

CONNECTED



Caribbean Vibes

Jamaica inspires couple's cottage

NETWORK
RESILIENCE

FILM FESTIVALS



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 connects 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 broadband-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.

The Torch Burns Brighter Than Ever

Serving our community has been an honor

As I write this final column, I reflect on a career spanning over four decades. Beginning as a young clerk in telecommunications, I could not have foreseen the profound impact this industry—and especially the people in it—would have on my life. As my career concludes, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the opportunities, challenges and relationships that have defined my journey.



JEFF WILSON
Chief Executive Officer

At West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative, our shared accomplishments since 2013 fill me with pride. Together, we've grown from serving around 8,200 internet customers to over 53,000 today, a testament to our commitment to improving lives. This growth wasn't easy. Rural broadband is a tough business, requiring strategic vision and difficult decisions.

Early on, we faced a pivotal choice—stand still and decline or expand boldly. We chose the latter, launching initiatives like partnerships with local governments and Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative. These efforts transformed us from a local provider to a regional leader, delivering high-speed internet across South Carolina and parts of Georgia. Today, our fiber network spans thousands of miles,


connecting communities and enhancing quality of life.

A standout achievement has been our collaboration with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative to launch Upcountry Fiber. This \$150 million partnership exemplifies what's possible when organizations unite around a shared goal. Seeing the transformative power of connectivity in rural communities has been the most rewarding part of my career.

None of this would have been possible without our incredible team. At West Carolina, I've witnessed resilience, innovation and compassion daily. Our employees' dedication goes beyond organizational success. They are committed to the welfare of our communities. Their efforts have been the foundation of our growth, making West Carolina not just a service provider, but a family.

Our board of directors also deserves recognition for its unwavering commitment and bold decisions. The board's foresight and dedication have been instrumental in driving progress and positioning the cooperative for long-term success.

This industry has evolved dramatically over the years, but one constant remains—progress is essential. Technology will continue to advance and so will West Carolina. I am confident in the cooperative's future, thanks to its strong foundation and the vision of those who will lead it forward. To the next generation of leaders, I urge you to keep pushing boundaries and never lose sight of the people at the core of this work.

To everyone who has been part of my journey, thank you. Your support, encouragement and shared belief in what we can achieve together have meant everything to me. It has been an honor to serve, and I step away with immense pride in what we've accomplished and excitement for what lies ahead for West Carolina. 

WC west
carolina

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

West Carolina Telephone
233 Highway 28 Bypass
Abbeville, SC 29620
Telephone: 864-446-2111
westcarolina.com

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UTILITY RESOURCES

On the Cover:



Wesley and Sandra Hershberger host guests from around the world in their Jamaica-inspired Irie Cottage rental in Abbeville. See story on page 9.

Photo by Matt Ledger

MEET OUR NEW EMPLOYEES



ANDREW NEWMAN lives in Seneca and is in outside residential sales. He loves spending time with family around bonfires and is devout in his faith in Christ. He and his wife, Ivy, have two children, Elijah, 4, and Sam, 2.



JULIAN WHITE, from Abbeville, is a network operations center technician I. He likes to play games and hang out with friends and family.

Fun fact: Julian escaped from an escape room.



DAVID WORLEY, a managed IT services technician II, was born and raised in Pelzer. His hobbies include building and flying drones, video games, 3D printing and laser engraving. David and his wife, Lindsey, have two daughters, Sadie Rose, 5, and Danielle Vera, 1.

Fun fact: David lived in New York City for a year for acting school.



EDWARD CRUZ is an account service representative who lives in Walhalla. He enjoys traveling and fishing trips.

Fun fact: Edward is a medical translator and likes to help others.



NICHOLAS HOLBROOKS, a construction technician I, was born and raised in Fair Play.

In his spare time, he likes to hunt. Nicholas and his wife, Whitney, have three children, Caison, 14; Jet, 8; and 20-month-old Valen.



JUSTIN SAYLORS is a network operations field technician who lives in Abbeville.

His hobbies include golfing, hunting and playing with his kids. Justin and his wife, Brooke, have two boys, Kace, 4, and Jude, 3.



CAITLIN BURCH is a customer service representative who lives in Greenwood.

Her hobbies include camping, concerts, spending days at the lake and Georgia football. She and her husband, Gareth, have two children, Easton, 13, and Emma, 11. A baby boy is due in February.

Fun fact: Caitlin loves to find shark teeth.



PATRICK MULCAHY is a network operations center technician I. Originally from Greenville, he has lived in Abbeville for 20 years.

His hobbies include travel, gaming and astrophotography. Patrick married Kristin Beals 20 years ago, and they have five small dogs.

Fun fact: Patrick has attended over 300 concerts.



HANNAH G. PATTERSON is an account service representative, originally from Greenwood but now living in Central.

She enjoys going to new places, hiking, painting and playing games on her Xbox.

Fun fact: Hannah has a bachelor's degree in biology.



GRAYSON HILL is a network and cybersecurity analyst from Lexington, and naturally his main hobby is hacking. He and his wife, Emily, have a 2-year-old named Maeve and a second daughter due in April, who they'll name Frances.

Fun fact: Grayson has been a pastor for four years.



TRAVIS EDWARDS is a construction technician I from Pickens.

He likes to travel, and his favorite hobby is cooking on the grill or smoking barbecue.

Fun fact: Travis likes to build computers.

welcome TO THE TEAM!

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.

These festivals in communities large and small offer great destinations. There's something for everyone. For example, the Lookout Wild Film Festival is a staple in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

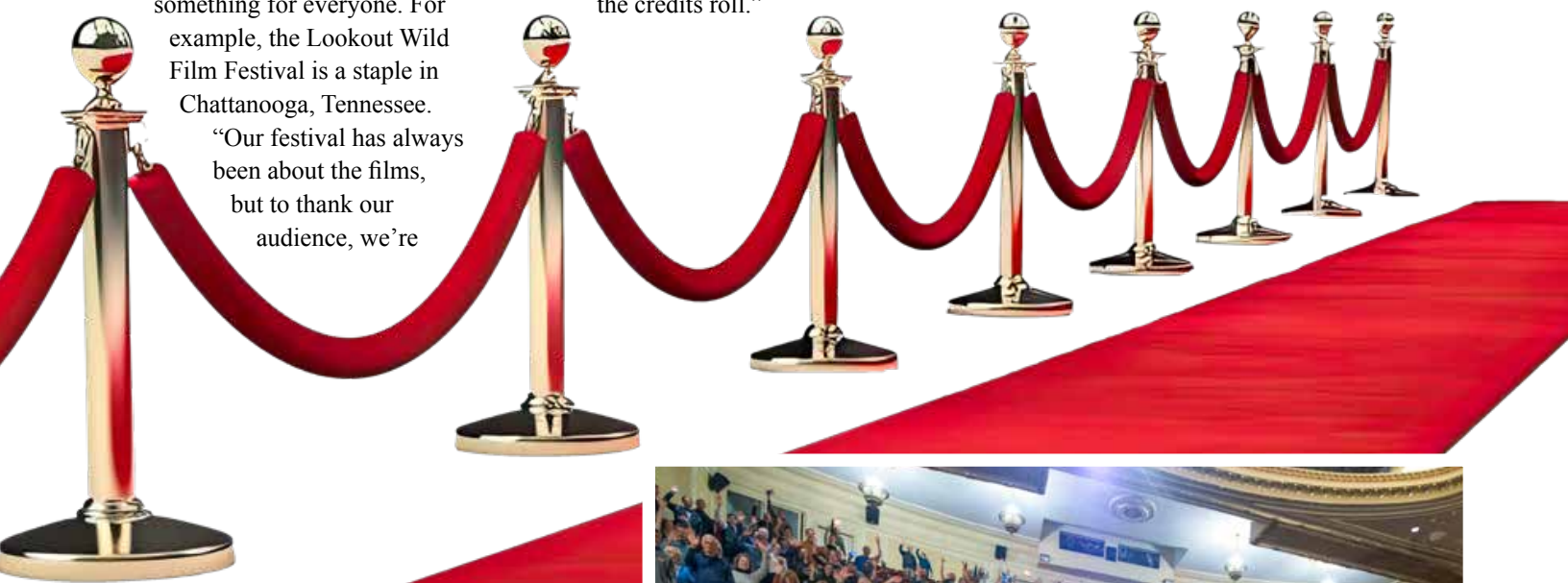
“Our festival has always been about the films, but to thank our audience, we’re

trying to bring in more of the festival aspect,” says Steve Rogers, event director for Lookout Wild Film Festival. “It’s about creating a welcoming and inclusive festival culture. You get to be in a room where every person around you shares a love for adventure and the craft of storytelling. Exploring amazing locations, cheering for stunning visuals and tearing up at touching moments become shared experiences that stay with you long after the credits roll.”

FAN FOCUS

Almost every film festival relies on fan participation. Screenings and special events are typically open to the public.

Fans at film festivals often rub elbows with industry insiders, filmmakers and actors as they get an inside look at the movies and topics that will shape the entertainment scene in the coming year. They also get to see impactful projects that



Festivalgoers pack a Chattanooga venue for the Lookout Wild Film Festival.

REGIONAL FESTIVAL FARE

The Lookout Wild Film Festival, Chattanooga, Tennessee: The festival season in the Southeast starts out on the wild side when this returns to Chattanooga, Jan. 16-19, for its 13th year. The festival welcomes guests to its new venue, The Signal at the historic Choo Choo complex, to screen films capturing the thrill of outdoor adventures and the importance of environmental conservation. Live music is thrown in for good measure before screening sessions and during intermissions. Find details on the festival focused on "wild places and the people they inspire" at lwff.org.

The Chattanooga Film Festival, named after its host city: The festival is June 21-28 at the historic Read House. The films are a treat for fans of horror, and the festival touts itself as a summer camp for cinephiles. Actor and producer Elijah Wood won the Moonstruck MoonPie Eating Contest back in 2015.

The Southern Fried Film Festival, Huntsville, Alabama: This festival combines independent film, music and technology.

The Lindsey Film Fest, Florence, Alabama: The University of North Alabama hosts the Lindsey Film Fest, Feb. 27 to March 1. Created in 1988 by George "Goober" Lindsey of "Andy Griffith Show" fame, the festival is free.

The Beaufort International Film Festival, Beaufort, South Carolina: The festival returns Feb. 18-23 for its 19th run. Last year fans saw actor Gary Sinise receive the Pat Conroy Lifetime Achievement Award as the festival celebrated the 30th anniversary of "Forrest Gump." Beaufort served as a backdrop for the film.

Cosmic Holler Film Fest, Ashland, Kentucky: An out-of-this-world experience is guaranteed. This one-day fall film festival at the Paramount Arts Center is a celebration of all things science fiction. Last year's festival kicked off with a visit from Capt. Kirk himself, William Shatner.

may never make it to their neighborhood theaters. But beyond that, fans meet people with similar interests, making the festivals social events involving 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

A festival's website is the best resource to find everything from ticket availability to screenings info, schedules, parking and even lodging. Online ticket sales for the public often start well in advance, and popular festivals can sell out quickly.

A great option for the adventurous film buff is to sign up as a festival volunteer. Many festivals are staffed by volunteers, and even the largest festivals rely heavily on volunteer workers. Duties range from greeting patrons and taking tickets to helping 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.

Once at the festivals, attendees can easily navigate their many options through schedules continually updated on the event's website or even through an app. Take, for example, the Sidewalk Film Festival, which will take over the Historic Theatre District in downtown Birmingham, Alabama, Aug. 18-24. Spread across about a dozen venues, it offers more than 200 film screenings, plus educational and Q&A sessions. To help attendees stay on track, the festival's website, sidewalkfest.com, has maps and an interactive schedule. 📱



Outdoor adventure gets top billing at the Lookout Wild Film Festival.

Photos courtesy of LWFF

A Caring Community

West Carolina & Upcountry Fiber double food collection in annual campaign

West Carolina and Upcountry Fiber—its Upstate fiber partnership with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative—collected record amounts of nonperishable food during the third annual Give Big, Get Gig campaign in November. The initiative saw participation from more than 645 customers, a significant increase from the previous year.

The campaign invited customers to donate at least three unexpired, nonperishable food items at West Carolina and Upcountry Fiber offices in exchange for a free upgrade to 1-Gig internet speed during December. Current Gig customers received a special thank-you gift.

“Seeing such generosity from our members and Upcountry Fiber’s first-time participants has been heartwarming,” says Shannon Sears, West Carolina’s director of commercial operations.

The food collected was distributed to nine area organizations. This year’s drive was particularly critical as communities continued to recover from Hurricane Helene’s damage, which strained local food pantries.

“The need has never been greater,” West Carolina CEO Jeff Wilson says. “This campaign highlights how we can make a real difference. Thanks to our customers’ generosity, families across

our service areas will have food on their tables this holiday season.”

“Give Big, Get Gig has become a cornerstone of West Carolina and Upcountry Fiber’s commitment to community support,” Sears says. “We’re already planning next year’s event.”



The 2024 Give Big, Get Gig food drive collected twice as much nonperishable food for area food banks than the 2023 drive thanks to the participation of more than 600 West Carolina customers.



West Carolina employees collected hundreds of canned goods during the Give Big, Get Gig food drive.



Irie Cottage

Jamaican paradise in the Palmetto State

Story by JAIME BIESIADA

Wesley Hershberger is a builder by trade, spending his days painting and working on cabinets. His wife, Sandra, enjoys decorating. The couple blended their talents for a new endeavor, sparked by their time volunteering on the Caribbean island they love visiting.

The Hershbergers have been volunteering for more than 20 years with a nonprofit dedicated to community-building in Jamaica. Now, the Abbeville residents are bringing a bit of their favorite island to their own backyard thanks to Irie Cottage, a Jamaican-themed rental with Caribbean flair available on Airbnb.

Asked why they decided to create Irie Cottage, Sandra simply says, “It was just our love for Jamaica.”

In 2002, the Hershbergers began volunteering with Jamaica Relief Ministries, dedicated to helping children. Wesley says they often build or remodel houses to enable parents to keep their children with them, instead of having to send them to orphanages or into state care. The nonprofit is largely funded by two thrift stores, including one in Abbeville that Wesley helped open in 2020.

The Hershbergers have visited Jamaica two or three times a year as volunteers. They estimate they’ve been to the island between 50 and 60 times.

“Our time would be, usually, in some type of manual labor,” Wesley says. Sandra paints and helps care for local children, while Wesley rebuilds structures.

They were also members of the board, helping set the nonprofit’s strategic goals.

INSPIRED BY CARIBBEAN RESORTS

The inspiration behind Irie Cottage was Country Country, a resort in Negril where guests stay in beach cottages painted in varying color schemes. Sandra was particularly drawn to the decor. The cottage’s name derives from the popular Jamaican greeting “irie,” used to share a sense that “all is well.”

Irie Cottage is a structure originally meant to house animals on the Hershbergers’ property. Over the years, it’s been used for storage and as a garage. In 2020, Wesley and Sandra began converting it into a cottage.

A COLORFUL HOMAGE

Inside and out, Irie Cottage is painted in cheerful colors, from greens to blues to yellows. Bright red and yellow accents on its exterior make the cottage pop in its natural surroundings. Its tile work also hearkens back to its Caribbean theme, Wesley says.

The inside of the cottage is decorated with art depicting Jamaica and its people and other items the Hershbergers collected on their visits to the island.

Wesley and Sandra also offer their guests fresh eggs and butter from their own farm, with cows nearby in the pasture. The only thing that’s missing, Sandra jokes, is the ocean.

To donate to Jamaica Relief Ministries or find out more about its thrift stores, visit jamaicarm.org. 📩



ABOVE: The Hershbergers include a few eggs from their farm as part of their welcome basket for guests.

TOP: Sandra searched antique stores and websites for the colorful furniture and decorations she and Wesley saw in Jamaica.

Photos by Matt Ledger

A SMOLDERING SITUATION

Volunteer fire departments face dwindling numbers, aging workforce



Illustration by Adobe Stock

Story by MELANIE JONES and JEN CALHOUN

When a crisis strikes in a rural community, the first people on the scene are usually friends and neighbors who sacrifice their time and safety because they want to help, not to 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 volunteers has been shrinking. In 2020, the number of volunteer firefighters reached a record low. On top of that, more than half of those volunteers in smaller departments are aged 40 or older, and 34% are 50 and older.

That doesn't mean older firefighters can't get the job done, 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," he said. "He'd grown up in that area his 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."

A HEALTHY MIX

Steve doesn't believe older firefighters are a bad thing. He sees the importance of having all ages.

"We can't let the fire department get all old," he says. "Nothing wrong with a good mix. That's pretty important. But we still have to have young people to get out there and do the work. Is there a safety factor in having everybody that's older? Probably, because

the older we get, the more likely we are to have heart attacks and other health issues."

Depending on the state, county or even the fire district, firefighters may not have to meet physical requirements. "A lot of places, they're hard up enough for people that if you've got a pulse, you're probably qualified," Steve says.

Not all volunteer fire departments are having trouble recruiting younger volunteers, however. The Vincent Volunteer Fire Department in Owsley County, Kentucky, maintains a squad of 17 or 18 members between the ages of 25 and 55. That's not too bad for a small, unincorporated community in a county of about 4,000 people.

"It's hard to find younger people, because a lot of times, the tradition just doesn't carry," says Capt. Billy Long, who heads the department. "There's just not a lot of involvement with it. But here lately, we've had a lot more involvement with the community. It's been good this past five, six, seven months."

BENEFITS AND SACRIFICES

Billy, who is 41, understands the benefits and the difficulties of becoming a volunteer firefighter. On the one hand, the job is rewarding, especially in a small town like Vincent. "You get to know everybody," he says. "Also, the involvement—it can open up other doors. I've been a volunteer firefighter since 2002, and I've also been an EMT for 12-13 years now."

But it's also a tough, time-consuming job. "I guess a lot of it is the time, the effort, the training," Billy says. "You've got to attend training every year. It's a lot of effort to do something without pay."

Steve says his best recruitment tool is his existing firefighters. He also says his department is probably the only one in a

“A lot of places, they're hard up enough for people that if you've got a pulse, you're probably qualified.”

—Steve Hirsch, chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council

Photo courtesy of Steve Hirsch



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

Photo by Adobe Stock/Teerapong23

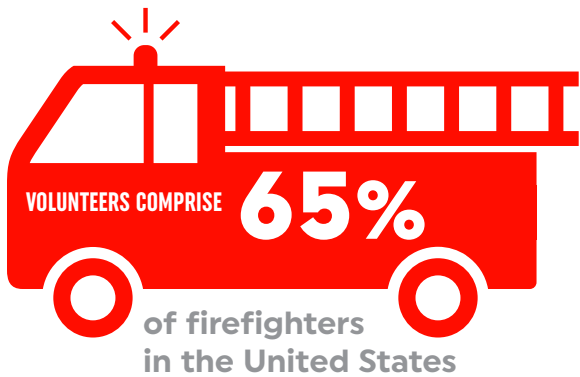


multicounty region that has an aerial ladder. Park that on the street, and people start coming in. Being active on social media is a good way to recruit younger people, he says. But having a good attitude is a big part of it.

He hears a lot of negative comments about the younger generation, how they're always on their phones. “What I find is, most of the time, they're checking to make sure that I know what I'm talking about, and that's OK,” Steve says.

It's important to keep recruiting, he says, because we can't let the fire departments die.

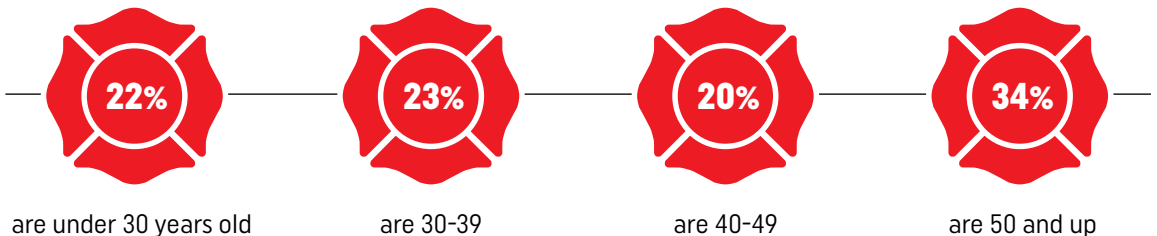
“What is a community going to do when they don't have a fire department?” he says. “That's probably the newest, biggest building in that town of 80-some people. People use that fire station for all sorts of events in the community. A lot of our small towns have lost their school, they've lost their grocery 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.” 📱



The number of volunteer firefighters reached a record low of **676,900** in 2020

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

‘The Ultimate Test of Our Network’

West Carolina services weather the storm

Story by PATRICK SMITH

A few short months after Hurricane Helene, the magnitude of the damage is clear and historic.

“We’ve certainly seen our share of storms, but nothing compares to the extent of what we saw with Hurricane Helene,” says Jeff Robinson, West Carolina director of engineering. “It’s unlike anything I’ve seen in my career.”

Helene also showed the importance of a well-designed internet network with reliable backup systems and an adaptable structure capable of navigating around damage to keep the service up and running.

The hurricane, however, provided an unwelcome and powerful test. For the cooperative, Helene affected every area of its network across South Carolina. Damage also extended into the southern portion of its service area in Columbia County, Georgia.

With widespread power outages, the hurricane left about 33,000 customers unable to use West Carolina’s internet service. However, the resilient network remained active and waiting for

the restoration of power to homes and businesses.

“We use redundant routes to ensure our services are always available,” Robinson says. “I didn’t have power at my house for six days, but because I have a generator at home, I never lost TV, phone or internet service for the duration of the recovery efforts.”

Even though the hurricane affected each of West Carolina’s remote offices, the internet network was active throughout the service area. “With backup power, the network we built is so resilient that everything kept running,” West Carolina CEO Jeff Wilson says.

FULLFILLING A COMMUNITY NEED

Preparation was key to facing Helene. As up-to-the-minute hurricane reports filled headlines in the days leading up to the storm’s landfall, the West Carolina team prepared.

“We saw the forecast and thought it could be bad, but it was much worse than anyone expected,” Robinson says. “It

was the ultimate test of our network, our company and our employees. So many of our employees were dealing with the same issues, like being without power at their own homes. I’m so proud of them and their willingness to stick with it until service was restored to every customer.”

During the roughly four weeks of recovery, every effort was made to keep people connected. “We activated Wi-Fi hot spots everywhere we could for the community,” Wilson says. “We did everything to help restore services as quickly as possible. Some employees worked almost 30 days straight.”

After what was likely a once-in-a-lifetime storm, the recovery highlighted the cooperative’s mission to help the community grow.

“We’re here to serve our neighbors and make a difference,” Wilson says. “We work to get, and keep, people connected. That’s our commitment to customers, and I’m grateful the resiliency of our network helped us keep our promise.”



Jeff Robinson is West Carolina’s director of engineering.



Construction technicians Mason Johnson, left, and Andrew Price work to repair West Carolina’s network after Hurricane Helene.



CEO Jeff Wilson shares details on the West Carolina rebranding with employees and the community in 2024.

Leaving a Legacy of Community Service

CEO Jeff Wilson retires in February

Story by PATRICK SMITH

During a career spanning more than 48 years, West Carolina CEO Jeff Wilson served his community. While community service is likely something he'll always continue, Jeff will soon start to do it in a new way. After 12 years at West Carolina, he'll retire on Feb. 28.

"Some people joke that I'll never retire," he says. "It'll be different, but I'll be fine. I'll just channel my energy in a different direction."

When he started at West Carolina in 2013, Jeff stepped into the CEO role with big shoes to fill, taking on a job held by only two other people since the cooperative was founded in 1952.

"I showed up to a well-run company with a team of great people," Jeff says. "I'm grateful we've been able to move the company forward in so many positive ways."

CAREER GROWTH

Jeff's never been afraid of hard work. In high school, he worked in a slaughterhouse from 4-7 a.m. before heading to class. Shortly thereafter, he started as a part-time clerk at the Continental Telephone Company of the West in Idaho.

"I wanted to be an outside technician, so I'd spend Saturdays riding with them on my own time to learn their job," he says.

From there, his hardworking mindset led Jeff to success in nearly 20 professional opportunities in Wyoming, Washington,


Idaho, and most recently before West Carolina, as the CEO of Dickey Rural Telephone Cooperative in North Dakota.

Among the many changes he's seen during his career, it's hard to top the advances in technology from 1977 to now. "When I started, it was all rotary phones and 10-party lines," Jeff says. "Now it's all high-speed broadband with fiber."

LEAVING A LEGACY

There's plenty in the future for Jeff, including more time for golf, friends, reading and being a better dinner companion for his wife, Sandy. "It'll be nice to have a conversation where I can be fully engaged," he jokes. "I won't have to worry about our next marketing plan or new product all the time."

Worry or not, Jeff's leadership helped usher in unprecedented growth at West Carolina. "In 2013, we had about 8,200 internet customers," he says. "By September 2021, we hit 20,000, and we're well over 52,000 customers now."

While he's incredibly proud of the growth, Jeff's also quick to credit the West Carolina team. "I work with wonderful people every day," he says. "They're the ones who made this growth happen. I'll miss the feeling of going into an area that's never had service, or has poor service, and changing lives for customers. What we do is all about service to the community." 

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.



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

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. Sauté

10-12 minutes, stirring occasionally, until softened and golden. Add minced garlic, and sauté 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.



GROWN-UP GRILLED CHEESE

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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