

CONNECTED

Making Waves

West Carolina launches new brand



**GIVE BIG,
GET GIG**

RURAL WRITERS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

A Winning Game

Esports brings fun, competition and a future

NTCA members are committed to doing more than providing fast, reliable internet service. They strive to enrich the community, including finding new opportunities to help everyone as technologies and online trends evolve.

For example, a growing high school sport unlocks all the traditional benefits of competition, such as team building, while enhancing skills applicable to modern careers. Known as esports, competitive gaming can make a difference in the lives of students.

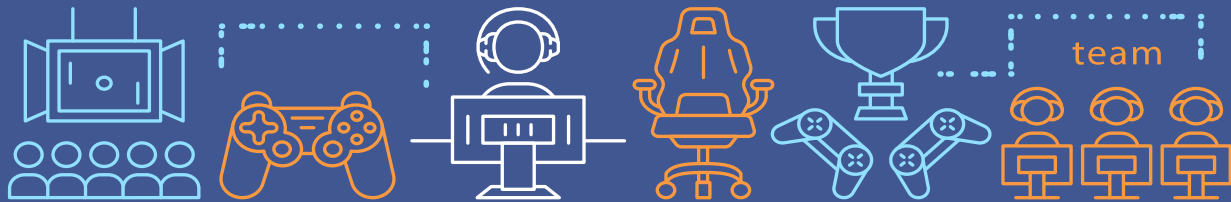
High schools across the nation have embraced esports, and the National Federation of State High School Associations includes esports alongside basketball, football, volleyball and more. Without fast, reliable internet services, however, rural students wouldn't have access. That's the power of providers like yours—they break down barriers and open doors to new opportunities.

Many of the competitions may seem familiar to gamers, ranging from sports games and racing simulations to strategy

and multiplayer battle titles. A growing number of colleges recognize esports and field teams. There's even professional-level competition.

The benefits of esports resemble those found in traditional high school sports. Success relies on teamwork and cooperation. Participants learn life skills and gain a deeper understanding of technology needed for careers ranging from software development to marketing. The broad world of gaming also brings people together, and 61% of gamers say they've met someone they otherwise would not have ever encountered.

Every day broadband uplifts rural America, and we look forward to seeing what innovations and opportunities come next. 🗨️



ESPORTS

ESPORTS STATS

Esports is increasingly popular, turning gaming into team competitions at high schools, colleges and even in professional competitions. Some online streaming services offer live coverage of competitions.

WHO ARE GAMERS?

- 24%** are younger than 18 years old
- 36%** are between the ages of 18-34
- 13%** are between the ages of 35-44
- 12%** are between the ages of 45-54

WHO ARE ESPORTS SPECTATORS?

- 50%** are between the ages of 25-41
- 26%** are between the ages of 16-24
- 20%** are between the ages of 42-56

BUILDING SKILLS

Esports creates skills today's students will find marketable.

- Computer network and hardware proficiency
- Digital literacy
- Broadcasting
- Soft skills
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Problem-solving
- Team building

Source: NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

A Sound Investment



System upgrade takes listening to next level

Whether you're gaming, watching a movie or listening to music, a high-quality sound system can take you from casually listening to feeling like you're part of the action. If you've thought about installing a sound system in your home, 'tis the season, to treat yourself to one that easily meets your needs and budget.

All sound systems have two basic components. First, there's the source providing the audio signal. This can be a TV, gaming device or digital music player, like your phone or computer. The second component is the amplifier, which boosts the audio signal. More than just volume, the amplifier improves the overall sound quality with more detail and clarity.

When it comes to speakers, music formats only require two, but the more speakers you have, the more immersive the sound will be. A soundbar, sometimes called a media bar, has multiple speakers enclosed in a single horizontal unit, usually placed above or below the TV. A surround sound system is much more complex, with speakers strategically placed around the room to deliver the best possible sound.

SOUNDBAR VS. SURROUND SOUND

Soundbars are ready to go right out of the box. They're relatively inexpensive, sleek and easy to install. Soundbars are ideal for smaller spaces because of their minimal visual impact.

When shopping for a soundbar, pay close attention to the number of speakers hidden inside. A larger soundbar doesn't

necessarily mean better sound quality. Look to manufacturers like Bose, Sonos or Vizio for reliable options.

Surround sound is the choice for high fidelity and full dynamic range of sound—think of your listening area as a movie theater with booming audio. It considers factors like room size, acoustics and listening positions to determine the number of speakers and locations. If you already have a basic speaker system at home, upgrading to surround sound might be as simple as adding an extra speaker or two.

PRICE OF PERFECTION

Very simple sound systems can still deliver a fantastic listening experience, so don't worry if you're starting on a smaller budget. But if you're designing your own setup and need advice on speaker placement or hiding wires behind walls, you'll need an electrician for expert guidance. Installers charge an average of \$50-\$100 an hour, so remember to budget for that.

The most common format for surround sound systems is the 5.1, with six audio channels, five speakers and a subwoofer that delivers the deep, rumbling bass frequencies. A 5.1 setup can cost between \$300 to \$1,700.

A more extensive option is the 7.1 surround, with two additional audio channels and two more speakers. Comparable to the audio setup found in large cinemas, the cost of this configuration runs anywhere from \$400 to \$4,000. [🔗](#)

A Season of Both Abundance and Need

Happy holidays! As we enter the holiday season, we find ourselves surrounded by the magic that defines these months. Families travel from across the country with one simple goal—to be home for the holidays. Gatherings take place around tables filled with food, while the hustle and bustle of gift shopping and twinkling lights brighten our homes. It's a time when cherished traditions are passed down, and the spirit of giving is alive.



JEFF WILSON
Chief Executive Officer

But the season also reminds us of those in need. With light comes darkness, and with abundance comes scarcity. Many of our neighbors struggle, and that's where real magic happens—when we come together to support one another. This is the heart of our annual Give Big, Get Gig initiative, which we're excited to extend to Upstate South Carolina with the opening of our new Upcountry Fiber office in Seneca.

The concept is simple—bring in three or more nonperishable food items, and we'll reward you with a free speed boost to our 1-Gig plan for the month of December. This is when internet usage tends to peak as families are streaming holiday movies, setting up new gadgets and connecting their phones to home WiFi. Last year, we collected over 4 tons of food, distributed to local pantries whose shelves were nearly bare. This year, with your generosity, we can do even better.

To take part, just visit any of our offices in November with your donations. If you're not yet a customer, our team can help you sign up for services. Once you've made your contribution, enjoy faster speeds throughout December. If you love the extra speed, simply call us to make the upgrade permanent. Otherwise, your service will return to your regular plan in January.

Beyond the holidays, we're continuing to offer streaming support through community classes, most recently in Belton. Many of our customers are transitioning to streaming, but we know it's not always easy. Program providers sometimes pull channels unexpectedly, and sports fans have seen their games disappear midseason. Streaming can help, but navigating different platforms is tricky. That's why we've partnered with MyBundle to simplify things.

If you're wondering how to catch your favorite NFL game, visit mybundle.tv/pages/nfl and select your team. You'll see all the available streaming options. In addition, we've launched a new app in partnership with MyBundle that aggregates all your streaming services into one easy-to-use guide. Visit mybundle.tv/app, enter your phone number and follow the prompts to get started. It's like having a TV Guide in the palm of your hand.

I understand the world of TV and streaming can feel like the Wild West, but we're here to make it easier for you.

As always, we are grateful to serve you and wish you and your family a wonderful holiday season! 📺

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is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Abbeville, Anderson and McCormick counties.

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On the Cover:



Several months ago, West Carolina launched new branding that reflects its connection with the communities it serves. [More info on page 12.](#)

Photos courtesy of West Carolina

MERRY Christmas

From Our Family to Yours!

The employees of West Carolina are grateful for the support of our customers. We wish you a season filled with love and laughter with friends and family.

Our offices will be closed on the following dates while our employees spend the holidays with their families:



Nov. 28 and Nov. 29—Thanksgiving



Dec. 24 and Dec. 25—Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

Jan. 1—New Year's Day

CALL BEFORE YOU DIG

Decorating a Christmas tree is one of the season's many traditions that, thankfully, doesn't require any digging.

Just remember that planting real trees—or any other underground project—must include a call to South Carolina's 811 program.

State excavation laws require homeowners and contractors to call 811 before digging. Starting a digging project haphazardly can damage expensive infrastructure and put lives at risk. SC-811 notifies all utilities based on the address, allowing those stakeholders to safely mark their facilities.



Find out more at sc811.com.

5 STEPS FOR SAFE DIGGING:

- Call 811 for your lines to be marked.
- Wait the required amount of time—three full business days for normal requests, not counting the day of the call.
- Call 811 or 888-721-7877 to confirm all lines have been marked.
- Respect the marks and call for re-marking, if needed.
- Carefully dig around the painted lines and flags. Those facilities keep your family digitally connected.



Adobe Stock/schab

Lumps of Coal for Robocalls

If you've been seeing unfamiliar numbers popping up on your phone this season, they aren't coming from the North Pole. Robocalls are an annoying imposition by folks who have a special spot on the naughty list.

Here are a few tips for dealing with dreaded robocalls:

- Add your number to the National Do Not Call Registry.
- Check for tools and services from your wireless carrier or blocking features on your smartphone.
- Download and activate robocall-blocking apps.
- Let calls from unknown numbers go to voicemail.
- If you accidentally answer a robocall, just hang up. Pushing other numbers or answering yes can cause an unauthorized charge.
- If the caller asks for anything involving a gift card, it's very likely a scam.
- Report any scam calls to the FCC Consumer Complaint Center at 888-225-5322.

Visit ctia.org/consumer-resources/how-to-stop-robocalls for more information.



Blast Off

Go on a holiday adventure at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Looking for an out-of-this-world family experience this holiday season? The U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, will capture everyone's imagination, from kids to adults.

The center was first conceived as Wernher von Braun and his team of rocket scientists were in the final months of refining the Saturn V rocket that would send Apollo astronauts to the moon. As director of the nearby Marshall Space Flight Center, von Braun saw the need for a permanent exhibit to showcase the hardware of the space program.

He petitioned the Alabama Legislature to create a museum with the help of the U.S. Army Missile Command and NASA. The U.S. Army donated land for the museum, and the U.S. Space & Rocket Center opened its doors in 1970, the year after Apollo 11 successfully carried astronauts to the moon and back.

Since then, the center has hosted more than 650,000 visitors each year from as many as 64 different countries. Visitors can get an up-close look at an authentic Saturn V rocket, one of only three in the world, as well as Pathfinder, the world's only fully stacked space shuttle display.

A HELPING HAND

While the holidays often bring hope and happiness, for many people achieving those peaceful goals are elusive. That's particularly true this year, as communities throughout the Southeast strive to recover from damaging winds and devastating floods.

Dolly Parton, Walmart and countless others have contributed to organizations supporting these rural areas in need. If you wish to contribute, consider these options:

American Red Cross: [redcross.org](https://www.redcross.org)

The Salvation Army: [salvationarmyusa.org](https://www.salvationarmyusa.org)

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE TO EXPLORE

Not only is the USSRC an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, but it is also the official NASA Visitor Center for Marshall Space Flight Center. The museum offers regular bus tours highlighting the facility where the Space Launch System is in development to carry astronauts to Mars, asteroids and even deeper into space.

In addition to exhibits detailing the most complete chronology of launch vehicles in the country, the center's Apollo 16 command module, real Apollo 12 moon rock and daily STEM on Stage performances let visitors interact with artifacts and exhibits.

Children under 8 can explore an International Space Station-themed playground at Kids Cosmos, and every Saturday kids 12 and up are invited to the Maker Lab for hands-on projects that incorporate lessons on topics like solar energy and robotics. Adrenaline junkies can ride the G-Force Accelerator to experience three times the force of gravity or take the Moon Shot to see what a rocket launch feels like as you fly 140 feet straight up in 2.5 seconds.

"The Space & Rocket Center is really an amazing feast for the eyes. It's a place to learn about the past, the present and the future of space exploration."

—Pat Ammons, senior director of public and media relations

AN ASTRONOMICAL CHRISTMAS

One of the USSRC's most popular attractions is the INTUITIVE Planetarium, which features a state-of-the-art digital dome theater. Each screening is unique as a team of live astrophysicists takes visitors on a tour of the solar system.

"It is truly an extraordinary, absolutely world-class planetarium," says Senior Director of Public and Media Relations Pat Ammons. "It's all live and interactive. They take you on a personal tour, you can ask questions and it's highly interactive."

Throughout the holidays, the planetarium also screens a special feature called "The Star of Bethlehem," which explores both the science and religion behind the famous celestial phenomenon. 📺

Photos courtesy of the U.S. Space & Rocket Center

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LEFT: The U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, is a holiday destination for the family.



Photo courtesy of Neil Jandt



ABOVE: Finn Cushing, 2, tries an astronaut's suit on for size.

LEFT: See a piece of the moon, a rock brought home by astronauts.



A Very Berry Christmas

Holiday cheer fills Newberry each year

Photos courtesy of Oswaldo Tapia



Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

Every year the week before Thanksgiving, Bridget Carey, tourism and events manager for the city of Newberry, gets an early-morning text from Austin Willingham of Willingham & Sons Building Supply & Septic Tanks. It's a photo of a truck Austin and his son, Bryce, take to pick up Newberry's 25-foot

Fraser fir Christmas tree from Avery, North Carolina.

Throughout the day, Austin shares updates as the tree nears Newberry. Once it arrives, the evergreen receives a police escort to Community Hall, where it's installed outside, decorated and bedecked by the city's public works employees.

Then, on the Thursday before Thanksgiving, the festivities of A Very Berry Christmas begin.

FOURTEEN YEARS OF CHEER

Newberry hosted its first Christmas event in 2010. Over the years, Bridget says, the festivities have grown in size

and scope. It starts with the Community Christmas Tree Lighting, this year to be held Nov. 22. "We want this event to be a place for families to come and kick off the holiday season," Bridget says.

It starts at 5 p.m. School choirs perform, and carols are sung. The mayor will address the crowd, which last year numbered 5,000, and a local family is chosen each year to flip a switch to light the tree.

Afterward, attendees can enjoy music, food and drinks for sale, faux snow and plenty of other decorations that make for great photo backdrops. Kids can write letters to Santa in Santa's Workshop, then drop them in a special mailbox. "It's just magic," Bridget says. "To me, that's what it is—magic."

Last year, Fisher Films used Newberry's downtown to film scenes of its movie "Christmas at Xander Point," including some footage shot at the tree lighting. Bridget says the film is expected to come out this December. 📺

EVEN MORE MERRIMENT

Fridays in December bring North Pole Nights to downtown Newberry, featuring Santa on a fire truck and faux snow. Christmas crafts are offered at the Newberry Arts Center.

Santa also rides around the town's neighborhoods on a fire truck throughout December.

For updates about this year's event and other Christmas festivities, visit newberrychristmas.com and follow the town's social media accounts.

TOP: Newberry's Christmas tree shimmers with decorations.

BELOW: A brass quintet plays before the tree lighting.



Holiday Tradition

Give Big, Get Gig food drive returns



Story by JOHN CLAYTON

For the past two years, West Carolina has asked its customers and members to participate in the Give Big, Get Gig program.

And for the past two years, people have responded in a big way, providing donations for area food banks in exchange for a month of West Carolina's 1-Gig speed at no extra charge.

"December is such a time of heavy internet usage because so many people are entertaining and hosting guests and family members," says Mary Miller, West Carolina's marketing communications manager. "You have multiple people on your WiFi, so we thought it would be a great way to thank our customers for their generosity."

The amount of food donations doubled last year from the total in 2022. While inflation has slowed over the past year, higher food prices and other costly expenses can make the holidays difficult for some families in the communities West Carolina serves.

"The need is real, and this is a direct way that our customers and members can provide that hands-on support for our

areas and come together and help one another," Mary says.

Beginning in November, West Carolina encourages members and customers to donate at least three nonperishable food items in exchange for 1 Gig internet service for a month. Those donations go to area food banks, such as United Christian Ministries of Abbeville County and the Iva Food Bank.

Give Big, Get Gig has also been the start of bigger things beyond the holidays for West Carolina and its relationship with area food pantries.

Earlier this year, West Carolina received a matching grant through CoBank's Sharing Success Program following a \$10,000 donation that went to help a half-dozen area nonprofits.


"We've been able to supplement the food pantries with monetary donations," Mary says. "The biggest eye-opener for us has been, in many cases, these food pantry shelves are empty, and we've been able to change that."

This holiday season, Give Big, Get Gig is being expanded to include Upcountry Fiber, West Carolina's partnership with Blue Ridge Electric in the Upstate.

Regardless of where the food is

Volunteers pile up canned goods at the South Carolina Governor's School for Agriculture at John del la Howe School.

collected, Mary says every West Carolina employee plays a vital role in the food drive.

"It's all hands on deck," she says. "Every employee touches this effort at some point, whether it's helping with the collections, organizing and sorting or delivering. It's a really neat way for our employees to come together during the holiday seasons and just have fun together and know that we're doing good things." 

GIVE BIG, GET GIG AGENCIES SUPPORTED IN 2023:

- United Christian Ministries of Abbeville County
- Food Bank of Greenwood County
- Iva Food Bank
- McCormick Helping Hands United
- Newberry Living Hope Foundation Food Pantry

Photo courtesy of West Carolina

THE ART OF SELF- RELIANCE

Rural writers get a boost from the internet

Story by JEN CALHOUN



Photo courtesy of Shawna Holly



Shawna Holly was researching how to publish her first novel when she ran into a type of writer’s block she’d never experienced. This particular block had nothing to do with plot holes or mental tangles. Instead, it centered around the relatively slow-moving churn of books through the nation’s traditional publishing houses.

“The industry—from my perspective—is very busy, like so many other businesses right now,” Shawna says. “There are very few literary agents and acquisitions editors compared to how many debut authors are seeking representation, and they’re all overworked. As a result, the path to traditional publishing is slow. For authors seeking a faster solution, self-publishing is the answer.”

So, that’s what she did. In June 2023, the Boerne, Texas-based writer published her first novel, “The Stories We Keep,” via a self-publishing platform that distributes paperbacks and e-books all over the world. Her second book, “When We’re Broken,” came out earlier this fall. Both books are in the genre of women’s literary fiction.

TAKING CHARGE

Shawna is among a growing number of writers embracing self-publishing

platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speed up the book publishing process. This is especially true for writers from small or rural towns who may have a harder time finding an agent or fostering connections to publishing houses in larger cities.

“Agents receive thousands of queries a year, and they’re only taking on maybe two or three new authors in addition to the clients they already have to manage,” Shawna says. “It just makes it darn near impossible to find that magic match. I just thought, ‘I’m in my 40s and have more stories to write. I don’t want to wait.’”

Best-selling authors who famously self-published before landing big book deals and film adaptations include Amanda Brown, who wrote “Legally Blonde,” and Andy Weir, who wrote “The Martian.” Colleen Hoover, the East Texas author of the blockbuster “It Ends with Us,” also self-published her first book, “Slammed,” in 2012. She increased her audience by giving away free books and by posting regularly on social media.

Even those self-published writers who don’t reach traditional literary heights have profited in the world of self-publishing. The Alliance of Independent Authors published a survey in 2023 reporting that

self-published authors earned a median income of \$12,749—more than double that of traditionally published authors. They also made up more than 50% of Kindle’s Top 400 books of 2023, the survey found.

UNTANGLING THE WEB


Self-publishing isn’t the only internet tool that sparks creativity, however. Connie Clyburn is an East Tennessee-based writer of several books, including “Wisdom from the Doublewide” and the devotional “Aging Fabulously.” Connie found fellowship online through video calls with other writers from as far away as Ireland.

From her home in Telford, Tennessee—which she describes as “a little wide place in the road between Jonesborough and Greeneville”—she also uses the internet to connect with others through her online magazine. Called *ah law, y’all*, the quarterly publication highlights the Southern Appalachian area.

“You don’t always think about how vital the internet is as a writer,” says Connie, who infuses her writing with scripture and ways to apply it to everyday life. “But, as a rural writer, it has opened up a big world. Anything that I come up with



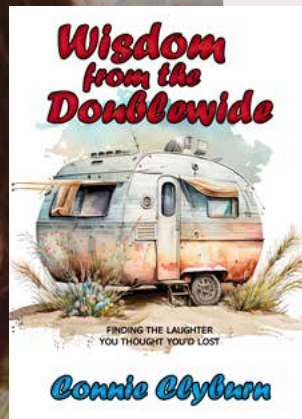
Photo courtesy of Connie Clyburn

that I want to read about or research or just connect with is right there at your fingertips.” 

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information on Connie Clyburn, look up her blog, “Wisdom from the Doublewide,” and the online magazine *ah law, y'all*.

Find out more about Shawna Holly and her books at shawnaholly.com.



LEFT: Connie Clyburn got her start as a journalist, and now she writes books, a blog and a newsletter from her home in East Tennessee near Jonesborough. Connie turned her blog into the book “Wisdom from the Doublewide.”

OPPOSITE PAGE: Shawna Holly lives outside of San Antonio, in a town of about 15,000 people. An Air Force veteran, Shawna self-published her book, “The Stories We Keep,” to avoid the sometimes long and tedious process of finding an agent and a publisher.

GET A START WITH SELF-PUBLISHING

Most writers learn quickly that finding a publisher is often harder than writing the book itself. Books are meant to be read, but the steps involved with finding an agent and publisher can waste valuable time and resources. As a result, many writers self-publish. The comprehensive book and writers' blog “What We Reading” lists several self-publishing platforms. We've listed a few resources here for e-books. Visit whatwewereading.com for more information on self-publishing print books.

Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, also known as KDP

- Highest market share and sales in the self-publishing industry.
- Writers earn royalties of between 35% and 70% depending on the price of the book.
- It's important to note there's another option called KDP Select, which is different than KDP. KDP Select users get certain marketing perks that can help sell their books. In exchange, they can't publish their work with any other self-publishing company.

Apple Books

- Writers earn royalties of 70% on all e-books.
- Second-biggest player in the industry after Amazon's KDP.
- No upfront fees for authors once they have an iTunes account.

Barnes & Noble Press, also known as B&N

- Writers earn 70% on e-books above 99 cents.
- B&N is considered one of the easiest platforms to use.
- Completely free to use, and it does not require exclusivity.

Other platforms include Kobo Writing Life, Draft2Digital, StreetLib, IngramSpark and PublishDrive, some of which have different pricing models and royalty distributions. Each of these platforms generally offers distribution to all the major e-book retailers, so it's important to research all options.

Source: “15 Best Self-Publishing Platforms for Your Book” from the blog “What We Reading.”

What's in a Name?



West Carolina says it all

West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative and WCFIBER are now under one name—West Carolina.

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

West Carolina has been known by that name for years, but now it's official.

A rebranding initiative was completed in July for the organization born as West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative and its subsidiary WCFIBER, which provides high-speed internet, TV, phone and other services to local communities in western South Carolina and eastern Georgia. Both organizations have united under one brand—West Carolina.

"We intentionally removed fiber and telephone from our name," West Carolina CEO Jeff Wilson says. "This change reflects our belief that West Carolina represents more than just our products or services—it embodies our community, our people and our shared dedication to making a meaningful impact."

Mary Miller, West Carolina marketing communications manager, says the singular brand will alleviate confusion among members, customers and even employees. Outside of the new name, members can expect everything to be business as usual at West Carolina, she says.

"We often juggled between WCTEL and WCFIBER, and if it was confusing for our

employees, it surely was confusing for our customers," Mary said. "Our values and services are the same, regardless of where we're serving. Together, we're one West Carolina."

A NEW LOOK FOR A NEW NAME

The new West Carolina brand includes a new logo, which features an icon that embodies the values behind the brand. "At first glance, you can see a WC," Mary says. "The movement and curves are a nod to the local waterways in areas served by West Carolina. The soft lines speak to West Carolina's agility and accessibility. And, to some, it can also resemble a puzzle piece, demonstrating the role we play in our communities. Every aspect of the icon was very intentional."

Mary says the new brand honors both West Carolina's history and future. "The new brand reflects our legacy," she says. "There's a little bit of a throwback feel to it, but it's also modern and forward as well."

West Carolina's team consolidated both WCTEL's and WCFIBER's websites into westcarolina.com. The new site offers an easier user experience and streamlines

information. "Connect to what you love," West Carolina's new tagline, is featured on the home page.

All communities served by West Carolina will see the rebranding take shape with new employee clothing, signage and updated vehicle wraps during the rest of 2024 and 2025.

"We're in a transitional period right now," Mary says. "In the coming months you're going to see the brands overlap a little. Gradually, you're going to see the complete transformation to West Carolina."

Employees and community members served on focus groups during the rebranding process. "This new brand encompasses months of research, interviews, focus groups and data insights," Mary says. "Without our customers' and employees' insights, we would not have arrived at this brand. West Carolina embodies so much—our services and our products—but it's so much more. It's our people. It's our communities. It's our relationships, and we wanted to leave room and space for all of that in this new brand." 





Photos by Adobe Stock

Powering up is never more important than during the holidays, whether it's for TVs, computers, battery-hungry toys for the kids or other electronics. And you want to do it safely and efficiently, too.

With expensive electronic gear, you want to protect against potentially damaging power spikes. Meanwhile, batteries need proper storage so they're always ready to go when you need them.

Here are a few tips to get you through the holidays:

POWER STRIPS

Consider these as multioutlet extension cords. A basic power strip is convenient for some uses, but it is not the best at shielding against a power surge. Always look for a rating, typically measured in joules, that shows how much energy a strip can absorb before failing. Generally, a strip with a higher rating offers better protection.

SURGE PROTECTORS

From large blocks to travel-size versions, there's a surge protector for almost every need. Consider a joule rating of 2,000 and above, if possible, particularly for your expensive or delicate equipment. Surge protectors work by absorbing excess voltage, so protection will degrade over time. Consider choosing one that stops providing power when it can no longer protect your devices.

UNINTERRUPTIBLE POWER SUPPLY

An uninterruptible power supply, or UPS, offers surge protection and keeps your equipment working for a time after the power goes out. A UPS can give you time to save files and shut down equipment properly.

BATTERY BASICS

While they seem simple, batteries do need care and attention. Consider these options:

Keep them cool and dry: Store batteries in a cool, dry place. Extreme heat or cold can cut battery life and performance.

Avoid metal containers: Opt for the original packaging or plastic containers for battery storage. Metal can cause batteries to short-circuit.

Don't mix: Store different types of batteries separately. Combining alkaline and lithium batteries can cause leakage or rupture.

Check the dates: Batteries do expire. So, use older batteries first and check your stored batteries to make sure they are still within the recommended date range.

Store when not in use: Not going to use that device for a while? Remove the batteries to avoid leakage or other device damage. 📱



Holiday Simplicity

Breakfast casseroles are a gift for busy hosts

Make-ahead casseroles can make the difference between holiday stress and satisfaction. From sweet to savory, there are many choices. Here are several to try this season.



**Food Editor
Anne P. Braly
is a native of
Chattanooga,
Tennessee.**

BLUEBERRY PANCAKE CASSEROLE

Crumb Topping:

- 1/2 cup flour
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Pancakes:

- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 tablespoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups whole buttermilk
- 1/2 cup milk
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1-2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
- 2 cups blueberries
- Maple syrup, for serving

Crumb topping: The day before, in a medium bowl, combine flour, sugars, cinnamon and salt. Add melted butter and stir until fully incorporated. Cover and refrigerate.

Pancakes: Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine flour, sugar, salt, baking powder and baking soda.

In a separate bowl, combine eggs, buttermilk, milk, melted butter, lemon zest and vanilla extract. Whisk wet ingredients until well combined. Add wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir until just combined. The batter will be lumpy. Do not overmix.

Pour the batter into the greased baking dish. Sprinkle the blueberries over the top. Remove the crumb topping from the fridge and crumble over the top of the blueberries and batter. Bake for 35-45 minutes, until puffed and light golden brown. Use a toothpick to check the center for doneness. Serve warm with maple syrup.

SCRAMBLED EGG BAKE

- 4 slices bacon
- 8 ounces dried beef
- 2 4-ounce cans mushrooms, drained
- 1/2 cup butter, divided
- 1/2 cup flour
- 4 cups whole milk
- 16 eggs
- 1 cup evaporated milk

Saute the bacon until almost done. Add dried beef, mushrooms and 1/4 cup butter. While hot, add flour and stir in whole milk. Simmer sauce until thickened and smooth, stirring constantly.

Beat eggs with evaporated milk and salt. Scramble in remaining 1/4 cup butter.

Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Ladle a layer of sauce into the dish followed by a layer of scrambled eggs. Repeat layers, ending with a layer of sauce. Garnish with mushrooms and bacon. Cover with foil and bake at 275 F for 1 hour.

To make ahead: Make casserole, cover and refrigerate. Bake as directed.



FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

- 1 12- to 14-ounce loaf French or sour-dough bread. Stale bread works great.
- 1 8-ounce package full-fat cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 3 teaspoons vanilla extract, divided
- 8 eggs
- 2/3 cup packed brown sugar
- 3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 1/4 cups whole milk

Topping:

- 1/3 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cold and cubed
- Maple syrup and/or powdered sugar for topping

Grease a 9-by-13-inch casserole with nonstick spray. Either cut the bread into 1-inch cubes or tear it into preferred size. Spread half of the cubes into prepared baking pan.

Using a hand-held or stand mixer with a whisk attachment, beat the cream cheese

on medium-high speed until completely smooth. Beat in the powdered sugar and 1/4 teaspoon vanilla until combined. Drop random spoonfuls of cream cheese mixture on top of the bread. Layer the remaining bread cubes on top of cream cheese. Make sure some cream cheese is still exposed on top. Set aside.

Whisk the eggs, milk, cinnamon, brown sugar and remaining vanilla together until no brown sugar lumps remain. Pour evenly over the bread. Cover the pan tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 3-4 hours or up to 24 hours. Overnight is best.

When ready to bake, remove from the refrigerator and uncover while you make the topping.

Mix the brown sugar, flour and cinnamon. Then, use a pastry cutter or your hands to cut the cold butter into the topping mixture until crumbly.

Bake at 350 F for 45-60 minutes. You can use a knife to check the French toast—it should come out mostly clean when the dish is ready. Avoid putting the knife into the cream cheese dollop, which could give a false reading.

SAVORY RICE CEREAL CASSEROLE

- 2 pounds pork sausage
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 3 cups Rice Krispies
- 3 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 6 eggs
- 2 cans cream of celery soup
- 1/2 cup milk



In a skillet, cook sausage with onion until meat is no longer pink and onions are tender; drain. Transfer mixture to a lightly greased 9-by-13-inch casserole. Top with layers of rice, cereal and cheese. In a bowl beat the eggs with the soup and milk. Spread mixture on top. Cover with foil and refrigerate overnight.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Remove foil and bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour or until a knife inserted in center comes out clean. Let stand for 5-10 minutes before serving.

Note: Making this a day ahead helps to soften the cereal. It can be baked right away, but the cereal may still be crispy. 📺

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