

CONNECTION



A Place to Belong

Shop serves General Good

SHELTERING
STRAYS

RECRUITING
HEROES



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

An Ongoing Mission

NTCA supports rural broadband

As we begin a new year, our NTCA members are on my mind, specifically how they do so much to create a better tomorrow by deploying and sustaining reliable broadband networks that connect rural communities to the world.

We've come a long way since the creation of NTCA in 1954, and I wanted to start 2025 with a reminder—or possibly an introduction—to who we are and how we serve the people who work so hard for you.

We represent about 850 independent, family-owned and community-based rural telecommunications companies. Without NTCA members, many communities would continue to be left behind by larger, national internet providers. So, we strive to advance policies that help these companies close the digital divide. This includes supporting programs like the Universal Service Fund, which helps rural consumers get and stay connected to high-quality, affordable internet.

I'm proud to note how well our NTCA members do their jobs. The robust and reliable broadband they provide enables businesses to connect to customers, doctors to patients and teachers to students. And the work they do in their communities goes beyond providing internet service. Many host digital literacy classes, sponsor STEM and esports initiatives at schools, support economic development initiatives and so much more.

In short, NTCA members are dedicated to improving the communities they serve.

As we enter a new year, we continue to support our members as they work to make your lives the best they can be. 🗨️

HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

BROADBAND NETWORKS SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

Your fast, reliable internet connection links you to the internet, bringing you a seemingly endless number of services. Whether you enjoy streaming entertainment, gaming, video calls and more, this essential service adapts to your needs.



Did you know, however, that same network may also underpin a range of other services essential to your community? While the specifics may vary from place to place, fast internet networks create a foundation for rural America.



PUBLIC SAFETY

The communications systems serving first responders often rely on high-speed internet.



EDUCATION

School systems send large amounts of data and offer classrooms access to online resources.



GOVERNMENT

From informational websites and apps to the computer networks and databases needed to operate, local governments require excellent connectivity.



HEALTH CARE

Whether transmitting medical records or for telehealth visits, medical providers increasingly rely on digital tools.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Fast broadband networks provide a community resource attractive to both businesses and homebuyers, creating a keystone for growth.

A Safe Place to Stay

Isaiah House provides comfort for foster children



Photo courtesy of Corey Paulson

Television host Mike Rowe, center, surprises Isaiah 117 House co-founder Ronda Paulson and her family for a taping of his Facebook show “Returning the Favor.”

Story by MELANIE JONES

When Ronda and Corey Paulson met their first foster child at the back door of the Carter County, Tennessee, Department of Children’s Services, he was wearing too-small pajamas. The clothes he was wearing when he was removed from his unsuitable home were filthy, and DCS was unable to provide any that fit him properly.

The 9-month-old was fortunate the couple could come get him quickly. Some foster children spend hours—if not days—at overwhelmed and understaffed DCS offices, sometimes sleeping on the floor.

That situation has begun to change, however, thanks to a far-reaching program the Paulsons were inspired to establish in 2018. Thanks to word of mouth and a 2020 feature by “Dirty Jobs” host Mike Rowe on his Facebook page, their effort is spreading nationwide.

When the couple took the baby boy, Isaiah, home they lavished him with love and everything else an infant could need. But the Paulsons couldn’t stop thinking about something they learned in their

foster-parenting classes—the DCS office is usually the only place for a child to go on removal day.

They thought of little Isaiah. And they started studying the Bible’s book of Isaiah, including part of one verse in particular, Isaiah 1:17, which calls on people to “take up the cause of the fatherless.”

Then they thought, “What if there was a home?” Corey says.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT


So, that’s what they set out to create. Ronda put together a board and worked with the local DCS office to come up with a workable concept. They raised money, bought a house and renovated it to DCS specifications. They painted the door red, and they called it Isaiah 117 House.

The house provides space for DCS workers who now bring children there instead of an office building. Children and teens have access to baths and showers. They get brand-new clean clothes and

toys. They have beds to sleep in if the placement takes more than a few hours. Volunteers cook them nutritious meals and comfort food.

That was 2018, and it was supposed to be one and done. “Clearly, we’ve learned that God had other plans,” Corey says.

Word of mouth spread. Soon neighboring Tennessee counties wanted their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Then, in 2020, Ronda and the Isaiah 117 House were featured on Mike Rowe’s Facebook show “Returning the Favor.” Two million people saw that episode on March 9, 2020. Then the calls really started coming in. Corey says they heard from people in 41 states and four countries wanting to start their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Now about 30 are open and more are in the works across 12 states.

“On March 13, the world shut down,” Corey says of the COVID-19 pandemic. “But our mission kept growing. We say Mike Rowe and Jesus are building houses for children.” 

LEARN MORE

Interested in learning more about Isaiah 117 House or how to establish one in your area? Visit isaiah117house.com.

Key Choices Ring in the New Year

Our students begin their paths to the future



KELLY ALLISON
General Manager

Happy new year. I hope you had a wonderful holiday season and enjoyed your time with friends and family. Now, we're at a moment for resolutions and contemplating all we'll achieve in the next 12 months.

One particular group will soon reach a significant milestone—graduating from high school. Some members of the Class of 2025 already cemented their plans for the next few years, but others are likely considering the short-term steps that will determine their long-term paths.

As these students begin their final months of high school, I want to thank them and their families for all they do, because these young people will become our community's leaders for decades to come.

In my role with Colorado Valley Communications, I appreciate the opportunities these young people have. We provide the essential communications resources for online education, work-from-home jobs and so much more. Every day, we see how young people make the most of the digital tools connecting our community to the world.

Many students complete the early college selection process by late winter. Come spring, others will pick their next destinations. We celebrate these choices because a college education is a wonderful, challenging opportunity. From engineers to physicians, business leaders and so many other professional paths, the road begins with college.

However, that's far from the only option. Traditional colleges won't meet the needs of everyone. Some future members of the workforce will enroll at a community college, trade or technical school, and we applaud these options. The route from high school to high-paying jobs in in-demand fields based on trade school educations may be shorter and much less expensive than traditional college degrees.

What would we do without expert locksmiths, reliable truck drivers, electricians, plumbers and the other tradespeople who make modern life possible? Individuals who invest their time to learn these skills are invaluable.

These are topics close to our hearts at CVCTX because the people who install the networks that make our services possible need the training to bring you the highest-quality service. In fact, NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association and Northwood Tech in Wisconsin provide ongoing training and accreditation—including remote classes—to create a foundation for these vital professionals.

Our hope is all our young people have the resources and ability to choose the career best for them. Then, hopefully, they'll be part of our community for generations to come.

As we begin this new year, remember the high school seniors around us face important decisions. As their communications provider, we're proud to offer the powerful internet network linking them to all the resources they need to take their next steps.

May your 2025 be filled with joy. Thank you for letting us serve you. 📧

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To sign up for service, to increase your bandwidth or to let us know where to build out our fiber network next, visit cvctx.com.

Customers in several parts of our service area can access fiber to the home, while expansion for access is in the works for other locations.

For more information on Colorado Valley's service area, visit cvctx.com/maps. To learn about the service available at your address, visit cvctx.com/signup.

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On the Cover:



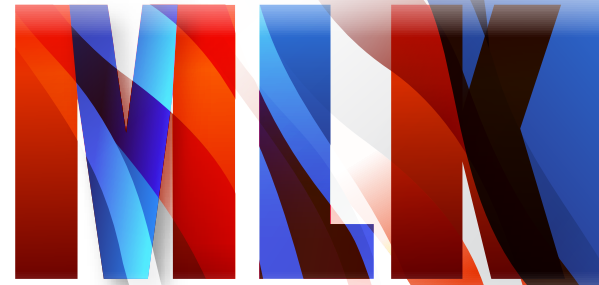
Photo courtesy of Erin Wotipka

Amy Vaculik greets guests with love at Jack & Mary's General Good. The coffee shop provides a place for adults with autism or learning difficulties to work and interact with other members of the community.
See story on Page 8.

ATTENTION, High School Seniors!

Colorado Valley Telephone Cooperative will award \$5,000 scholarships to graduating seniors from local high schools. To be eligible, applicants must be graduating high school seniors and live in a household that receives telephone service from the cooperative. For all the details and to get an application, go to cvctx.com/scholarships. Applications must be received by April 1.

CVCTX also partners with the Foundation for Rural Service to offer \$2,000 scholarships. Same eligibility requirements apply. Go to FRS.org/programs.



★ MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY ★

Honoring Martin Luther King Jr.

Colorado Valley Communications offices will be closed on Monday, Jan. 20, in observance of **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY.**



Watch Your Words Online

Social media is a convenient way to stay in touch with family and friends. Sites like Facebook and Instagram are great ways to watch concerts or religious services you can't attend in person. Users can find new books, movies, shows or entirely new communities. Discover new hobbies. Learn to dance. Learn to cook. Learn just about anything.

In some ways, it can also get out of hand. Angry people are spewing some hurtful things on social media about everything from politics and religion to celebrities' dress sizes. But hearts, minds and even careers can escape damage if you follow a few simple rules of social media etiquette.

- Treat others the way you want to be treated. Would you want to be insulted because of your deeply held beliefs?
- Don't say anything online you wouldn't say in person. Many otherwise decent, intelligent, kind people are reduced to typing hateful, verbal abuse in online disagreements.
- Think before you post. Walk away from an online conversation and consider what you want to say and how you can politely and intelligently make your point.
- Don't use slurs.
- If you know something isn't true, don't share it. If you suspect something isn't true, investigate.

It's tempting to say whatever you want online, but remember, the internet isn't truly anonymous. People just may think the worst side of you represents all of you.

Save by Going Paperless

Simplify your life and reduce clutter by going paperless. SmartHub is the most convenient and secure way of viewing and paying your monthly CVCTX bill.

Customers who haven't already registered get a one-time \$5 bill credit when they sign up for paperless billing. Learn more at cvctx.com/billing.



Roll Out the Red Carpet

Fans play key role in film festivals' success

Story by KATHY DENES

The new year brings film fans front-row access to the latest—possibly greatest—in movie entertainment. Surprising plot twists, emotional turbulence, enlightenment, wild outdoor adventures, horror, invasions from space and even close encounters with celebrities are all in store. The 2025 film festivals are ready for their close-up.

“Over the years, our audience has given us many nicknames—spring break, immersion therapy, summer camp,” says Emily Lock, conference director for the Austin Film Festival & Writers Conference. “Fans’ passion for movies, TV and all kinds of new media

helps aspiring creatives forge the careers they’ve dreamt of, propels working directors into household names and ultimately imbues their art with meaning and cultural impact.”

The conference welcomes storytellers, rising talents and industry luminaries from across Texas and the world. Old friends who consider the trip a beloved tradition

rub elbows with new attendees who will experience the magic of the festival for the first time, Emily says.

With 60 film festivals on the docket for 2025, Texas is rich with options for fans of about any genre and at about every price range, according to the Houston Film Commission.

FAN FOCUS

While its primary focus is giving filmmakers a place to introduce their projects



Ryan Gosling takes selfies with fans at the SXSW 2024 “Fall Guy” premiere in Austin.



Austin's State Theatre prepares to welcome festival guests to a screening.

FESTIVAL SCENE

The **Hill Country Film Festival** in Fredericksburg runs through the last weekend in May. The festival was started in 2010 by the Hill Country Film Society, which now offers year-round film programs through the monthly Indie Film Series, Summer Film Camp and Film Affare, an annual exploration of food and film.

Midsummer brings the **San Antonio Film Festival**, from July 30 to Aug. 3. Celebrating its 31st year, the festival focuses on affordable attendance and works with top local hotels and restaurants to offer discounts.

Austin hosts more than two dozen film festivals. Besides the massive 2025 **SXSW Film and TV Festival** in March, the city has other fan-friendly festivals like the **ATX Short Film Showcase**, which is held every month. Eight local projects are screened, and their Texas-based filmmakers are on hand after each for a Q&A session. The **Best of the Year Fest** is held in August.

The end of summer brings fans and industry insiders together Sept. 12 at AFS Cinema for the **Austin Under the Stars Film Festival**, showcasing indie filmmaking. And in October, the **Austin Film Festival** marks its 32nd year of championing the art of storytelling and great screenwriting.

In Houston, events start with the Jan. 20-25 **ShortFlix Film Fest**, in its second year of showcasing films of 12 minutes or less at the Pearl Theater. The **Houston Greek Film Fest** ends the season at the Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston. The MATCH, or Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston, also hosts a spring festival, April 12-13, that highlights underwater videography.

and network with industry colleagues, almost every festival relies heavily on fan participation. Screenings and special events are open to the public.



Actor Paul Reiser answers audience questions about his film "The Problem with People" at the Austin Film Festival.

Ticket prices run the gamut from free admission upward to hundreds of dollars.

Fans at film festivals often interact with industry insiders while getting to see impactful projects that may never be shown at their neighborhood theaters. But beyond that, fans meet people with similar interests, making the festivals social events about much more than just cramming in as many screenings as possible.

Finding a great festival to attend is easy, they are plentiful. One great resource for starting your search is filmfreeway.com.

HIT THE MARK

Festival ticket sales often start well in advance, and popular festivals can sell out quickly. Some have a tiered ticketing system that prioritizes previous buyers. Tickets usually are available for purchase during the festival, but there's a chance

that popular screenings and events will involve a waitlist.

To ensure access, and save money, a great choice for the adventurous film buff is to sign up as a festival volunteer. Many festivals are staffed completely by volunteers, and even the largest fests rely heavily on volunteers. Duties range from greeting patrons and taking tickets to helping out at evening parties. Volunteers often reap the rewards such as free admission and sometimes even access to industry professionals.

Another option is to become a member of the organization putting on a festival, which can bring year-round benefits. Some festivals also offer members the option of in-home streaming of films throughout the year, while others have affiliations that provide discounts at movie theaters throughout the country. 📺

Working to *Benefit* the General Good

Jack & Mary's offers much-needed opportunities

Story by MELANIE JONES

Customers walking into Jack & Mary's General Good in Schulenburg are greeted by smiling faces and the warm aroma of coffee. But there's something different about this coffee shop. It's staffed by young adults with autism or learning challenges.

Those individuals age out of the public education system at 22. After that, there's nowhere for many of them to go, especially in rural towns like Schulenburg. "It was a time that, for these parents, felt like falling off of a cliff," Erin Wotipka says.

Erin founded And Then a New Day, a nonprofit providing training and services for adults with learning challenges or autism, as well as Jack & Mary's General Good, which serves as the organization's for-profit arm.

Erin, a former special education teacher, was teaching general education classes at the private school her children attended. Feeling unfulfilled, she quit her job. Shortly thereafter, she bumped into the parents of one of her former special education students. "It was just kind of like God

put us in the right place at the right time," she says.

As the parents shared their struggles with what to do for their son after he aged out of the school, Erin saw a golden opportunity. "I started working with him again, and it just re-inspired my whole love for working with individuals with autism and learning challenges," she says.

But this required a new skill set. As a special education teacher, Erin taught elementary-level skills. "Now, I had to figure how to transition this into real-life

Photos courtesy of Erin Wotipka



Erin Wotipka and her husband, Ryan, started Jack & Mary's General Good to give young adults with autism and learning challenges who have aged out of public education a place to work and socialize.



Jack & Mary's helps employees like Willhelm Keilbach gain work experience.

application, real-life skills and job skills that they need to be doing," she says. "There's nothing for them to do here. We just started trying to fill this void."

CREATING A SPACE

As they began serving more young adults, Erin realized they needed a place where they could learn job skills. "So, I was like, OK, I need to create this place where they can have a safe place to learn these skills. Then they could also have a place to learn social skills because, let's be honest, not a lot of people want to hang out with our kiddos," she says. "The only way that they're going to interact with typical people is that typical people hang out with them and interact with them."

Erin and her husband, Ryan, recognized that not only was there a need for these young adults to have a place to work and socialize, but young families in the community also needed someplace to hang out. So, they developed Jack & Mary's General Good.

The shop is named for two of Erin's first special education students. Jack was on the autism spectrum and had trouble making friends. When Mary joined his second grade class, she sat next to him at lunch on her first day, and the two became fast friends. Jack died when he was 10, but Jack and Mary's friendship left a lasting impression on Erin. "I want our place to represent that kind of love and friendship and inclusion," she says.

Jack & Mary's General Good's purpose is twofold. First, it gives the young adults in Erin's program a place to develop skills. Secondly, it gives the community



Brooke Shimek works the counter.

the chance to interact with the people in the program. "Because let's be honest, a lot of times people are uncomfortable," Erin says. "They don't know what they're supposed to say to them or how to interact with them."

A PLACE AT THEIR PACE

Program participants range in age from 15 to 41 and represent a variety of skill levels. Some employees wipe down counters or take out the trash. Others make the coffee or wait on customers. Jack & Mary's has even gotten into the coffee roasting business, and participants help with that, measuring out the coffee beans and packaging the finished product. "The process is very much calculated," Erin says. "It's very much a comfort zone for these young adults."

Participants also make items sold at the shop, from bracelets to candles to all-natural cleaning sprays. The products are available at Jack & Mary's and at some local boutiques. All proceeds are folded back into And Then a New Day.

Weekends are the busiest time for the shop because people come in off the interstate just looking for coffee. "They see what this is, and they're like, 'Wow, this is amazing. I've never seen anything like this before,'" Erin says. "So, I know that it is something special."

As she describes the work they do at And Then a New Day and Jack & Mary's, Erin's voice grows animated. "This is why we're different," she says. "I want to find that thing that young adults can do and likes to do and figure out how we can make it fit." ☺

Jack & Mary's General Good

610 Lyons Ave., Schulenburg
979-505-4061
jackandmarys.com

Monday-Friday: 7 am. to 2 p.m.
Saturday: 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Sunday: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Find the coffee shop on Facebook and Instagram.



And Then a New Day participants make products sold at Jack & Mary's.



Eleanor Benbenek, right, works with Jack & Mary's founder Erin Wotipka to package coffee.

COURAGE, COMMITMENT AND COMMUNITY

Volunteer fire departments welcome new members



Illustration by Adobe Stock

Story by MELANIE JONES

In times of crisis in rural communities, the first people to arrive on the scene are often friends and neighbors who sacrifice their time because they want to help, not draw a paycheck. They put out the fires. They drive the rescue vehicles. They save lives.

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, nearly 19,000 of the nation's 29,452 fire departments are all-volunteer, and the number of those volunteers has been shrinking. In 2020, the number of volunteer firefighters reached a record low. On top of that, more than half of those volunteer firefighters in smaller departments are aged 40 or older, and 34% are over 50.

But the tide may be turning. The number of volunteer applications through NVFC increased from 31,309 in 2022 to 38,696 in 2023, the latest year for which data is available.

Kim Hilsenbeck is marketing director for the State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas, a trade association representing fire and emergency services workers for the past 148 years. She says the number of applications for volunteer firefighters through the website volunteerfirefighter.org dropped in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is rebounding. In 2020, that number was 1,992. It dropped as low as 566 in 2022, but by 2024 it was back up to 1,711.

EYES ON THE FUTURE

Kim wants to challenge the idea that every volunteer fire department is struggling for new volunteers. In many places that is the case, she says, but departments in other areas are thriving, even growing. "It's not a blanket statement," she says of the idea of a shrinking volunteer force. "It's a little more nuanced than that."

Kim says Texas volunteer fire departments overall need to think about the future and replenishing their ranks. "Some are doing a phenomenal job pulling in volunteers," she says. "Others could use a little help."

In a way, it all comes down to marketing. "Departments need to have a toolbox of marketing and outreach methods, from social media to word of mouth to banners on the firehouse lawn," she says. "Fundamentally, it involves understanding and communicating with people."

Social media is absolutely one tool departments must use to recruit younger members, she says, including posting videos to TikTok and Instagram. Kim recently developed a social media seminar to help smaller, more rural departments better use social media platforms as a marketing tool.

Other options to attract new, younger volunteers are for departments to partner with local school districts to offer firefighter academies and to allow students to gain volunteer hours needed for graduation by working at a fire department.

A HEALTHY MIX

Older firefighters aren't necessarily a bad thing, says Steve Hirsch, NVFC chairman. At 62, Steve is the training officer of the fire department in Sheridan County, Kansas. He recalls a man once asking him the age of the oldest firefighter in his department. He told the man 93. The man laughed and said, "No, I mean the age of your oldest firefighter that's still responding to calls." The man was shocked when Steve again replied, 93.

"But you know, that was out of a station that might get one or two calls a year," Steve says. "He'd grown up in that area his

“Departments need to have a toolbox of marketing and outreach methods ... Fundamentally, it involves understanding and communicating with people.”

—Kim Hilsenbeck, State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas marketing director

Photo courtesy of Steve Hirsch



National Volunteer Fire Council Chairman Steve Hirsch has been training firefighters for 25 years.

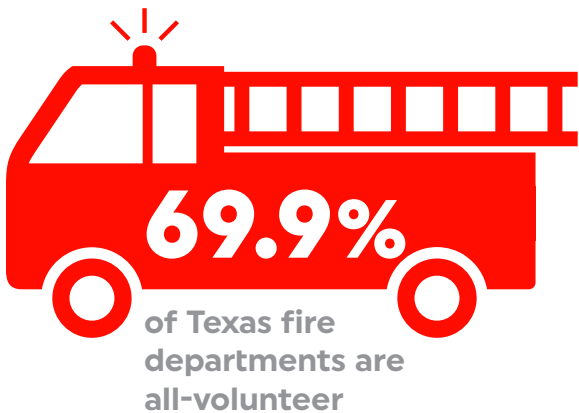
Photo by Adobe Stock/Teerapong23



entire life. He knew where every hole and every gate was in his neighborhood. He wasn't out there pulling hose or doing entry, but he was able to drive a pickup. It worked out nice.”

Steve, who has led fire training in Kansas for 25 years through the state association, sees the benefits of having a wide age range of firefighters. “The departments I go into that are really good departments have a nice mix of older and younger people,” he says. “The older people keep the younger ones from making the mistakes that we've all made, and the younger ones have the stamina to get stuff done.”

It's important to keep recruiting, he says, because fire departments are vital to a community's safety, and firehouses are often a hub for gatherings and activities. “What is a community going to do when they don't have a fire department?” Steve says. “That's probably the newest, biggest building in that town of 80-some people. People use that fire station for all sorts of events in the community. A lot of our small towns have lost their school, they've lost their grocery store. A lot of them have lost their banks. Some of them don't have cafes anymore. So that fire department becomes the glue that binds that community together. And, you know, you lose one more glob of glue, and pretty soon, things just fall apart.” 📱



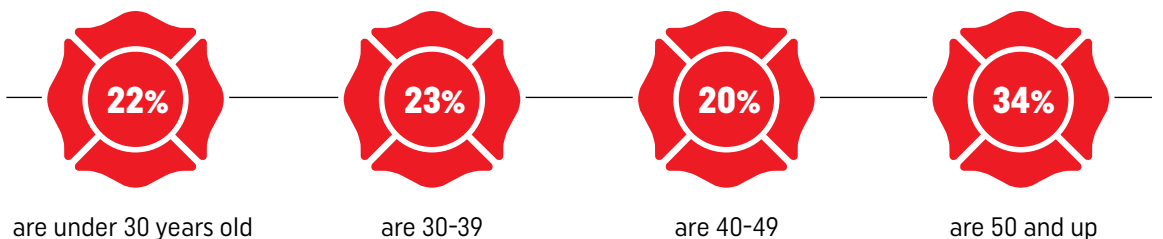
11.8%
of Texas fire departments are mostly volunteer



200%
Increase in call volume in the last 35 years



The volunteer fire service is an aging population. In communities under 2,500:



Source: National Volunteer Fire Council

Growing

Shelter needs more room to find homes for strays

Story by MELANIE JONES

Nearly 1,600 dogs and cats arrived at the Gardenia E. Janssen Animal Shelter in 2023, stretching the limits of the 24-year-old building. There's simply not enough room to provide all the animals with proper service and care.

One room is used for hands-on work and medical treatment. In the same 12-by-12-foot space, one volunteer may clean up kittens in a sink while another gives puppies a bath in the washtub, a technician administers vaccines and an animal control officer manages two large dogs.

The small reception area is often used by eight to 10 people at once. Three people share the building's single office, which also serves as the meeting room, break room and continuing education space.

The La Grange shelter, which can safely house about 55 cats at any given time, takes in almost 900 each year. There are 32 canine kennels, and for most of 2024,

there were also eight to 12 temporary dog kennels to ease overcrowding.

The shelter has raised about \$1 million to expand the facility, but another \$600,000 is needed for the building, plus \$200,000 to outfit it.

Shelter Executive Teresa Stanley-Brown, the shelter's executive director, says sick kittens and puppies are the motivation for the expansion. Young animals coming in from the wild can carry communicable diseases and should be kept apart from healthy animals for at least two weeks. A dedicated isolation space would allow the shelter to quarantine ailing animals to prevent sickness from spreading and to give animals with weakened immune systems time to build their strength.

The only space currently available for adoptable cats and kittens is just one door away from the dog kennels, and the barking is stressful for felines. Stress in felines

can lead to upper respiratory problems and other preventable conditions, which the new space will allow.

"Even though the older cats have better immune systems, no matter how many volunteers we have cuddling cats, it's still a stressful place," Teresa says. "The new facility will be far more effective space for our feline guests. The dedicated isolation space will save lives."

MORE SURRENDERS, FEWER ADOPTIONS

The expansion plan provides more new space for cats than dogs, and Teresa says some people question what they perceive to be an imbalance. "We believe we could raise the money to add space for more dogs," she says, "but as a nonprofit, could we sustain the annual expense to hire more staff to properly care for the additional capacity?"

Currently, the shelter must ask people



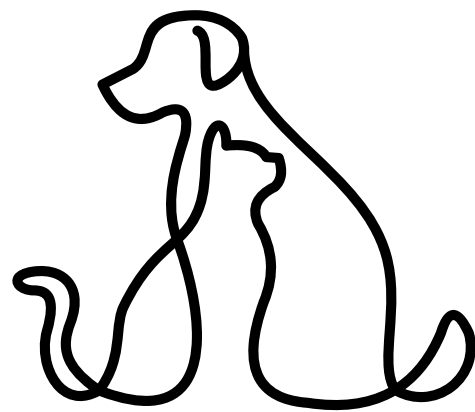
Newton, one of the dogs living at the shelter, visits preschoolers with animal care tech Devon Stevens.



The Gardenia E. Janssen Animal Shelter includes an outdoor space where dogs can play.



Pains



One of the shelter's many canine guests enjoys some sunlight.

who call to surrender their dogs—or those who come in with strays—if they can keep them just a little while longer. “It’s a game of Tetris every day,” she says.

Teresa says the La Grange shelter’s space struggles are not unique. Shelters across the country are seeing unprecedented intake numbers. “The most disturbing and heartbreaking thing is that adoptions are down 30% to 50% nationwide,” Teresa says. “We are caring for each dog and cat for much longer.”

FINDING FOREVER HOMES

Shelter staff and volunteers work hard to make their animals appealing to prospective owners. They bring in a trainer, so the dogs know basic commands. “Our goal is to make them so adoptable that even the person who doesn’t want a dog will adopt,” Teresa says.

The shelter has a program to help even the least-adoptable cats find a home. Fayette County is rural, and many people want barn cats to control the rodent population on their properties. The



This playful tuxedo kitten is one of 900 feline friends the shelter takes in every year.

shelter adopts out barn cats at a reduced adoption fee, \$35 compared to \$75 for a friendly cat.

“We can either spay and neuter them and put them in a barn or euthanize them,” Teresa says. “We want to give them a chance.”

Operation Save a Life also promotes adoptions. Funded by donors, the program offers free pet adoptions for first responders and military members, active and retired.

'BACKBONE OF THE SHELTER'

The shelter’s staff of 11 would never be able to get all the work done without the help of about 50 volunteers. The volunteers do everything from walking dogs and cuddling kittens to cleaning cages and litter boxes. They sweep the floors, file paperwork, do laundry and transport pets.

“They’re the backbone of the shelter,” Teresa says. More hands are always welcome, she adds. “We can never have enough.” 🐾

LENDING A HAND TO FURRY FRIENDS

A sizable grant from Fayette County boosted the Gardenia E. Janssen Animal Shelter toward its fundraising goals, but it has also received some help from “huge” private donations, shelter Executive Director Teresa Stanley-Brown says.

To help drive those donations, the shelter developed named sponsorships for various rooms. For example, sponsorships of the cat and kitten rooms cost \$50,000 each, but one donor gave \$100,000 to name both after his late cat. Each space varies in cost, and smaller donations are always welcome, too. For more information, go to the shelter’s website, janssenanimalshelter.org.

GARDENIA E. JANSSEN ANIMAL SHELTER

240 Svoboda Lane, La Grange
979-966-0021
janssenanimalshelter.org

Find the shelter on Facebook and Instagram.



Caring for kittens, like this kitty “purr-ito,” takes extra space.

Photos courtesy of Teresa Stanley-Brown

All the Comforts of Home

Classic trio's widespread appeal endures

The definition of comfort food depends on your region. In the Midwest, it might be a bubbly hot dish just pulled from the oven. In the Southwest, comfort may come in the form of a steaming bowl of chili, while Southerners might look toward biscuits and gravy with a side of grits.

Three simple dishes, however, bring together the entire culinary country—tomato soup, a gooey grilled cheese sandwich and a warm slice of apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.



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Photography by *Mark Gilliland*
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CREAMY TOMATO SOUP

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 3 cups yellow onions, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 (28-ounce) cans tomatoes
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil or
1 1/2 tablespoons dried basil, plus
more to serve
- 1 tablespoon sugar, or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black
pepper, or to taste
- Dash of Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Heat a nonreactive pot or enameled Dutch oven over medium heat. Add butter, then add chopped onions. Saute

10-12 minutes, stirring occasionally, until softened and golden. Add minced garlic, and saute 1 minute until fragrant.

Add crushed tomatoes with their juice, chicken stock, chopped basil, sugar, pepper and a dash of Worcestershire. Stir and bring to a boil then reduce heat, partially cover with lid and simmer 10 minutes.

Use an immersion blender to blend the soup in the pot or transfer to a blender in batches and blend until smooth—being careful not to overfill the blender with hot liquid—then return soup to the pot over medium heat.

Add heavy cream and grated parmesan cheese and return to a simmer. Season to taste with salt and pepper, if needed, and turn off the heat.

Ladle into warm bowls, and top with more parmesan and a sprinkle of basil.



Makes 4 sandwiches

- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 yellow onions, diced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme or 1/4 teaspoon dried
- 2 teaspoons fresh rosemary or 3/4 teaspoon dried, divided
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar
- 8 slices artisan sourdough bread
- Mayonnaise
- 12 ounces Gruyere cheese, grated at room temperature
- 6 ounces sharp white cheddar cheese, grated at room temperature
- 4 thin slices Muenster cheese, at room temperature

Add 1 1/2 tablespoons butter and olive oil to a skillet and heat over medium-low heat. Add diced onions, salt, pepper, fresh thyme and 1 teaspoon of fresh rosemary to the hot skillet and saute about 10 minutes, stirring often, until onions are soft and

starting to brown. Stir brown sugar into the onions and cook another minute. Transfer onions to a plate.

For each sandwich: Spread one side of two pieces of bread with a little bit of mayonnaise.

To the same skillet, add remaining butter and rosemary and heat over medium heat. Add both pieces of mayonnaise-coated bread, mayonnaise side down, and cook until bread is golden brown and crunchy, 2-3 minutes.

As soon as you add the bread to the skillet, add a bit of cheese to the top of each piece. Once it starts to melt a little, sprinkle a couple tablespoons of the caramelized onions over the top of one of the pieces of bread.

When the bread is golden brown, sandwich the pieces of bread together and cook on low heat until the cheese is fully melted. Transfer to a plate and repeat with remaining slices of bread and ingredients.

GRANDMA'S SIMPLE APPLE PIE

- 1 double-crust pie pastry
- 1 large egg, beaten
- Filling:**
- 6-7 cups apples, about 2 pounds
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg



Preheat the oven to 425 F. Peel the apples and cut them into quarters. Remove the core and slice the apples 1/4-inch thick.


In a large bowl, combine the apple slices with lemon juice, sugar, flour, cinnamon and nutmeg. Toss apple mixture well and set aside.

Roll out half of the pastry dough into a 12-inch circle. Line a 9-inch pie plate with the dough and fill it with the apple mixture.

Roll out the remaining dough and cover the apple filling. Pinch the edges to seal, trimming any excess. Style the edges as desired by crimping or pressing with a fork.

Cut four to five slits on top of the crust to allow the steam to release. Whisk the egg with 2 teaspoons of water or milk and brush over the crust.

Bake at 425 F for 15 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 375 F and continue baking for another 35-40 minutes or until the crust is golden and the apples are tender.

Remove from the oven and let rest for at least 30 minutes before serving. Serve with vanilla ice cream, if desired. 



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