



# CONNECTED

## DOUBLE DUTY

McCormick students get  
head start on college

## HIGHER EDUCATION

Abbeville School Leader  
seeks PhD online

## UNLIMITED LEARNING

Broadband creates  
education opportunities



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## Let's 'build once' under RDOF

As an organization representing rural broadband providers, we are excited about the FCC's plans to invest \$20.4 billion to bring affordable high-speed broadband to rural Americans. While the agency's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) is a terrific opportunity for unserved and underserved communities, it is important that as a nation we are investing in networks that can meet broadband needs for the foreseeable future.

Services delivered in high-cost rural areas using RDOF funds should be reasonably comparable to those in urban areas — both now and over at least the term of support distribution, if not longer. We believe it is far more efficient to have policies that encourage providers to “build once,” deploying rural networks that are scalable and will offer services at speeds that are still relevant to customers another decade from now.

NTCA was one of the biggest and earliest supporters of a program that will promote sustainable networks capable of delivering the best possible broadband access for many years to come. After months of advocacy by our members and staff, including securing bipartisan letters signed by dozens of members of Congress, the FCC announced in January that it will consider rules to fund sustainable and forward-looking networks.

This will help strike a terrific balance by looking to reach as many rural Americans as possible while ensuring that the FCC is funding the best possible networks for the available budget. I am energized by the role that NTCA members can play in being a key part of the solution in bridging the digital divide. 🗨️



Once a decade, the United States counts its citizens. This results in a treasure trove of data relevant to politics, businesses, schools and much more. For example, federal agencies use census results to distribute more than \$675 billion in federal funds annually.

Similarly, states use census data to draw congressional district boundaries. The numbers can even determine how many congressional representatives a state sends to Washington, D.C. Locally, many counties, cities and towns lean on census statistics when planning infrastructure such as roads, schools and emergency services. Businesses also factor census data into calculations that determine the locations of new stores, hotels and more.

As you can see, the census is an important program and one in which you'll be asked to participate. For the first time, everyone can complete the census online, as well as by phone or by mail. You will still receive a census form by mail, but you will have the option of visiting [respond.census.gov/acs](https://respond.census.gov/acs) to complete your duty to respond to the census.

Census Day is April 1, and census takers will visit households that have not already replied to census questionnaires online, by phone or through the mail. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau hired thousands of temporary workers to help implement the 2020 census.

The bureau also understands the unique challenges of counting people in rural areas. Some rural homes do not have typical mailing addresses, using instead post office boxes in nearby community centers. However, census questionnaires are not mailed to P.O. boxes. In these remote areas, census takers will deliver paper questionnaires to each home and offer guidance on how to respond by phone or online. If there's no response, expect an in-person follow-up.

By law, the Census Bureau must keep your information confidential, using the details to produce statistics. The bureau may not publicly release responses in any way that might identify an individual. 🗨️

# Maybe it's not so smart

Streaming boxes can add a layer of TV security

Story by NOBLE SPRAYBERRY



**I**s your TV watching you? Could it be a backdoor to your private information? Those are questions recently posed by the FBI. For people who rely on a smart TV, the answer might be, “Yes.”

A smart TV can connect directly to the internet, allowing access to services and applications that provide movies, TV shows, music, videoconferencing, photo streaming and more. It's all right there in one consolidated interface.

But convenience comes with tradeoff. Some smart TVs include microphones and cameras. These features allow voice commands and the potential of using facial recognition to customize content to an individual viewer.

Those innovations, however, raise the possibility of TV manufacturers eavesdropping. Similarly, an unsecured TV has the potential to be used by a hacker as a backdoor into your other Wi-Fi-connected devices.

The FBI suggests a range of strategies to ensure a TV protects your security. Do internet research on your specific TV model to check the status of updates and reports of security breaches. Also, if possible, change passwords. Then, learn how to turn off microphones, cameras and the ability of the TV manufacturer to collect personal information. Even placing tape over the camera lens is an option.

There's another strategy, too — do not directly connect your TV to the internet. Instead, consider a third-party device to create a bridge between your television and streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu and more. 🗨

## HERE ARE A FEW OPTIONS TO CONSIDER:



**Roku:** Many devices that allow TVs to connect to online streaming services are sold by companies that also offer TV content. As a result, not all services are available on every device. If that's a concern, consider a Roku, which can generally connect to all content providers. Rokus typically range in price from \$30 to \$99.



**Apple TV:** Prices for an Apple TV device range from \$149 to \$199, with the more expensive options having more storage capacity and the ability to play 4K video. The device will connect to most streaming services, and currently the purchase of a new Apple TV comes with a one-year subscription to the Apple TV+ streaming service.



**Amazon Fire TV Cube or Fire Stick:** Amazon's Fire streaming devices cost from about \$30 to nearly \$200, based on capacity and the ability to offer 4K content. Look for frequent sales to find a bargain. The interface is clean and useful. Fans of Amazon Prime can have easy access to that service's streaming options. While most streaming services may be available, that has changed from time to time.



**Google Chromecast:** Google offers its twist on the streaming boxes with a small, hockey-puck-shaped device that allows content to be “cast” from a computer, tablet or phone to the television. Most streaming services are supported, and viewers with a Google Home smart speaker can control programming with voice commands.

# The 2020 census matters for rural America



**JEFF WILSON**  
Chief Executive Officer

**H**ow important is the 2020 census? For rural areas like ours, \$675 billion is at stake.

In mid-March the U.S. Census Bureau will send postcards to most addresses in South Carolina and across the country. That is one of the more important pieces of mail you will receive in 2020. Why does the census matter to your broadband and telephone provider, and why am I using this space to encourage you to participate?

Simply put, our part of South Carolina has a lot to gain from accurate census numbers — and a lot to lose if we aren't all counted.

These risks and benefits come in three main areas dependent on census data: government funding, political representation and statistics for economic growth.

According to the Census Bureau, census data determines the spending of more than \$675 billion in federal funds. That can mean anything from schools, roads and equipment for first responders to grants for expanding our broadband network or programs that help those in need. Many of those projects seek to do the most good for the most people — and if we don't help to create an accurate count of all of our people, that funding may go elsewhere.

“Simply put, our part of South Carolina has a lot to gain from accurate census numbers — and a lot to lose if we aren't all counted.”

As you may have heard if you follow political news, the census data is used to draw and redraw districts for state and federal lawmakers. The number of congressmen and congresswomen we have representing South Carolina is dependent on our population. If we don't count all of our state's residents, we would show a lower population and run the risk of losing representation in Congress to a bigger state that may have different interests than ours.

The same thing is true on a more local level in the state legislature. If the counties in our region come up short on the population count, we could lose a legislator and have a more difficult time making our area's concerns heard in Columbia.

Lastly, our area's population is a key factor in almost all of the statistics businesses look at when considering a market to build. Whether it's a fast-food restaurant or an industrial plant, corporate managers are looking at our population when it comes to customer base, workforce and market potential. Showing a lower population on the census because many people weren't counted would make us less appealing for businesses to locate here.

If you want to know more, visit [census.gov](https://census.gov).

I know everyone is busy, and that little postcard later this month may seem like just adding one more thing to your to-do list. But from what I've read, the Census Bureau is making things simple, quick and easy for everyone to be counted.

As someone who cares deeply about our rural area, I hope you'll take those few minutes of time to make sure you and your family participate in the census.

Our communities are counting on you. 

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#### On the Cover:



McCormick High student Jay'nious Johnson is among dozens in dual enrollment degree and certificate programs at Piedmont Tech. See story Page 12.

# STAY SAFE THIS SPRING



Along with longer days, warmer weather and blossoming flowers, spring often also brings severe weather — including lightning, strong winds and hail.

**Here are a few tips for protecting your loved ones and your home.**

## BEFORE THE STORM

- » During a storm, using electronics plugged into your home's electrical system can be dangerous. Charge all phones or other communications devices before inclement weather occurs.
- » Purchase lightning rods, surge protectors or lightning protection systems to safeguard home electronics or appliances.
- » Identify safe areas in your home, workplaces or other areas you frequent and discuss emergency plans with your families.
- » Consider using a weather app or weather radio, or sign up for emergency notifications through emails, phone calls or texts.

## DURING THE STORM

- » Continue to monitor weather reports and stay away from doors and windows. Seek shelter in safe areas in case a severe thunderstorm approaches.
- » Do not use landline phones, running water or other electronics. Lightning can travel through phone lines and plumbing.
- » Unplug appliances and electronics.
- » Do not drive on flooded roadways.

## AFTER THE STORM

- » Stay at least 35 feet away from downed utility lines and report any fallen lines to authorities. Avoid items such as a fence, car or tree in contact with a downed power line.
- » Monitor weather apps and local media for reports of weather-related hazards.

Sources: The Electrical Safety Foundation International and the Department of Homeland Security.

## Get to know the new WCTEL employees!



Jordan Riley, Managed IT Services Tech 1; Robin McMurtury, Account Services Representative; Emily Young, Customer Service Representative; and Jared Lopez, NOC Tech 1.

### Jordan Riley

- From Greenwood
- In his spare time likes to work at his homelab, aka personal server farm/data center
- Graduated from Piedmont Tech with an associate degree in computer and technology networking

### Robin McMurtury

- From Abbeville
- Married to Tyler
- Spoiled chocolate Lab named Cooter
- Hobbies include dancing, walking and relaxing on the porch
- Graduated from Lander University with a bachelor's degree in exercise science
- Fun Fact: Adopted as a child

### Emily Young

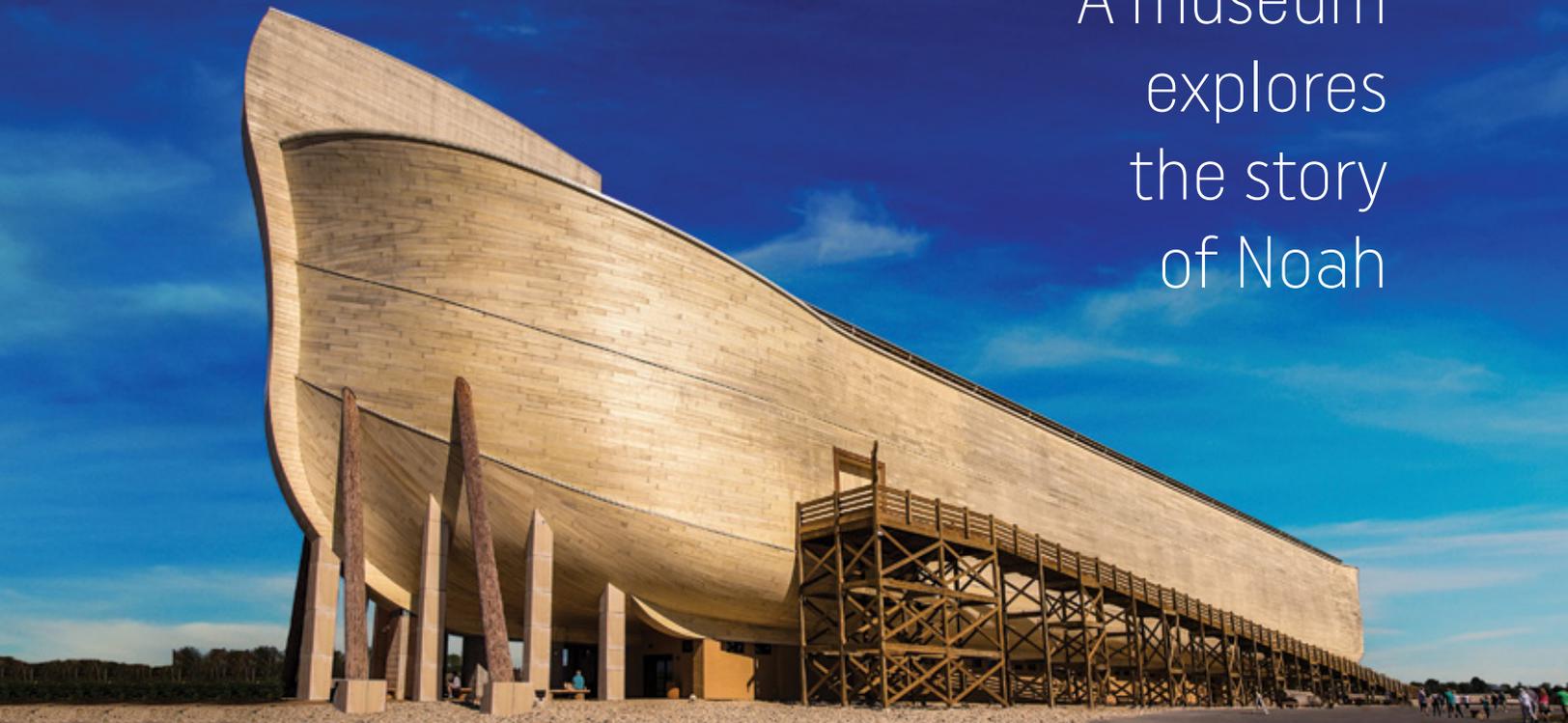
- From Greenwood
- Married to Travis and has one daughter, Ella, who is 1 year old
- Has two cats and a moltipoo puppy
- Hobbies include walking, hiking, anything outdoors, spending time with family, reading and cooking
- Graduated from Clemson University with a bachelor's degree in business management
- Fun Fact: Has a mild obsession with salsa

### Jared Lopez

- From Greenwood
- Has a German shepherd and an English bulldog
- Hobbies include soccer, mountain biking, reading and video games
- Graduated from Piedmont Tech with an associate degree in computer and technology networking
- Fun Fact: Fluent in English and Spanish and knows basic French

# A biblical journey

A museum  
explores  
the story  
of Noah



Story by ANNE BRALY

**T**he heavens opened, and the rains came down — not in biblical proportions as they did in Noah’s day, but could there have been a better backdrop for a recent visit to the Ark Encounter?

This religious attraction in Kentucky opened just over three years ago on an 800-acre site. At a cost of \$100 million for Phase I, its primary feature is the massive ark, taller than a four-story building and built to the specifications God laid out for Noah. In keeping with measurements in the book of Genesis, converted from the Hebrew cubits specified in chapter 6, the three-deck ark is 510 feet long, 85 feet wide and 51 feet high.

Sitting in a beautifully landscaped area

just off Interstate 75 in the small town of Williamstown, Kentucky, the Ark Encounter draws more than 1 million visitors annually from around the world who come to learn more about Noah and his family, the animals aboard ship and the ancient flood that most Christians believe engulfed the earth. Ticket booths are located at the 4,000-spot parking lot, which has plenty of room for group buses, and guests take the free shuttle service from the lot to the ark grounds.

In addition to the ark, the attraction offers a zip line and the Ararat Ridge Zoo. And you won’t walk away hungry — a tremendous buffet replete with Asian, Cajun and American fare will satisfy your hunger, and there is seating for 1,500.

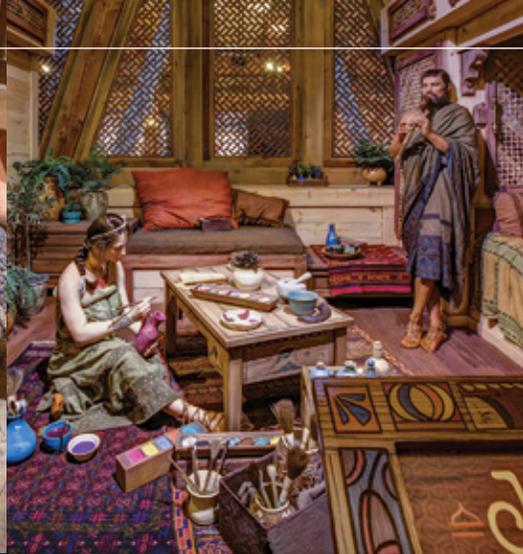
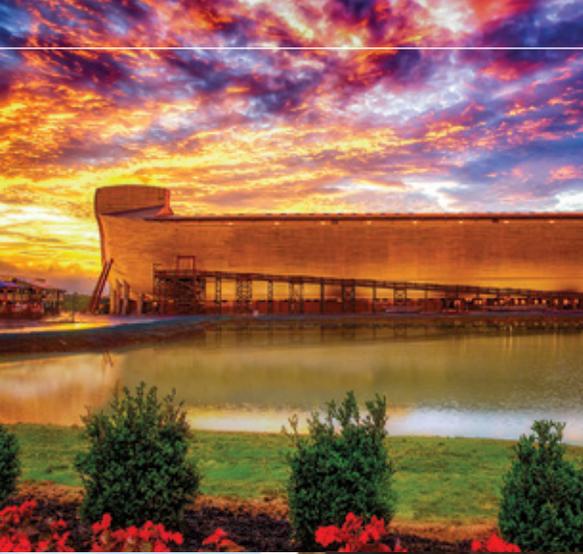
## THE SHIP

It took Noah 50 to 75 years to build his ark. It took a team of Amish builders and others just two years to build Kentucky’s

new ark, a project that was the dream of Australian Ken Ham, founder and CEO of the Answers in Genesis ministry, the Ark Encounter and the Creation Museum in nearby Petersburg, Kentucky.

Patrick Kanewske, director of ministry and media relations for the Ark Encounter, says much of the ship matches accounts in Genesis, but “ark”-tistic license — imagination — fills in the blanks. Such license includes names of the women/wives onboard, the color of their skin, the placement of rooms and animal cages, and so on.

Look up from the first deck to the top of the ship, and it’s easy to see the scope of the Ark Encounter. Sixty-two trees, mostly Douglas firs from Utah that were standing dead timber, went into the frame structure. Throughout each deck are divided rooms, each with a different theme and exhibits — some interactive — telling stories of the ark, the flood and



Photos courtesy of the Ark Encounter and the Creation Museum.

## If you go...

- **WHAT:** Ark Encounter
- **WHERE:** 1 Ark Encounter Drive, Williamstown, Kentucky
- **HOURS:** Times vary by season, so please check the website
- **TICKETS:** \$48 for adults 18-59, \$38 for seniors 60 and up, \$25 for youth 11-17, \$15 for children 5-10 and free for children 4 and under
- **PARKING:** \$10 for standard vehicles, \$15 for oversized vehicles
- **INFORMATION:** [arkencounter.com](http://arkencounter.com)

why it happened; what life was like before and after the flood; and the Christian belief that God created Earth in just six days. Movies on the second and third decks depict life then and now.

Plan on spending a good half-day at the Ark Encounter to experience all it has to offer. And when your day is through, Kanewske hopes people will walk away with the truth of God’s word and the gospel. “We proclaim that here,” he says. “That’s the bottom line. People will learn a lot about the flood account, Noah and his family and all that, but what we want them to take away is God’s word.”

### ALL ABOARD

How, one may wonder, did all of the animals fit on the ship? First — according to “Ark Signs That Teach a Flood of Answers,” a book that you can pick up in the Ark Encounter gift shop — you need to consider the term “animal kind,”

referring to a group of animals not related to any other animals. So at the most, Noah, who God only charged with bringing air-breathing animals on board, was responsible for fewer than 6,744 animals to house, feed and clean. “When you see the size of the ship, there’s every possibility that 6,000 to 7,000 animals could fit in a ship of its size without any problem,” Kanewske says.

Cages large and small line the walls and center of the lowest deck. Once again, ark-tistic license is used to show how Noah and his team might feed the animals and store grain. For a realistic experience, live animals come from the zoo onto the ship each day.

Jose Jimenez, a Naval chaplain from Rhode Island, recently brought his young family to experience the Ark Encounter. “It’s a great place for kids,” he says. “And it’s good for people who have questions. It doesn’t answer all of them, but a lot.”

### ARK ENCOUNTER PHASE II

Plans are in the works for major expansion of the Ark Encounter, and some of those plans have already been realized. April 2019 brought the opening of The Answers Center, with a snack bar, a gift shop and a 2,500-seat auditorium that hosts daily presentations, movies, special speakers, concerts and more.

A new playground has also opened and is designed to accommodate children of all abilities. And the summer of 2019 saw the opening of the zoo expansion, including the addition of more animals — lemurs, sloths, peccaries and a bearcat — and stages for zookeeper talks.

“We take things seriously here,” Kanewske says, “from our food to exhibits to how our employees are trained. It’s a world-class experience.”



HI! I'M AMANDA CLARK

In this column, you'll learn about technology and read simple tips to get the most out of your electronics. For more tips or help with your devices, be sure to read this column in future publications. I'm always happy to help!

## DEVICE OF THE MONTH



**Epson WorkForce ES-65WR**  
Wireless Portable  
Color Receipt Scanner

Although using your phone to take a photo of a business document is perfectly acceptable in some situations, it is still no substitute for the sharpness and clarity that a scanner can offer. This Epson WorkForce scanner comes with USB 2.0 connectivity, built-in Wi-Fi and up to 600 dpi resolution. It exports to QuickBooks or Excel and can be taken on the go. \$259.99 MSRP.

# Money matters

## Turn to online tools



**T**ax season is far from anyone's favorite time of the year, but it's a good opportunity to take stock of your finances.

In the past, this may have meant visiting an accountant or sitting down at the kitchen table with shoeboxes full of statements and receipts. Fortunately, technology has made it easier to track your banking and expenses and to even keep your credit secure. All it takes is your internet connection.

### MONEY MANAGEMENT

There are several money management tools on the market. Some, such as Quicken — [quicken.com](http://quicken.com) — are software applications that offer web and mobile options, but full functionality requires their desktop version. Others, including Personal Capital — [personalcapital.com](http://personalcapital.com) — are online services accessed through a web browser.

Regardless of which you choose, these personal finance managers allow you to view and track your spending, savings and investments in a single screen, without the need to visit different sites or remember multiple passwords. The main dashboard for Personal Capital, for example, lists your bank accounts, investments, credit card balances, personal loans, mortgage and other assets, and its colorful graphics correspond to your net worth, budget and savings.

Along with a quick-glance view of your finances, Quicken allows you to organize and pay all your bills online, as well as manage a small business. The company's Home and Business option tracks assets and liabilities in a complete balance sheet.

Even if you are only looking for a simple way to manage your budget, these tools are worth a try. Personal Capital is a free service, and Quicken offers a starter plan for \$34.99 a year.

### TAXES

If your income is \$69,000 or less, the IRS offers a free way to file your return: [www.irs.gov/filing/free-file-do-your-federal-taxes-for-free](http://www.irs.gov/filing/free-file-do-your-federal-taxes-for-free). While the IRS offers a free option for those earning more, it is far from easy to use.

For those with a higher income who want to file from their computer, the better option is to use a commercial service, such as TurboTax, E-file.com or H&R Block.

### CREDIT LOCK

Credit is an important part of your financial life, so protecting it from improper use is a must. You may have heard of "freezing" your credit, but you can also "lock" it. Both prevent creditors from accessing your credit report — protecting you from new accounts being opened without your knowledge — but there are differences between them.

Freezing your credit with all three major credit reporting bureaus — Equifax, TransUnion and Experian — is free, but Experian charges \$19.99 a month for a credit lock.

Whether you choose to freeze or lock your credit, remember you are entitled by law to a free copy of your credit report every 12 months from each of the credit reporting companies. 

# Continuing education

## Doctorate made possible by high-speed connections

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Photos by MATT LEDGER

If all goes according to plan, Skip Hopkins will be Dr. Skip Hopkins by August 2020 at the latest.

Hopkins, director of student services for the Abbeville County School District, is in the homestretch of pursuing his Ph.D. in educational leadership and management, all of which he has done through online courses with Capella University.

“There are several universities in the state that offer doctoral programs, but for me, the online program was a better option,” says Hopkins, a career educator who completed his undergraduate degree at Erskine College and other postgraduate work at nearby Lander University. “I’ve got a wife and two sons, and I still get to spend time with them. I may be in the kitchen with my laptop, but I’m still around them. I’m not in a class for three hours each night and on the road.”

If not for high-speed internet access from WCTEL, it would be impossible for Hopkins to pursue his doctorate. Clemson University offers the nearest on-campus doctoral program, but it’s a little over an hour away from his home in Donalds. The University of Georgia is the next closest, and it’s about 90 minutes away.

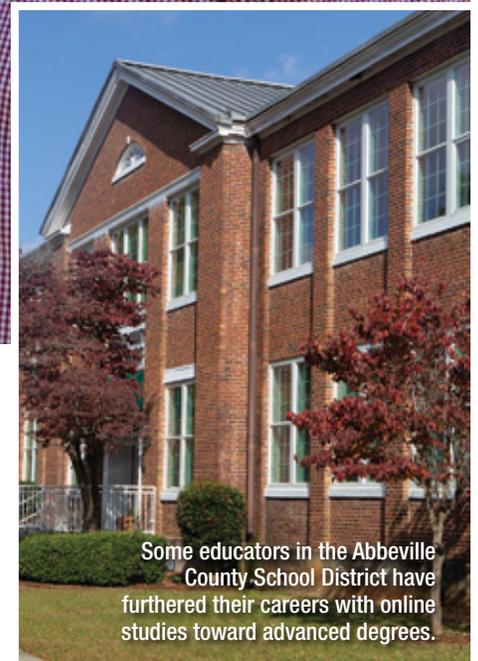
“I wouldn’t be doing this without the online capabilities I have with WCTEL,” Hopkins says. “It would be too much of a sacrifice with my family that I’m unwilling to make. Being able to utilize WCTEL’s services has made it possible for me to stay connected to my family and accomplish this.”



Abbeville County School District Director of Student Services, Skip Hopkins, studied online for his doctorate.

The online program has also allowed Hopkins, 50, to consistently work toward his doctorate at a quicker pace. He plans to have completed his doctoral work, which began in August of 2017, in just under three years.

The combination of online assignments and occasional videoconferencing with professors makes reliable internet speeds and connections crucial for Hopkins to be successful. “Being online, it’s an accelerated program,” he says. “It’s a lot of work, and it’s done in a shorter period of time. I couldn’t imagine going to a university and taking one class at a time. I get home from work, and then I can put in three to four hours if I want to in a day, or I can wait until Saturday, which happens a lot, and I’ll put in a 10-hour day to get everything completed.”



Some educators in the Abbeville County School District have furthered their careers with online studies toward advanced degrees.

Hopkins says he averages 16 to 20 hours every week doing his coursework online. Each of 12 classes lasts 10 weeks, with assignments due at the end of each week on Sundays. “It’s constant,” he says. “We’re completing assignments and discussion. We’ve got to view webinars and participate in study activities where there are transcripts you’re pulling to read or videos that supplement the other work.”



# A class of their own

## Broadband brings education to students on their schedule

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

In 2012, Aziza Zemrani was busily putting together an accelerated online program for the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. The curriculum would allow students to complete courses they need in just seven weeks from anywhere in the valley or beyond. But there was a lingering concern about handling presentations using the available online technology.

“I needed them to present so I could see their skills and competency in communication,” Zemrani says. “We use Blackboard Collaborate, which allows for face-to-face engagement and interaction. But my colleagues were worried about how it would work if we had a student with a disability.”

As if in answer to those concerns, the program’s first cohort group in 2013 included one deaf student, Phillip Robinson. When it came time for each student to present that June, the university’s Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology worked with the disability office to arrange for a sign language interpreter to present with him.

“He presented live with his classmate, and it was beautiful,” Zemrani says. “He was almost in tears telling me this was the first time he was able to present live like that in an academic setting.”

Robinson graduated in December, joining hundreds of other students who have

come through the accelerated online program of the university in Edinburg, Texas. While Zemrani originally expected the program to appeal primarily to students from outside the state or even the country, it has also been popular among local students in the valley looking to fast-track their education.

“Some of these students might be working two jobs, so they can’t fit traditional classes into their schedule,” she says. “With the online program, because of the course delivery and structure, students can take up to two more modules and finish in one year.”

### A PLACE TO START

Online courses like the ones offered at UTRGV are taking off across the country thanks to improved broadband access. But with so many online options available to students, it can be daunting to figure out which one is the best fit. That’s why the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system contracted with Distance Minnesota to act as a single point of contact for all online students in 2004.

Distance Minnesota was founded as a consortium of three local colleges that wanted to offer online courses. Today, the organization partners with 37 colleges and universities throughout





the state, answering any questions prospective or current students may have about their online options.

“We do chat, phone assistance and email assistance seven days a week,” says Distance Minnesota Executive Director Lisa Leahy. “In all, we handle approximately 25,000 student inquiries a year.”

But more than acting as a helpline for students, Distance Minnesota compiles data on the programs each school offers and the level of interest in each course. This makes the organization a resource for schools deciding which classes to offer online and for students looking to fulfill a specific course requirement. That help is particularly important for making online programs accessible to out-of-state or international students.

“Throughout our nearly 20-year history with the school system, we’ve come to understand what each of the individual universities has to offer,” Leahy says. “Many of us have worked closely with the faculty and the administration on these campuses. So if a student has a specialized need for a certain class, we can tell them the best course is at this school, and often we’re able to put them in touch directly, whether they’re in Argentina, California or New York.”

### VIRTUAL HIGH

College coursework isn’t the only level at which online programs are giving students more flexibility. Connections Academy, a nationwide program that offers tuition-free online K-12 public schooling in 28 states, launched a new online academy last fall in Tennessee. Since it opened, the academy has grown from about 750 students to 1,300 enrolled.

The Tennessee Connections Academy is authorized by Robertson County Public Schools, though it is available to students throughout the state. The system was already using a virtual curriculum from Connections Academy’s parent company, Pearson, to offer online classes to approximately 50 students. So it was a natural partnership to work together to bring that same experience to students across the state.

“It’s a unique learning environment with certified teachers in all subject areas for the kids,” says Derek Sanborn, principal at Tennessee Connections Academy. “The students are able to interact with their teachers and other kids with live lessons throughout the week. They receive textbooks and other materials at each level, and it’s all at no cost to the parent.”

The online academy is held to the same standards as any public school in the state, and students are required to attend for six-and-a-half hours each day. The program has been a good fit for kids who may be homebound, live in remote areas, or even be on traveling sports teams, allowing students to complete their hours in the evening or on weekends.

“We also have students who may have been bullied in their school or didn’t feel safe. Maybe the traditional setting wasn’t motivating for them,” Sanborn says. “I think giving parents that choice is really important because they get to decide what’s best for their kids.”

### NEW ENGAGEMENT

Even with the increasing quality of online classes, there are still challenges educators work to overcome, including engaging students.

One way Tennessee Connections Academy attempts to address this issue is by scheduling in-person field trips, allowing families to meet and connect with their teachers and other students.

In her own classes, Zemrani has recorded live classroom sessions and used apps like Flipgrid to allow students to record short intro videos about themselves. While engagement continues to be a challenge for any online course, she believes finding new solutions is well worth the investment.

“We have students in the military who may be called to serve somewhere in the middle of their program,” Zemrani says. “The online course is a great opportunity for them to finish their program when they might not otherwise be able to. Broadband is so important to that.” 



# DOUBLE TIME TO SHINE

## McCormick High students stepping up with PTC dual enrollment

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Photos by MATT LEDGER

Jordan Brown was in the midst of her final basketball season at McCormick High School, and every day was one step closer to her college dreams.

As part of McCormick's dual enrollment program with Piedmont Technical College, the high school senior is also a college sophomore, taking classes at PTC that count toward both her high school diploma and her associate degree.

"Sometimes it gets tough," says Brown, an All-Lakelands selection as a junior in basketball and a track standout with her sights set on a college basketball career. "But the professors are willing to work with us and help any way they can. The staff at Piedmont Tech is very supportive."

Brown says she wants to go into the medical field as a nurse after college and is happy to be well on her way to that goal.

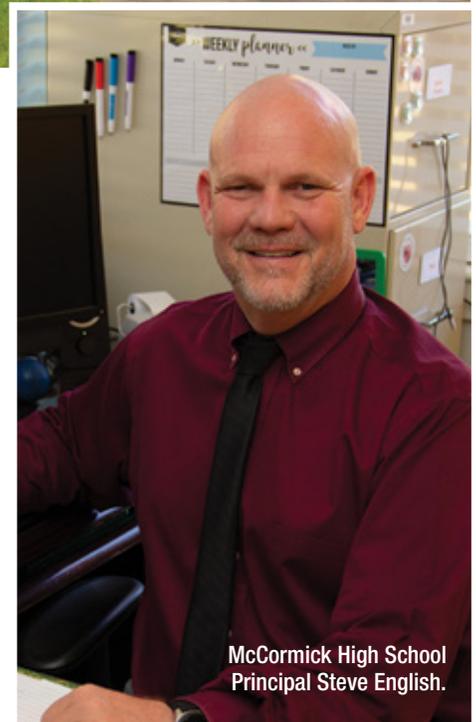
The dual enrollment program began at McCormick High School in 2011, giving juniors and seniors a chance to get a head start in college. The McCormick County School District began funding the initiative, and the program has since received funds from the South Carolina Education Lottery.



McCormick High School Principal Steve English says the program has been invaluable to the students who have participated in it. Close to 150 students have graduated college with their associate degrees, and others are now entering certificate programs offered at PTC. They're learning trades such as welding, auto mechanics and machine tool technology so they will be prepared for well-paying jobs as soon as they enter the workforce with their high school diplomas. Jordan Houston, another McCormick High student, began a new dual enrollment program with Lander University this academic year.

"In the long term, the program has probably been costing us a little bit more," English says. "But our students are getting more out of it, and that's the most important thing.

"Our success rate is pretty high as far as students going into and completing the program," he says. "Of course, you have a few that don't make it, but, you know, I'm OK with that, too, because it just tells them, and it tells us, that they're not quite ready and we've all got some work to do."



McCormick High School Principal Steve English.

### SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

Brown is among 23 McCormick High juniors and seniors participating in the program during the 2019-20 academic year, a little more than 20% of the total of juniors and seniors at the school.

That number is usually higher with 30 students – about 15 from each eligible

class – taking part in the program, says Valerie Yarbrough-Jones, PTC’s dual enrollment director.

Yarbrough-Jones says it was an easy sell from the start. “They’re still very excited about it,” she says. “For the first several years all you had to do was announce registration, and then you had to just kind of pick who could get in. It came down to whoever met the criteria first, and we started with a huge waiting list.”

School officials identify those attempting to graduate high school with their associate degree in hand as attending “the middle college.”

It’s quite often the first taste of college for not only the students but also their families. “So many of our students are first-time or first-generation college students,” English says. “By giving them this opportunity, it’s given them a kick start or a jump start to be the first ones in their families to go to college or finish college. They’re able to enter colleges as juniors and reduce their costs tremendously because they got two years of college for free.”

### ANYTHING THEY NEED

Yarbrough-Jones says she can’t help but feel like a proud parent when her dual enrollment students receive their associate degrees and head off to their four-year college destinations. Two-year colleges such as PTC have agreements with four-year colleges and universities in South Carolina that compel those schools to accept all of the credit hours earned by technical and community college students.

“I’m so proud of these children because they work very, very hard, and it’s not easy,” Yarbrough-Jones says. “I get to see the sweating and the tears and the frustration, but when they graduate and have a degree from Piedmont Tech, it’ll all be worth it.”

In addition to the classroom instruction, Yarbrough-Jones says students in the program also receive counseling about their college futures, apply for financial aid and are taken on college visits. “Basically, anything they need, we’ll do,” she says.

Yarbrough-Jones recounts how a recent



PTC’s Dual Enrollment Director Valerie Yarbrough-Jones earned an associates degree from Piedmont Tech and now helps students at McCormick High School with dual enrollment classes.



McCormick High School dual enrollment students gather to celebrate their graduations from Piedmont Tech.

student in the program who is now at Clemson University reported back to her with all A’s. The proof, she says, is in the pudding. “She’s a bright kid, and she’s taken advantage of all the opportunities,” Yarbrough-Jones says. “And I was so proud because I thought, ‘OK, this is great. We can compete.’”

Graduates of the dual enrollment program have gone on to continue their educations at four-year institutions such

as Clemson, Erskine, Lander, Presbyterian and others across the state. “Some of them have gotten through their two years and then gone back and gotten additional majors and minors,” English says. “Some have gone on to medical school, and some we’ve seen go on to law school. It’s probably been the most impactful program we’ve had here in McCormick County.”

# Mystery and intrigue

## High Point Restaurant chef shares secrets for a great steak

**H**igh Point Restaurant opened in January 2000, and Eric Gipson, executive chef, has been there since the second day of business. As a child growing up in Monteagle, Tennessee, he remembers the restaurant when it was a spooky old house — “the kind of run-down, ghost-infested mansion of campfire stories,” he says.

Legend has it that mobster Al Capone financed the 1929 home for his book-keeper/mistress and used it as a place to stop on his bootlegging travels between Chicago and Miami. This was well before Interstate 24 ran up and over Monteagle Mountain, so its hard-to-reach location made for the ideal hideaway. Supposedly, the floors had a lining of sand to muffle the sound of gunfire, and escape routes aided in getting the illegal hooch to its final destination during the days of Prohibition.

Today, it’s a place for an amazing meal along the road between Nashville and Chattanooga in a beautiful mountaintop location. But can you duplicate the restaurant’s wonderful steak at home?

It’s a familiar scenario: You take the family out to a fancy restaurant and order the steak, and there goes your budget for the week. It’s an amazing steak that sends your taste buds on a trip through culinary heaven — an experience you’re not likely to forget. So, you go home and try to reproduce it, and it’s an expensive disaster. It’s still less expensive than a night out at your favorite steakhouse, but the flavor is less than memorable.



Eric Gipson, executive chef of the High Point Restaurant, serves up great steaks and other dishes.

What went wrong? How do restaurants get their steaks so tender, so flavorful, so perfect? Gipson says making a great steak involves several keys. “I think it’s mostly attention to detail and knowledge of how best to prepare what you are given,” he says. “A truly good steak is first and foremost a good piece of meat. Proper seasoning and heat can turn it into something great.”

It all begins at the grocery store, but customers don’t always go for the best. You may go for the bright red cuts. They look appealing, but they have little fat, and the end result will most likely be a dry, tough piece of meat. Gipson says to look for cuts that are a little paler in color and have fine lines of fat running through

them. “The ones with the faded, almost pink hue are more tender,” he advises. “That may just be optics, as I also look for a cut that has fine white lines of fat that may make it appear less than red.”

And there’s one more thing. “People I have spoken to have the misconception that putting salt on the outside of a steak will dry it out,” he adds.

Not true.

“When heat is applied, the salt on the outside causes the outer layer to tighten up, creating something of a moisture barrier,” he says. “This traps more of the juice inside, making for a more flavorful steak all around.”

The steaks at High Point are a main feature on the menu. With nine different

options, the most popular are those that feature filet mignon, including filet mignon with Burgundy mushroom sauce, High Point Oscar, Black and Bruised Steak, Steak and Lobster, Steak and Shrimp, and Steak Diane.

And people come from near and far to order them — Chattanooga, Huntsville, Murfreesboro, Nashville, Tullahoma and everywhere in between, Gipson notes. Tennessee's partnerships with foreign corporations like Nissan and Volkswagen bring customers from around the world, and the nearby University of the South in Sewanee supplies guests from among its student body and their visiting families.

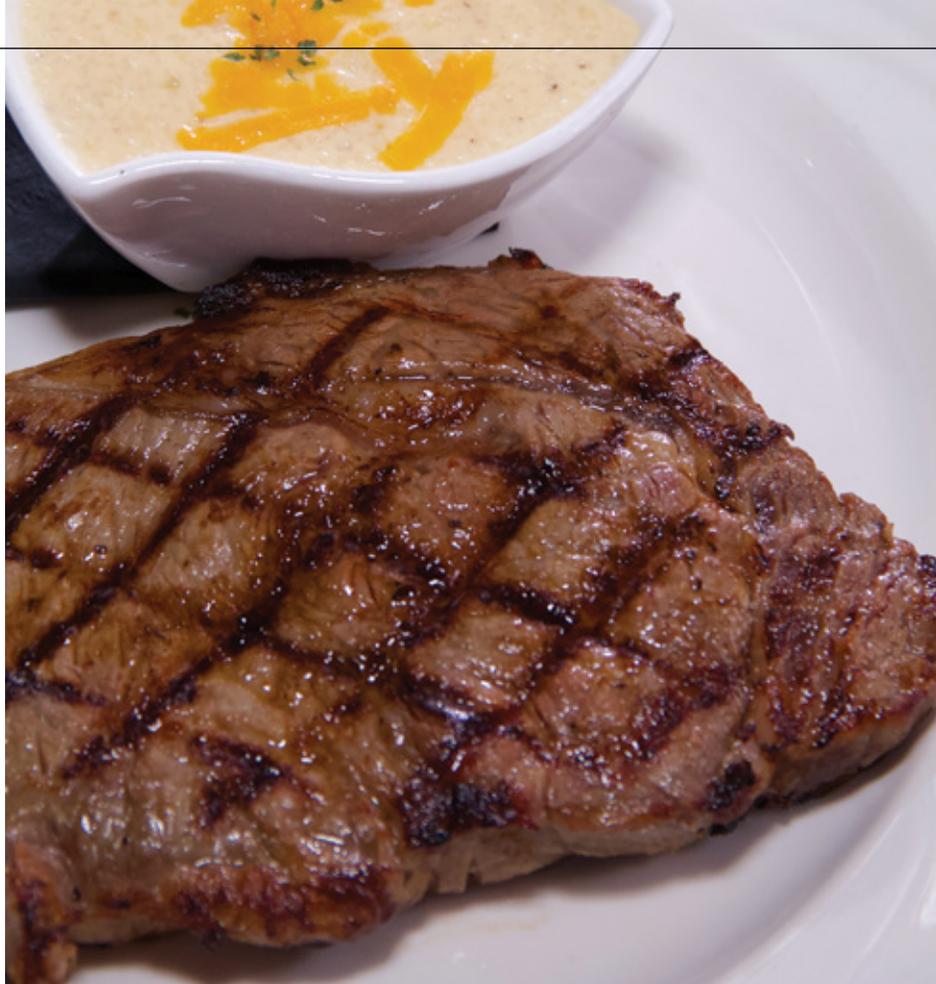
"We always strive to deliver an excellent meal at a reasonable price point. Also, our steak seasoning is unique to High Point," Gipson says. "So the seasoning, combined with fine sauces and compound butters, add to an already excellent cut of meat."

Gipson says grocery stores have improved on the cuts of meat they offer customers. "Of course, that is dependent on where you shop," he says. "For years, most grocery stores sold only the cheaper USDA grades of beef or meat that wasn't graded at all.

"What we serve is USDA Choice," Gipson says. "That means that it is closer to USDA Prime," which is only around 2% of all beef sold. "However, all of our meat has been aged a minimum of 21 days, which makes for a more tender, flavorful steak. I'm sure that with the multitude of high-end grocery stores these days, a comparable steak can be found."



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



## 'Steakhouse' Steaks

*This recipe is adapted from one by Food Network's Ina Garten.*

- 2 (8-ounce) filet mignons
- 2 tablespoons peanut or vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided

Set the steaks out on the counter at least 30 minutes before you plan on cooking them to take the chill off.

Heat the oven to 400 F. Pat the steaks dry and then brush each steak with the oil. Mix the salt and pepper on a plate, then roll each steak in the salt-and-pepper mixture, liberally coating all sides.

Heat a well-seasoned cast-iron skillet over high heat — as high as your stove will go. Open your window and turn on your fan. This is a smoky process. Once the skillet is very hot, add the steaks to the pan. Sear them evenly on all sides, getting a nice brown crust all over. It should take about 2 minutes per side to get a good sear.

Remove the pan from heat, place a pat of butter on top of each steak, and then transfer the skillet to the oven. Bake the steaks until their internal temperature reaches your preferred doneness — 120 F for rare, 125 F for medium-rare and 135 F for medium.

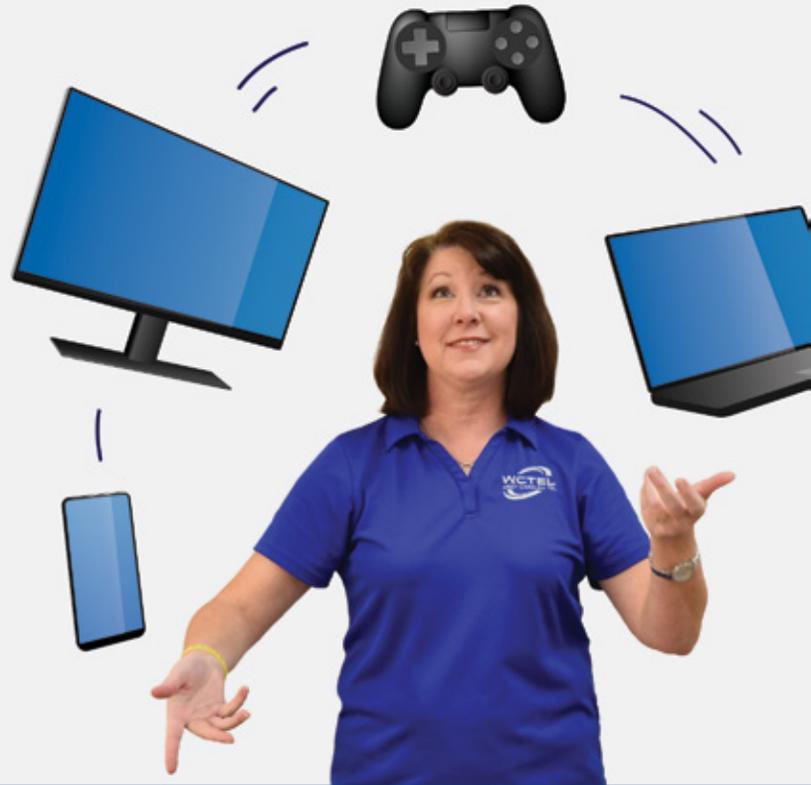
Remove the steaks from the skillet and cover them tightly with aluminum foil. Allow them to rest at room temperature for 10 minutes before serving. 🗨



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