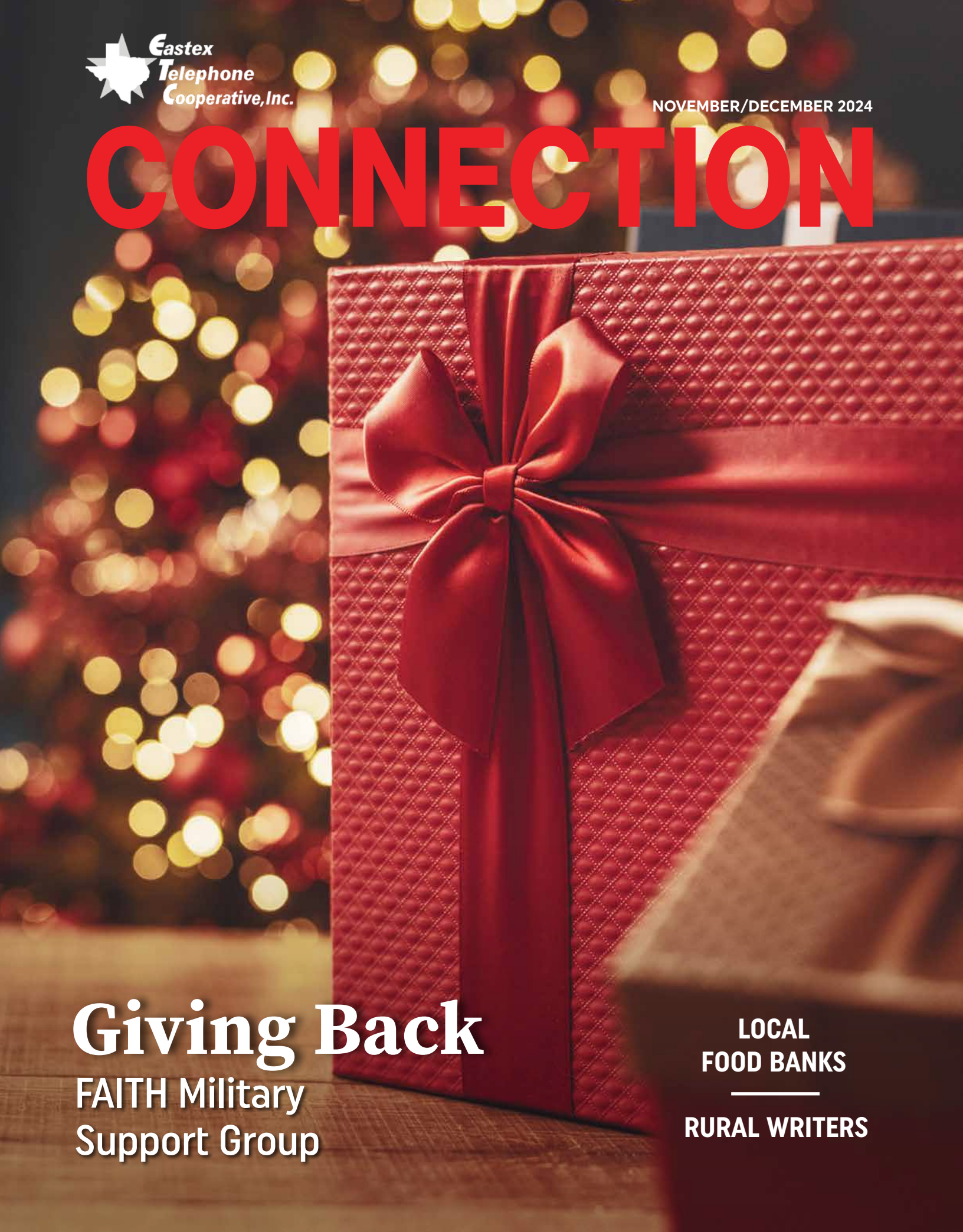
Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024

CONNECTION



Giving Back

FAITH Military Support Group

LOCAL FOOD BANKS

RURAL WRITERS

NTCA THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION

RURAL CONNECTIONS

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.

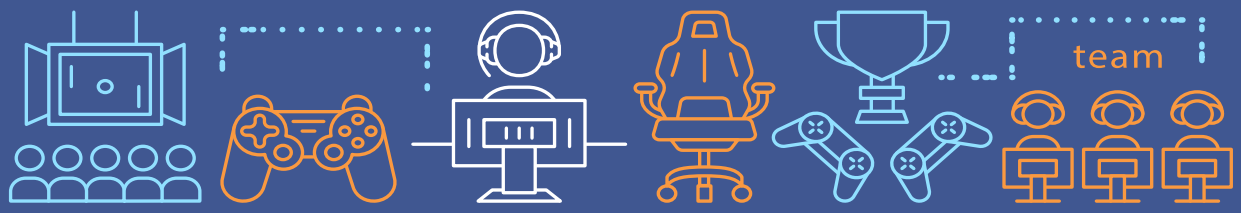
For example, a growing high school sport unlocks all the traditional benefits of competition, such as team building, while enhancing skills applicable to modern careers. Known as esports, competitive gaming can make a difference in the lives of students.

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.

Honoring Those Who Served

Veterans Day is a holiday for all

I always look forward to the holidays, celebrating the bustle, hustle and joy that come with Thanksgiving and Christmas. For many of us, these are happy weeks, and I'm appreciative of every one of them. But there's also another holiday this season deserving of reflection, gratitude and remembrance.

RUSTY DORMAN
General Manager

Every Nov. 11, Veterans Day honors the men and women who served in the armed forces. It's a day that carries a great deal of weight in rural communities like ours, where many families know intimately about all that our veterans face.

Perhaps there are stories handed down from generation to generation about someone who served decades ago. Or maybe a family member recently served or is currently active in the military. Communities like ours always step up when there's a need.

I see daily examples of how our communications services connect us. Even though they've changed over the years, beginning with telephone service and continuing with our fast and reliable broadband network, the thread is still the same—we help you make connections.

Veterans Day gives another opportunity to make a connection that may have a deeper meaning. Consider taking a few minutes to reach out, listen and learn about those who served.

One of the best ways to honor our veterans is by ensuring their stories are never lost. In today's digital-infused world, we have more communications tools than ever. Many online resources allow you to learn more about the experiences of our veterans and contribute to preserving their stories.

For example, the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project is a great resource. The project collects and preserves personal accounts of American war veterans so future generations can hear them. If you have a veteran in your life, consider recording their story and sending it to the project. It's a powerful way to ensure their legacy endures. Visit loc.gov and search for the Veterans History Project for all the details.

Another valuable resource is the National Archives, archives.gov, which has a wealth of information about military records and veterans' service histories. You can request records, which is particularly useful for those doing genealogy work. Similarly, The Virtual Wall, available at virtualwall.org, collects and displays the names and details of service members who died in Vietnam.

For those looking to take on a more direct role in supporting veterans, organizations like the Wounded Warrior Project and many others work to help members of our armed services.

Thank you for joining me in celebrating these valiant men and women. Have a wonderful holiday season and a merry Christmas.

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Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

A member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people in the Henderson, Livingston and Waskom areas.

Eastex is proud to offer broadband through Eastex Net, and security and automation services through ECS Solutions.

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On the Cover:

Eastex Connection focuses on giving this season by highlighting organizations that work to better our community all year long.

Adobe Stock image by stokkete

VETERANS DAY IS NOV. 11

HONORING ALL WHO SERVED

The Veterans Crisis Line provides 24/7, free, confidential crisis support for veterans and their loved ones. Dial 988 then press 1 or text 838255. You don't have to be enrolled in Veterans Administration benefits or health care to call. Visit veteranscrisisline.net for more information.

GAME ON!

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	5				7			
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ANSWERS

9	1	3	2	7	4	6	8	5
2	5	8	6	1	9	4	7	3
6	7	4	5	8	3	9	1	2
3	9	6	8	4	5	1	2	7
4	2	5	1	9	7	3	6	8
7	8	1	3	6	2	5	9	4
1	6	2	4	5	8	7	3	9
8	4	9	7	3	6	2	5	1
5	3	7	9	2	1	8	4	6

Happy Thanksgiving and Merry Christmas!

Eastex wishes you and your family a jolly holiday season and the happiest New Year! In observance of the following holidays, our offices will be closed:

Thanksgiving: Nov. 28-29
Christmas: Dec. 25-27
New Year's Day: Jan. 1

Adobe Stock illustration by Angelina Bambina

Big Bend National Park

Popularity heats up when days cool down

Story by KATHY DENES

As temperatures fall at Big Bend National Park in Southwest Texas, tourism numbers rise. An incredibly popular destination, the park welcomes more than 500,000 visitors annually, up 50% since 2016. Peak season is October through April, when it's cool enough to fully enjoy river and desert sites and the lows remain bearable even at higher elevations.

The park's 800,000 acres are crisscrossed by hundreds of miles of trails to explore on foot or by bike. Take a short hike up Grapevine Hills to see the iconic Balanced Rock formation. Or, park at the Hot Springs trailhead for the half-mile walk to a 105-degree soak in geothermal mineral-salt waters. Stop by one of Big Bend's five visitor centers, take in its numerous historic sites and keep a lookout for graves and ruins from centuries past.

HISTORIC TREASURE

Big Bend National Park was established on June 12, 1944, one week after the D-Day invasion half a world away. President Franklin D. Roosevelt turned his attention from the turmoil of war to the wilds of Texas, making sure future generations could enjoy the majesty of this rugged slice of America.

Named for its location by the Rio Grande's southernmost curve, Big Bend retains evidence of its past human inhabitants, ranging from Indigenous peoples of 10,000 years ago to 1930s ranchers and miners. At its heart, rising to nearly 8,000 feet above massive canyons and desert expanses, are the Chisos Mountains, the only U.S. mountain range completely contained within a park.

Big Bend likely contains thousands of archaeological treasures, but two that visitors can check out include the pictographs at Hot Springs and petroglyphs at the Chimneys volcanic rock formations.

A good resource to help plan excursions is the park's Panther Junction Visitor Center, which opens daily at 8:30 a.m. Exhibits there provide an overview of the park's geology and natural and cultural histories, and it has a theater for viewing a park orientation movie. At the center visitors can get backcountry and river use permits and pay entrance fees. It also houses a Big Bend Natural History Association bookstore, a post office, restrooms and a faucet for filling personal water containers.

HAPPY CAMPERS

November and December in Big Bend National Park bring cooler temperatures, perfect for outdoor activities during the day. At night this top-rated Dark Sky territory is an ideal spot for stargazing.

Campers can reserve a spot through recreation.gov at the remote Cottonwood Campground, a quiet, shaded oasis open only from November to April along the banks of the Rio Grande. For those who want to be near multiple trailheads and close to "The Window" to see stunning sunsets, the Chisos Basin Campground is a popular option year-round, also available by reservation only.

RV campers looking for desert seclusion opt for primitive roadside campgrounds like Croton Springs and Hannold Draw, which provide unobstructed views of the Chisos Mountains and starry skies. These no-amenities sites require a backcountry permit and a reservation, offered through recreation.gov. Croton Springs doesn't allow horses, but Hannold Draw does, and it even has a corral that can hold eight.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- The Big Bend National Park Entrance fee, good for seven days, is $30 per vehicle or $15 for an individual unless you have a park pass.
- Bring plenty of water. Even with cooler temperatures, the dry desert air can lead to dehydration. Also, keep a park map handy, since cellphone and GPS service is spotty.
- Reservations are required for camping, with a limit of 14 consecutive nights. For RV campers, full hookups are only available at Rio Grande RV Campground.
- Backcountry camping requires a backcountry permit, as do river trips.
- No campfires are allowed in the park. Charcoal can be used for cooking in provided campground grills.
- Pets are only allowed wherever vehicles can go, never on hiking trails, and they must be on a leash when outside.
- Primitive dirt roads through the backcountry can be accessed by street-legal vehicles with high clearance and four-wheel drive.
- Chisos Mountains Lodge is the only option for indoor lodging within the park. Open year-round, it offers rooms and cottages, plus a dining room, camper store and gift shop. For lodge info, call 855-765-1324 or 432-477-2291.
- The nearby town of Terlingua offers unique lodging options, ranging from historic to modern. Vacancies may be in short supply in this "ghost town" the first weekend of November, though, when Terlingua draws in thousands of "chili heads" for its annual chili cook-off.

LEFT: An elf owl finds refuge in a power pole at Big Bend National Park.

Photos courtesy of the National Park Service

ABOVE: The iconic Balanced Rock formation is reached via the Grapevine Hills Trail.

LEFT: Big Bend National Park is a top Dark Sky location, providing stunning views like this one of the Milky Way from Panther Junction.

Taking Care o

FAITH Military Support Group continues its mission

Story by JEN CALHOUN

In June 2006, about a dozen people with at least one thing in common gathered at a Livingston physical therapy office—all of them had children or grandchildren deploying for military duty.

"Together, we had about 16 kids who had all joined different branches of the armed services and were about to deploy," says Bea Ellis, one of the founders of the Families and Individuals Thanking Heroes, or FAITH Military Support Group. "And this was just in our little group in our little community."

Now, nearly 20 years later, FAITH has grown into a nonprofit organization that serves thousands of members of the armed forces every year by sending Christmas cards and overflowing care packages full of food, toiletries and more. "It just kept growing," says Dan Ellis, Bea's husband and another one of FAITH's co-founders. "We never thought we'd still be doing it this far down the road, but there's still a need."

EARLY DAYS

Dan and Bea, who own and operate Livingston Physical Therapy, helped start the group when one of their sons was preparing to deploy to Iraq with the Marines. Like so many other young people at the time, he was inspired to join after watching the events of Sept. 11 unfold on a TV in his classroom.

The Ellises knew they couldn't be the only ones in town watching someone they love deploy. And if there were others, wouldn't they also be nervous and worried? If they banded together, they could form a community they could turn to for encouragement. With that thought in mind, they joined with Suanne and the late Bill Wilson to found FAITH.

"It was originally intended as a support group for the adults who had loved ones in the military," Dan says. "The idea was that if something happened to one of our kids or one of the families needed something we had a support group ready to go."

The group quickly decided to start sending care packages to their children. Pooling resources, they gathered various items—candy and letters, mostly. They paid for the postage out of their own pockets.

"We said we'd do that every month," Bea says. "We'd do a little potluck and bring everybody up to date. By August and September, others had heard and asked us to send boxes to their kids. In December 2006, we packaged and shipped about 40 boxes."

GOD'S HAND

Dan and Bea no longer have children in the armed forces, but they continue the mission of FAITH. As more people found out about the group's efforts, the list of care package recipients grew. Now, they send 125 packages each month with everything from protein-rich foods

Photos courtesy of FAITH Military Support Group

FAITH Military Support Group, a grassroots community effort in Livingston, has sent more than 24,000 care packages and thousands more Christmas cards to U.S. military members across the world.

f the Troops

Volunteers for FAITH have been helping members of America's armed forces since 2006.

and ready-to-eat meals to toilet paper and various hygiene products.

One service member told them the boxes had been more than a comfort when his platoon was the last group left at a Forward Operating Base in Iraq that was closing. "They had gotten removed from the resupply list, and they were running out of food," Dan says. "They had plenty of water, but they told us they were getting by on the stuff we sent.

"It was one of those situations where God's hand was in it," he adds. "We'd sent him a little extra stuff, and this man fed his 13 guys out of those boxes."

SENDING LOVE

About 85% to 90% of the boxes go overseas. The rest of the packages go to service members serving domestically, including those in hospitals. "You'd be surprised how many service members in hospitals don't have basic things like toothbrushes," Bea says. "Their families aren't always with them, because military hospitals are in specific locations."

For Christmas, the group sends out about 350 care packages. Each person on the list gets at least three or four so they can share with their friends.

FAITH also organizes the shipment of about 10,000 Christmas cards every year. "Each person on the list gets at least 40-50 hand-signed cards in their boxes to distribute to other military personnel," Dan says. "We also send blank ones, so they can send their families and friends Christmas cards."

They ask churches and school children to sign them, and they take cards to events all over town for signatures and well-wishes. "It's a communitywide effort," Bea says.

Her favorite story, however, is from a local Navy Seal who returned to a base in Iraq after spending nearly a month on missions outside the base. "He said he was walking through the mess hall and saw all our boxes out and found a letter from us," Bea says. "He said he was so moved he got up on the table and said, 'This stuff right here is from my people—my people in East Texas!'"

How to Help

FAITH Military Support Group is a 501(c)(3) organization that buys, packs and ships hundreds of care packages and Christmas cards to members of the U.S. armed services each year. Care packages go out monthly, and the Christmas cards include blank ones for service members to send to their families and friends. For more information on the program, getting your military loved one on FAITH's list or finding ways to donate and volunteer, email livptvbe@livingston.net or call 936-327-4084. You can also visit the FAITHMilitarySupportGroup Facebook page.

FAITH members buy, sort, pack and post boxes each month.

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

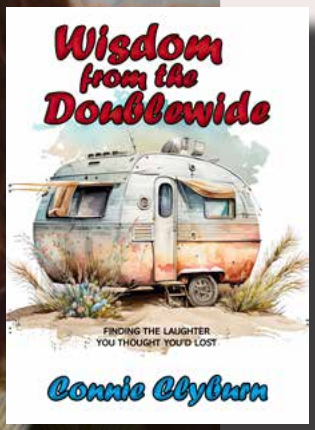
Photo courtesy of Connie Clyburn

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.



FAR LEFT: 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.

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."

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. For information on self-publishing print books, visit whatwereading.com.

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."

Helping Hands

Local food pantries do more than feed the hungry

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Every Friday during the school year, United Help of Waskom sends bags of food to the Waskom Independent School District. From there, teachers and school staff identify students who might need something to eat over the weekend.

The bags are small, containing anywhere from five to seven items. But their impact could be great to a child whose meals primarily come from a school cafeteria.

"In 2023, we were doing about 22 of these kid packs a week, or 90 a month," says Anita Nolan, United Help of Waskom's treasurer. "The next year, we averaged about 28 a week, or 114 a month."

The food bags are just one of the many ways United Help of Waskom and other food pantries are helping ease food insecurity in the region. Whether they're giving away boxes of food to families every month or providing Christmas and Thanksgiving meals, these groups have taken on a task that can feel overwhelming at times.

GROWING TOGETHER

Nolan has been volunteering at the food pantry for a few years now, and she's seen an increase in the organization's output. But she can't say for sure if the need has grown or if people are simply more aware now that the food pantry exists. "I was a little bit shocked that people in our community did not know we had a food pantry," Nolan says. "We've been working to reach out to the community and get our name out there."

As its name recognition grows, so does the pantry's expenses and workload. But Nolan and her fellow pantry staffers are happy to help. "On average, we provided assistance to about 85 families a month in 2023," Nolan says. "That grew by about 22% this year. Now, we're assisting 110 households a month. We've also helped 40 people with clothing items this year compared to around 15 last year."

United Help of Waskom was formed by merging a few local organizations,

Adobe Stock/ lesterman, SockaBPhoto, HASPhotos, Dragana Gordic

including the Women's Auxiliary of Waskom and Operation Help. The consolidation allowed churches and individuals to focus all their efforts and resources on a single group with a singular purpose—ending hunger in Waskom.

Today, the organization increasingly relies on technology for everything from social media marketing to collecting donations.

United Help of Waskom recently started collecting donations via Venmo and PayPal. "We know a lot of people don't carry cash or even use checkbooks anymore," Nolan says. "So, we're adding these types of services to create more avenues to donate."

MORE THAN FOOD

When a family or individual is hungry, they generally have other needs, too, says Deanna Dean, secretary at Henderson Food Pantry.

"We'll help people whose homes burn down, which happens more often than you'd think in the winter months," she says. "Sometimes, we'll have furniture and dishes and plates and household items, along with clothes and shoes. All these things are items donated by the community to our PALs Resale Shop."

During the Christmas season, the organization offers toys for children along with food boxes. Sometimes local businesses also donate turkeys or hams the group can add, as well. "We can also provide strollers and car seats for expectant mothers," Dean says. "And if families are out of formula or diapers, we can give them those, too."

In addition to its regular food boxes and clothing giveaways, United Help of Waskom gives out Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter food boxes. It also offers additional help in emergency situations.

"They might not have food to make it until payday, or they might be new here and they're not signed up, or maybe their circumstances changed quickly for the worse," Nolan says. "We'll meet them in the middle of the week and get them a food box.

"Harrison County, in general, has a pretty high poverty rate," she adds. "The cost of groceries, the cost of living has gone up considerably, so I know our community is hurting."

Feeding the Need

The region's food pantries work hard to help the people who need it most, whether it's families whose circumstances have changed or elderly people who might have to choose between medication or a meal.

In addition to food, many of the food banks offer everything from clothing, shoes and coats to household supplies. During times of disaster, they can also help.

If you or your family are in need this year—or if you want to donate or volunteer—listed below are a few nonprofit help centers across the region.

Center of Hope Polk County Mission Center
600 S. Washington Ave.
P.O. Box 1973
Livingston, TX 77351
Website: centerofhopepolk.org
Phone: 936-327-7634
Email: centerofhopepolk@gmail.com
Facebook: Center of Hope Polk County

Henderson Food Pantry of Rusk County/PALs Resale Shop
1780 Jacksonville Drive
P.O. Box 104
Henderson, TX 75654
Phone: 903-657-8495
Email: hendersonfoodpantry@gmail.com
Facebook: Henderson Food Pantry of Rusk County/PALs Resale Shop

United Help of Waskom
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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.

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Photography by ***Mark Gilliland***
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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.

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.

FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

- 1 12- to 14-ounce loaf French or sourdough 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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