food for their tables, who we are and the stories we hold. Also, it's nice to welcome city dwellers to our farm to bridge a growing urban-rural divide and offer them our countrysides for relaxation, calm, play and connection," says Scottie Jones, a farmer and founder of the U.S. Farm Stay Association.

And for small farmers, it's a way to make much-needed money for new equipment and for upkeep and repairs on old farm equipment and other needs. "In the last decade, the concept of hosting guests on one's farm has risen to the surface, especially as booking sites such as Airbnb and VRBO have made the daunting task of taking reservations much more easy to handle," Scottie says.

So if you're after a chance to unplug, here are some Texas farmers opening their gates to overnight guests.



## BlissWood Bed & Breakfast Ranch Cat Spring, Texas

For animal lovers, this 350-acre ranch on the edge of Texas Hill Country is the place to go with its herds of bison, donkeys and antelopes.

"People have learned the connection to nature and animals is so important to our well-being," says owner Carol Davis.

Carol bought the ranch 27 years ago and two years later opened it to overnight guests who come from larger cities around the state, as well as out-of-state travelers and some international guests looking to disengage from everyday life.

"I wanted to share this lovely place with others who are frazzled and stressed out in the city, offering a place to slow down and relax a bit," she says.

Overnight accommodations include romantic cabins for the two of you with private hot tubs. Or there are two-bedroom cabins perfect for a small family and larger houses that will sleep up to 10 people. You can also "rough it" in a safari tent beneath the massive oaks complete with luxury appointments and a private bathroom. Two RVs located around the show barn with views of the lake offer a different kind of glamping experience.

Rooms come stocked with



Left; Accommodations at BlissWood Bed & Breakfast Ranch, Cat Spring, Texas, include romantic cabins for two and houses that can sleep 10.

Right: BlissWood guests can stay in a log cabin.

Inset: The rustic charm of the BlissWood Bed & Breakfast Ranch has attracted visitors for about 25 years.

Below: The Cottages at Boldheart Farms, Dale, Texas, include one in the heart of the garden.



Photo contributed by Boldheart Farms

ready-to-eat breakfast fare — continental breakfasts are included in your stay — and special dining packages with things like pizza, beer and popcorn. Picnics on the ranch or chocolate-covered strawberries with champagne can be arranged.

*More information: [blisswood.net](http://blisswood.net)*

### **Cottages at Boldheart Farms Dale, Texas**

When was the last time you woke up to the scent of jasmine climbing the garden gate and the sounds of Arabian horses grazing peacefully in the nearby pastures? It's a scene that puts your soul in the right place.

There are two one-bedroom metal cottages — one in the garden, the other by the pond. Both have front porches where guests can hang out and read, write or even sleep. Owner Maggie Nicol opened the farm to guests with husband, Eric, just two years ago.

Picnic by the pond, learn to drive a tractor or tiptoe through the bluebonnets on a sunny spring afternoon.

The cottages offer comfortable bedding, air conditioning, kitchens and TVs, if you must. Guests can also enjoy a day on the farm with its ducks, hens, herbs, tomatoes and manicured gardens. A made-from-scratch breakfast is included in your stay each morning.

"I work diligently to give each guest a wonderful experience," Maggie says.

*More information: [thecottagesatboldheartfarms.com](http://thecottagesatboldheartfarms.com)*

### **Scurlock Farms Georgetown, Texas**

Frontage on the San Gabriel River turns the average farm stay into an adventure in the wilds of Texas Hill Country. Wildlife abounds on this 172-acre farm with good fishing, 9 miles of hiking and biking trails, or relaxation with a good book beneath

centuries-old majestic oaks.

Guests can interact with cattle, goats and horses or head into nearby Georgetown for shopping, art galleries or a meal at one of several charming restaurants in the nearby village of Salado.

Overnights are spent in one of two homes owners Sheron and Dan Scurlock have made sure will provide comfort for guests. One home has two luxurious king suites, and another is a one-bedroom house, formerly Sheron's mother's art studio. Kitchens come stocked with food basics and condiments.

Sheron and Dan have turned their farm into the perfect getaway for romance, work, vacation — whatever kind of escape you need.

*More information: [scurlockfarms.com](http://scurlockfarms.com)*

# Congrat

## to the Class of 2022!

### 20 area students receive VTCI Scholarships

**V**TX1 is proud to support local students through its Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. Scholarship program. Twenty graduating seniors from the cooperative area received \$3,000 scholarships earlier this year to help cover the cost of attending a two- or four-year college or university.

Congratulations to the 2022 VTCI Scholarship recipients! We wish you the best of luck as you continue your education.

Applications for the 2023 VTCI Scholarship program will be available starting on Sept. 14, and applications must be received by 3 p.m. on Nov. 18. For more information, or to get an application, click the "Community" tab at [vtx1.net](http://vtx1.net).



**MIA ALVARADO**  
San Isidro High School

**Attending:**  
Texas A&M University



**MARC BARCO**  
Lasara High School

**Attending:**  
Texas State University



**ALIYAH CANTU**  
Raymondville Early College High School

**Attending:**  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley



**MARIANA CONTRERAS**  
Lasara High School

**Attending:**  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley



**NICOLE DELGADO**  
San Isidro High School

**Attending:**  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley



**EMMA GARCIA**  
San Isidro High School

**Attending:**  
Stephen F. Austin State University

**NOT PICTURED: LIV MORGAN**  
San Perlita High School  
**Attending:** Texas State University

**GRAHAM BLAHA**  
McMullen County High School  
**Attending:** Blinn College

# Graduation

©Alex Goria/AdobeStock



**EVELYN GARCIA**  
Roma High School  
**Attending:**  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley



**BAILEY GARCIA**  
McMullen County High School  
**Attending:**  
Tarleton State University



**FAITH GARZA**  
Rio Grande City High School  
**Attending:**  
The University of Texas at Austin



**MAURICIO HERNANDEZ**  
Bruni High School  
**Attending:**  
Texas State Technical College: Harlingen



**ANDREA JOHNSTON**  
Lyford High School  
**Attending:**  
Texas A&M University Kingsville



**TOMMY LANE**  
San Isidro High School  
**Attending:**  
South Texas College



**NICOLE MARCAK**  
Weslaco East High School  
**Attending:**  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley



**JAIME MENDOZA III**  
San Isidro High School  
**Attending:**  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley



**STACI RODRIGUEZ**  
San Perlita High School  
**Attending:**  
Texas A&M University Corpus Christi



**JASMINE RODRIGUEZ**  
San Perlita High School  
**Attending:**  
University of Texas at San Antonio



**EMILY SOTO**  
Lyford High School  
**Attending:**  
University of Texas at San Antonio



**VALERIE VELA**  
Bruni High School  
**Attending:**  
Laredo Community College

# Find your wavelength

Podcasts let you tune in to your passions



Podcasts have seen an explosion in popularity in recent years, thanks to their variety and the connections hosts forge with their listeners. If you've never listened to a podcast before, you can think of them like prerecorded radio shows on your favorite topics.

But, because listeners can download podcasts to a phone or computer and play them at any time, audiences can go as deep or as light as they want on a given topic. Podcasts also don't require the full attention video does, meaning you can drive to work, answer emails or cook dinner — all while continuing to enjoy your favorite programming.

In the early days of podcasting, following your favorite show meant navigating a technological obstacle course of downloads and synced devices. Today, the process is as easy as downloading an app.

Apps like Apple Podcasts and Stitcher make it easy to search thousands of the latest podcasts and subscribe to your

favorites for free. If you have the Spotify app, you're already set. Just go to the Search tab and choose "Podcasts & Shows" to start adding new discoveries to your list.

Not sure where to start? Here are a few of our favorites to get you going:

▶ **"Criminal"** — One of the first true crime hits, even before "Serial" hit the scene, "Criminal" tells the "stories of people who've done wrong, been wronged, or gotten caught somewhere in the middle." Going beyond tales of murder, it takes a critical look at the impact of crime on its victims and perpetrators.

▶ **"This American Life"** — "This American Life" has been on the air since 1995, so there are plenty of stories to catch up on. Described as little movies for radio, each episode is also a little different. But they all tell the true, entertaining and often surprising stories of the people and events shaping our American lives.

▶ **"The Big Picture"** — Struggling to keep up with the latest movie releases? Hosts Sean Fennessey and Amanda Dobbins run down all the movies you need to see while also discussing old favorites and interviewing the people behind them twice a week.

▶ **"Lore"** — Truth is scarier than fiction in this documentary podcast series that explores the dark corners of history. Gather around the audio campfire to listen in on true historical tales, legends and folklore biweekly.

▶ **"Sound Opinions"** — Chicago music critics Jim DeRogatis and Greg Kot know everyone's a critic. Each week, they get together to discuss music's greats, talk shop with artists and share their opinions on the latest releases on this independent radio show and podcast. 📻





# The newest spectator sport

Streaming platforms like Twitch let gamers build massive followings

**G**amers have thriving online communities, including platforms like Twitch, that give millions of fans from around the world a place to share their knowledge and experience, while also providing countless hours of entertainment.

## WHY WATCH INSTEAD OF PLAY?

Staying up to date with the latest and greatest video games can be expensive and time consuming. Sometimes game descriptions and reviews aren't enough — it's better to see a game in action. Avid gamers can check out a Twitch stream to see if a game is right for them, gain insight into a game's features, and find updates and creative fixes to problems. Many people subscribe to Twitch channels just for the entertainment value.

It's also a way to engage with others in the gaming community. Live broadcasts

feature an interactive chat where viewers can talk with the streamer and other viewers. These connections with like-minded people and interesting personalities keep people interested and coming back for more.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STREAMING YOUR GAMING?

There are many incentives for live-streamers. The revenue potential can be sky high — some streamers have built careers, earning millions and striking deals with game publishers to get exclusive early access to the newest games.

The higher a streaming channel's subscriber count, the more opportunities the streamer has for exclusive marketing partnerships. Viewers can also donate to the channel during the broadcast. The biggest Twitch streamers get most of their income from paid subscription fees. 

**While the Twitch website and app are still the most popular, other platforms have sprouted up as well.**

## YouTube

YouTube's gaming section, [youtube.com/gaming](https://www.youtube.com/gaming), has functions similar to Twitch, and it's gaining popularity with amateur streamers because its optimized search engine makes it easier for a beginner's content to get noticed.

The audience is shared with YouTube, so the potential pool of viewers is vastly greater than on Twitch. For streamers, YouTube has greater potential for earnings from advertisements.

## Facebook Gaming

Facebook Gaming is growing as existing Facebook users check out the video gaming hub that can be easily accessed through the main social media site or [FB.gg](https://fb.gg).

There's also a Facebook Gaming app enthusiasts can download to discover content, connect with other gamers and casually play mobile games. Like the other popular streaming platforms, Facebook allows users easy access to uploads from their favorite streamers. But, like its main site, Facebook Gaming users can join groups and like topics to tailor their timelines to their specific interests.



# Supporting STUDENTS

## VTCI Scholarship program helps young people build bright futures

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

Providing students with the resources to help them succeed is vital. This was true in 1952 when a group of neighbors came together to form Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc., providing phone service where no one else would. And it's still true today, when that same company, now called VTX1, provides phone and high-speed broadband service to 40,000 homes and businesses across South Texas.

The VTCI Scholarship program helps students from small Rio Grande Valley towns get the education that can change their lives. Open to the dependents of cooperative members, the scholarship program is just one way VTX1 acts on its commitment to support its communities.

"It's a big deal, especially in the rural communities where, generally, money is tighter," says Director Adalberto Garza, who represents San Isidro on the board and chairs the scholarship committee. "I know the parents and the community as a whole really appreciate what we do. It's really very rewarding to help students form our future by offering educational opportunities."

### FUNDING THE FUTURE

The VTCI Scholarship program launched in 1998. Each year, it awards \$3,000 scholarships to 20 graduating seniors from high schools in the cooperative's exchange areas. The scholarship can be renewed for a total of four years with the amount increasing by \$250 per year if the student maintains a grade-point average of at least 3.0. By the time a student graduates from a four-year institution, the VTCI Scholarship may have covered more than \$12,000 of the cost of earning that degree.

The program is administered by Scholarship America, an independent firm. "We know everybody in these rural communities, that's just a fact of life," Garza says. "So, having that totally independent source do these evaluations completely removes the element of favoritism. We want our members to be sure that everything is being done with transparency and fairness."

### A NEW SCHEDULE

There's a new schedule for scholarship applications this year — part of an effort to shine more light on the program and its benefits. Applications for the 2023 scholarships will be available starting on Sept. 14 with submissions due by 3 p.m. on Nov. 18. Winners will be chosen by January, and the cooperative will publicly honor those students at its four membership and annual meetings in March. "We want to change the culture, we want to showcase the program at these meetings," Garza says. "We want all the members to know about our scholarship."

The revised schedule will also allow board members time to make arrangements to congratulate the scholarship recipients personally on graduation day. "The directors will now have an opportunity to schedule their time to be able to go to the graduation ceremonies in their districts and make the presentations," Garza says. "It's just going to be much better." 



To learn more about the VTCI Scholarship program, or to get an application, go to [vtx1.net/community](http://vtx1.net/community).

# Opening doors of opportunity

School officials see the benefits of VTCI Scholarships

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

For more than three decades, Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. Scholarships have helped hundreds of South Texas students turn their dreams of a college education into reality.

“For a lot of these kids, this may open an opportunity they might not otherwise have,” San Isidro Independent School District Superintendent Mario Alvarado says. “This isn’t a small scholarship. It’s an average of \$12,000. We’re always looking for opportunities for our kids to further their education, so scholarship programs like this are very important to our community and our students.”

Most of the 10 school districts in the VTCI service area include very small schools. For example, Bruni High School’s Class of 2022 consisted of 22 students, and San Isidro High School celebrated 14 graduates this year. While a rural, small-district environment has its advantages — the school often becomes a community hub, and classmates form tight-knit groups — small schools are often overlooked when it comes to resources and opportunities.

## SMALL SCHOOLS, SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

Students in rural areas often have access to fewer scholarship opportunities than their big-city counterparts — a reality Susan Douglas, a school counselor at Bruni High School in the Webb Consolidated Independent School District, knows very well. “That’s why this VTCI Scholarship is so important to us,” she says. “There are very few scholarships that kids are eligible to apply for around here. It’s really important that our kids have opportunities to apply for,



VTX1 Director Dr. Adalberto Garza, left, and Board President Dolly Villarreal, right, attended San Isidro High School’s graduation ceremony to honor this year’s VTCI Scholarship recipients. San Isidro’s 2022 VTCI Scholarship winners are Tommy Lane, Mia Alvarado, Nicole Delgado, Emma Garcia and Jaime Mendoza. Photography contributed by San Isidro Independent School District

and hopefully, get, scholarships. We need all the help we can get.”

Douglas works alongside Bruni High School teachers to make sure students and their parents are aware of all options available to help pay for college, including federal financial aid and scholarships like those VTCI offers. “A lot of them are the first generation of their family to go to college, so the process isn’t just new to them, it’s new to their parents, as well,” she says. “We do try to offer as much support as possible so they know that they’re not on their own. It’s new to them, so we try to help them along the way.”

## BROADENING HORIZONS

When talking to his students about the

VTCI Scholarship program, Alvarado emphasizes its potential to be a chance to see what life is like outside of South Texas. “I always challenge our graduates to try to expand their horizons a little bit. That’s where some of this comes into play in trying to encourage them,” he says. “You only do this once when you’re young. That little extra boost of \$1,500 a semester might be the difference in now saying, ‘I can go to College Station or I can go to Texas State or somewhere outside of the Valley.’”

“We set up a fund when our kids were small to start putting money away for college. But ultimately, when that time comes, everything seems to be more expensive.” ☑

# It's time to go LOW AND SLOW



Cooking ribs at a low temperature for a long time tenderizes the meat and adds delightful flavor.

The aroma of smoke wafting through the air as meat slowly cooks goes hand in hand with a lazy summer afternoon. Smoking is not the same as grilling. There's a science to it that scares off some cooks, but break it down step by step, and you can become quite adept at making tender briskets and fall-off-the-bone ribs.

Smoking, more commonly known as barbecuing, takes time and patience. Defined simply, the technique takes a tough piece of meat and cooks it slowly over indirect heat for extended periods — often 12 to 16 hours and sometimes even more — while the smoke flavors the meat and gives it its mouthwatering flavor and texture. Any expert will tell you that the key to the best barbecue — that kind that wins competitions — is cooking it low and slow.

Cooking over high heat tends to dry the meat out very quickly. Any moisture within the meat is essentially blasted out, leaving it tough, dry and difficult to chew. Smoking meat slowly at a low temperature, on the other hand, keeps the moisture from evaporating too quickly, allowing you to achieve the perfect combination of tenderness and juiciness.

Here are two recipes that are good for beginners.

The 3-2-1 rib recipe is one many home smokers use. This method is easy and generally foolproof, creating ribs that are so tender you can pull the meat off the bone with your fingers. And pork butt is basically a no-brainer. Just rub it down with your favorite blend of seasonings or use the recipe that follows. Place it on the smoker and within just a few hours, you'll have tender pork perfect for sandwiches. Add a side of beans and some potato salad, and you'll have the makings of a beautiful, tasty summer dinner.



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## 3-2-1 RIBS METHOD

1 rack of ribs  
Your favorite rub  
Your favorite barbecue sauce

### STEP THREE:

Liberaly coat the ribs with rub and allow them to “marinate” while you bring the smoker to 225 F. Place the ribs in the smoker, and add whatever wood chunks you want — cherry or hickory are popular. Smoke the ribs for 3 hours, maintaining the 225 F temperature. If you are smoking thinner back ribs, you may want to smoke them for just 2 hours. Any longer, and you may find the ribs dry out too much.

### STEP TWO:

The second stage is when the

meat tenderizes. Remove the ribs from the smoker and wrap them tightly in foil. This steams the meat and the result is tender, juicy ribs. Just before closing each rack of ribs in the foil, put a little bit of beer or apple juice in with the ribs. This helps the steaming process. Put the ribs, wrapped in foil, back in the smoker for 2 hours at 225 degrees.

### STEP ONE:

This final stage is when you sauce the ribs. Use your favorite barbecue sauce to liberaly coat the ribs on both sides before placing them back in the smoker for a final hour. The result should be a rack of ribs you'll never forget.



## SMOKED BUTT

*Smoked pork butt is a good one for beginners. The meat is not expensive, and the result is a mouthful of summer.*

- 1 (7-8 pound) bone-in pork butt
- Olive oil
- Water

### Dry rub:

- 1/4 cup light brown sugar packed
- 2 tablespoons black pepper, coarsely ground
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon dried minced onions
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper

### Spritz:

- 1/4 cup apple juice
- 1/4 cup apple cider vinegar

**Prepare the smoker:** Fill the hopper of your smoker with wood pellets, applewood, hickory, pecan or cherry. Start the smoker on the smoke setting for 5 to 10 minutes. Increase heat to 250 F.

Fill a small baking dish with water and set aside.

**Prepare the pork butt:** Place all dry rub ingredients in a small bowl and stir with a fork to combine. Place pork butt on a baking sheet and rub the entire butt with olive oil. Sprinkle the seasonings over it and rub them in, covering every bit of the butt.

Place the baking dish filled with water on the grate on one side of the smoker.

Fill a small spray bottle with the apple juice and apple cider vinegar and set aside.

Place pork shoulder on the grate and close the lid. Keep the smoker temperature around 250 to 275 F while smoking during these first several hours. Smoke for approximately 4 hours, spritzing with the spray bottle every hour.

Check the internal temperature of the pork using a meat thermometer. By this time, the pork should be at least 145 F.

Completely spritz the pork one last time and carefully wrap it in aluminum foil. Place pork back into the smoker and lower temperature to 225 F. Smoke pork about



A perfectly cooked pork butt is a great start to a summer sandwich.

another 4 hours, but do not spritz during this stage of cooking.

Check the internal temperature of the pork shoulder using a meat thermometer. You're looking for your pork shoulder to be about 200 F. Anywhere from 195 to 205 F is a good range. Remove pork from the smoker and let rest for at least 20 minutes but up to 2 hours. Shred or chop as desired. 🍴



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