



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO -NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Building the broadband workforce

Partnerships prepare for future growth

s we greet the new year, it's natural to look ahead to the next 12 months, which will again show our members supporting rural America by providing critical broadband internet service. It has been gratifying to see providers like yours working so furiously to build out broadband to communities still waiting for robust service while also serving existing customers. Yet, the work is never truly done.

Whether it is installations, upgrades or maintenance, there is certainly more than enough work to go around. That is why it is fitting that NTCA is stepping up to help broadband workers. Because retention and recruitment in rural markets is more challenging than urban areas, we are especially proud to work with some new partners to support the broadband providers we represent in creating a 21st century workforce.

We recently joined the White House's Talent Pipeline Challenge, a call to action for employers, education and training providers, and others to support equitable workforce development in critical infrastructure sectors like broadband. And we have partnered with Northwood Technical College, the National Rural Education Association and the Communications Workers of America to expand training and job opportunities for rural America's broadband workforce.

These efforts seek to prepare for immediate growth in the broadband industry because of significant funding for network deployment in the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act, as well as future demand for high-tech jobs.

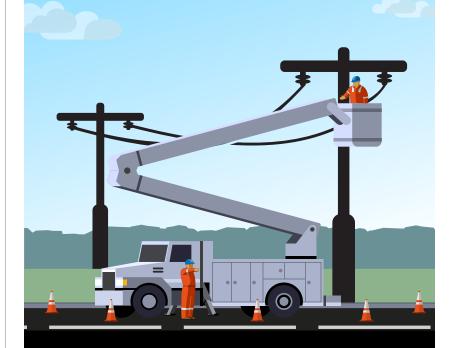
It's an exciting time to work in broadband, and you are fortunate to live somewhere served by a committed community-based provider. As connections grow, so will the number and skills of broadband workers. Stay tuned for more information soon from your provider about these initiatives.

Happy New Year. 🗅

- **→ MOVE OVER**
- **⇒ SLOW DOWN**
- **→ SAVE LIVES**

Every day, crews working on Texas roadsides bring you critical services. Please do your part to keep them safe.

Follow the state's MOVE OVER or SLOW DOWN law - drivers must yield to police, fire and emergency vehicles, as well as roadside workers like the crews providing your communications services.



- Move over a lane or slow to 20 mph below the posted speed limit when approaching vehicles using visual signals or flashing lights.
- On roadways with posted speed limits of 25 mph or less, drivers must reduce their speed to 5 mph.

WE'RE SAFER TOGETHER.



f you lost access to everything on your personal or work computer, how much would you pay to get it back? It's a question more people are asking themselves as ransomware attacks have continued to grow in number and severity.

About 21% of all cyberattacks in 2021 were ransomware attacks, according to IBM Security, costing individuals and businesses an estimated \$20 billion. From 2013 to 2020, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center saw a 243% increase in ransomware reports. That growth comes thanks to services that offer ransomware-for-hire and the increased popularity of cryptocurrency, which make untraceable payments to these services easier than ever.

The FBI does not recommend victims of these attacks pay the ransom. Victims rarely see their data returned, and payment only encourages future attacks. Instead, the best protection against ransomware is to understand how it works, where it comes from and how to protect your data from the start.

WHAT IS RANSOMWARE?

Ransomware is a type of malware, or malicious software, which locks the victim out of data on their computer until they pay for access to be restored. Most ransomware attacks target individuals, although attacks on large organizations with even bigger payouts have grown in popularity.

In the past, these situations largely involved attackers demanding a ransom to unlock the data. Today, most are "double extortion" assaults in which attackers demand payment for returning the data and to prevent it from being stolen again.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Ransomware can infect your computer in many of the same ways as any other virus:

- Phishing emails These emails trick users into downloading a malicious attachment disguised as a harmless file or visiting a website that can download the ransomware through their browsers.
- Software vulnerabilities Hackers can find holes in a piece of software's cybersecurity protection or buy information on these flaws to download the malware onto a device or network.
- Stolen logins Whether they're obtained through phishing, purchased on the dark web or hacked by brute force,

- stolen credentials give cybercriminals direct access to download malware onto a device.
- Repurposed malware Some ransomware is actually malware developed for other attacks like stealing bank information, and it's reworked to encrypt and lock personal data.

HOW CAN I AVOID IT?

Since paying attackers is not a reliable way to deal with ransomware, the best defense is to protect yourself and your devices before an attack can begin:

- Keep backups of any important data to eliminate most of the leverage an attacker might have.
- · Update your computer's software and operating system regularly to protect against the latest threats.
- Update your computer's cybersecurity tools to help response teams detect and react to new ransomware attacks faster.
- · Always be aware of phishing, social engineering and other strategies that can lead to a ransomware attack.

TO LEARN MORE, visit www.stopthinkconnect.org.

Are you ready for the future?

Embrace 2023 and beyond

appy New Year! This is always an exciting time, because in so many ways the months ahead seem like a fresh canvas waiting to be filled with plans, hopes, dreams, accomplishments and more. But if you're like many of us, a little bit of 2022 may linger.



KELLY ALLISON General Manager

Maybe it's that credit card bill showing holiday purchases, some unfinished to-dos or paperwork needed for the march toward filing taxes, but last year's odds and ends tend to stick around. Really, how things went in the previous 12 months can influence how you approach 2023 because we rarely start completely fresh.

For example, as a business, our past performance informs us about our budget, the status of our infrastructure and the wellbeing of our staff. That's just a start, too. I imagine it's the same for most of you.

But, what if you relied on future-proof tools and strategies as a foundation you know will work not only today but for the next year? Even better, what if that system adapted as the rest of your

life changes — a bigger family, a more demanding job or whatever else comes your way? You're ready.

Well, for us at CVCTX that bedrock system does exist. We've invested in core technologies that are as future-proof as possible. Naturally, I'm talking about our fiber optic broadband network, which is a true wonder woven throughout our community. Consider this: A single strand of optical glass fiber is three times stronger than steel and more durable than copper. It's still flexible, though.

As you know, there are immediate benefits for every home and business connected to this lightning-fast internet network. From telehealth and work-from-home opportunities to digital music and streaming videos, fiber provides a conduit to the tools and resources you use.

Those are the realities of today. Now, what about tomorrow? This is where an already exciting technology becomes even more magical. Fiber optic technology is built to stand the test of time.

Our network already provides performance rivaling that found in metropolitan areas. That's today.

Changes happen fast. From connected TVs, appliances, home security systems and more, internet usage is only increasing. Fortunately, fiber has the capacity to grow along with the demand. Upgrades, maintenance and more will certainly be required, but that core technology is ready for the future.

Those fiber optic cables are tiny but powerful and a substantial step forward in broadband speeds. We've made a significant investment in the fiber serving you, and we continue to make additional expansions in placing more fiber in our service areas. We know it's also capable of growing to meet our needs. Faster speed. More overall capacity. We're ready for the online tools, services and new devices only now being dreamed up.

So, as CVCTX heads into 2023 and we wrap up the final few details from last year, we know the foundation is solid. We can confidently go forward with excitement and anticipation. Our investments of the past will pay dividends.

Best of all, we are taking this journey with you. I hope you're as excited about what comes next as we are.



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

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

For more information on Colorado Valley's service area, visit cvctx.com/maps. The area served by the Cooperative can be seen in the link for Colorado Valley Exchanges. Fiber availability outside the Cooperative service area can be seen under the Colorado Valley Communications header.

Produced for CVCTX by:



On the Cover:



The experts at Plum Piano restore well-worn or damaged pianos that have suffered the ravages of time.

Photography submitted

See Story on Page 12



OPPORTUNITY!

Colorado Valley Telephone Cooperative will award \$5,000 scholarships to graduating seniors from local high schools.

To be eligible to receive a scholarship, applicants must be graduating high school seniors and live in a household that receives telephone service from the cooperative. For all the details, and to get an application, go to cvctx.com/scholarships. Applications must be received by APRIL 1.

Colorado Valley is proud to be an active member of the communities it serves and welcomes this opportunity to invest in the future of those communities by supporting higher education.

IARTIN LUTHER KING JR. **CLOSURE**

The offices of Colorado Valley Communications will be closed on MONDAY, JAN. 16, in observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

BROADBAND GLOSSARY

Technology terms you should know

Choosing an internet service that meets your family's needs starts with understanding your options. If all the broadband lingo is making it hard to do that, we're here for you! Check out this glossary of good-to-know terms, so you can select and use your internet service with confidence.

BYTES VS. BITS — Bytes are used to measure file size — for example a 10-megabyte file. Bits are used to measure the speed of your connection — for example 100 megabits per second or Mbps.

THE CLOUD — Refers to the way some data, software and services are located on internet servers rather than individual devices. When something is in "the cloud" rather than on your computer, you can access it from any device with a mobile connection. Examples include your email account, Google Docs and online photo storage services.

FIBER — The fastest, most reliable network infrastructure available. Built with cables made of thin strands of glass rather than copper, fiber optic networks

can provide speeds of 1 Gbps and beyond.

GBPS — Gigabits per second, a standard of measurement for very fast internet that can download or upload billions of bits of data per second. Most internet connections are measured in Mbps, or megabits per second, but fiber connections can be significantly faster and measured in Gbps instead.

'THE GIG' - Often used to describe internet services that can provide at least 1 Gbps of speed. This is an extremely high-speed connection for both homes and businesses.

MBPS - Megabits per second, a standard of measurement that describes how many bits of data your internet connection can upload or download per second. The higher the number, the faster the connection.

ROUTER — A unit that wirelessly links the devices in your home to your internet connection and to one another. A router is often paired with a modem, another device that brings the internet from our network into your home.

UPLOAD AND DOWNLOAD SPEEDS -

Measured in Mbps or Gbps, this tells you how fast you can upload data, like when you're posting a photo or video to social media. And it also lets you know how quickly you can download data, for example when you're loading a website or streaming music.



Find us on FACEBOOK and INSTAGRAM.

Brighten the Winter Plan now to cruise this year

Story by ANNE BRALY +

hen the days are cold and sundown seems to arrive in midafternoon, there's no better time to turn daydreams of warm breezes and blue water into reality. You might even save a little money while you're at it.

A cruise is a temptation thousands of people can't resist, and planning now can make a difference. "All of the major cruise lines have returned their fleets to full deployment," says Wes Rowland, president of cruiseexperts.com.

As a result, more cruise lovers are going to be on the water, and finding a deal for the best rooms and views is getting harder. There's so much to decide — dates, itineraries, cruise lines, room types and more.

One of the first considerations is the port of origin. Fortunately, there are options for Texans with ports in Galveston or New Orleans. Galveston is centrally located, making it a good option. East Texans might opt for the Port of New Orleans and

arrive a day or two early to laissez les bon temps rouler before embarking.

"Cruising is back," Wes says, advising that it's best to get a trusted travel professional who can help you with the many waterways you must navigate before purchasing your passage. "A travel agent can help you spend your money where it's important and save it when you can," he says.

The best cruise deals are not only about getting the lowest price. Cruise lines are now offering some attractive deals, many including add-ons that once cost extra. Check out some of the top cruise sites on the internet, and you'll find that some are now rolling more perks into up-front pricing, including beverage packages, tips, free specialty dining and Wi-Fi. "The end result?" Wes asks. "It's a better value for the guest. Cruise lines took advantage of the unplanned downtime during the pandemic to retire the oldest

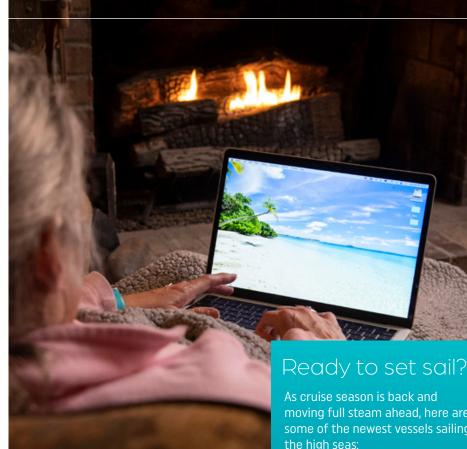
ships from their fleets, so with new ships coming online, consumers have better choices of fabulous, amenity-packed ships than ever before."

For example, Norwegian's 2023 cruise schedule includes a six-night Caribbean cruise on the Norwegian Prima, leaving from Galveston on March 8, in a suite with a balcony for \$1,485 per person, double occupancy. That includes its Free at Sea package: free unlimited open bar, free specialty dining, free onshore excursions and free Wi-Fi. Carnival also offers deals with reduced deposits and more, including a four-night Caribbean cruise for two on Carnival Valor out of New Orleans for \$1,234.

CONSIDER 'SHOULDER SEASON'

Supply and demand determine rates, so if your travel dates are flexible take advantage of what budget cruisers consider the Holy Grail of deals — "shoulder





With cruises booking up for spring, planning now will help you find the adventure and pricing you want. So brighten the winter gloom with dreams of the sea.

season." This window between the peak and off-seasons, from late September through mid-November, offers the best deals and smaller crowds. "Sometimes it's just the perception of when it's better or worse to travel. You need to know what your priorities are," Wes says.

TIPS FOR BUYING A CRUISE

If you choose to go it alone, do your homework. There's no guarantee you'll find the lowest rate, but these tips from cruiseexpert.com will help you be smarter about buying your vacation:

- Final deposits are due three months before the cruise. Usually, that's the last date a cruise can be canceled without a penalty. This is when you can snag a good deal as cruise lines slash rates to try to fill empty cabins.
- Book for fall or spring when most families with school-age children cannot travel. There's typically more

- availability and lower pricing during these times.
- If you're willing to risk it, book a Caribbean cruise during hurricane season when prices are much lower. Just be sure to invest in travel insurance. and make sure your prepaid deposits and other expenses are covered.
- Aggregate sites independent websites offering trips on multiple cruise lines — allow you to check out many options at once. Some of these include cruisecritic.com, gotosea.com, cruises.com and cheapcruises.com.
- If you're new to cruising and want to see if it's the right fit for you, try taking a short, two- to three-night cruise first. Royal Caribbean's recently refurbished Freedom of the Seas is one option. It makes short cruises between Miami and the Bahamas. 📬

- moving full steam ahead, here are some of the newest vessels sailing the high seas:
- ► Royal Caribbean's Odyssey of the Seas embarked on its first cruise in 2021 and is the first Quantum Ultra-Class Ship in North America offering bumper cars, glow-inthe-dark laser tag and virtual reality games. Passengers can kick back and relax beside the newly designed, resort-style pool. This ship is a game-changer for the cruise industry.
- ▶ Princess Cruises' Enchanted Princess launched in 2019 and offers a touch more sophistication than ships geared toward the teenage set. Dining options are excellent on all the cruise line's Medallion Class vessels, the category to which the **Enchanted Princess belongs.**
- ▶ MSC Cruises' Virtuoso set sail in 2019. There's a humanoid robot bartender in the Starship Club. The ship has the longest LED dome at sea, and it towers over a promenade of retail shops and restaurants. There are five pools that range from a waterpark for the kids to a quieter place to relax for adults.

A LEGACY

Turtle Wing Foundation brings support to special needs students and families

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

hortly after her daughter Emma was born, Colorado Valley Purchasing Coordinator Darla Kubala noticed she was different from other children. Talking didn't come as easily to Emma as it did to other children, and her eyes didn't track activity the same way other babies' did.

Kubala and her husband took Emma to many specialists, but they never received clear-cut answers. "Her diagnosis didn't really come for years, and we still don't really feel like we have a true one. They labeled it 'unknown neurological disorder,'" she says. "At that time, my husband argued that we weren't looking for a label. We wanted to know how to help her."

As friends of DeeAnn Hooper and her family, the Kubalas knew about the Turtle Wing Foundation in Schulenberg. Hooper and her husband, Chris, started it in 2011 in memory of their son, Jack, who lived with autism until passing away from an unknown viral infection when he was 9. The Kubalas were early supporters of the foundation's mission to help families of children with learning challenges.

"We jumped in from the very start, never expecting that one of our own children would need those resources," says Kubala. "Initially, we felt like there were others who needed it more.

I think we were still in denial. But when Emma was 3, DeeAnn told us 'Turtle Wing is here for all children, not just those with autism. And we can help you.'"

LIFE'S WORK

From the moment her sons, Jack and Will, were diagnosed with high-functioning autism, Hooper's life became about understanding and finding help for the challenges her sons faced. That often meant driving to Austin or Houston to find the specialists and therapy they needed.

Jack, their firstborn, was outgoing and loved playing baseball. But at school he threw tantrums and regularly lined up toys or other objects. Will, younger by 18 months, was slow learning to talk, but thrived in special education classes.

"That was my life. I did work, but it was to pay the bills. I constantly thought, 'What's the next therapy, the next thing I can do?" Hooper says. "I knew my boys had the ability to succeed, but they needed some extra support."

After Jack's passing, Hooper wasn't ready for that work to end. Will continued to progress well and no longer needed much help beyond developing social skills. "After Jack passed away, God

put it on my heart to do something, but I didn't really know what it was," she says. "I was like, 'What am I going to do with all this knowledge and desire to be in that realm of special needs?' Because I knew I didn't want that to change."

For guidance, Hooper turned to Loueva Hatfield, who started Hatch, a special needs learning center in Weimar. With some help from the Austin branch of







the Autism Society of Texas, Hooper formed her own nonprofit, Turtle Wing, and set about putting together its first fundraiser in 2011. "It was a grassroots thing in my living room — just sitting around planning," Hooper says. "The first thing we did was the Jack Hooper Day at the Ballpark and Home Run Derby. And it kind of grew from there."

'YOU'RE NOT ALONE'

The Turtle Wing Foundation still hosts Jack Hooper Day at the Ballpark each year along with other fundraisers and events. The Turtle Wing Toast kicks off the year in January, the Turtle S'Wing and Shoot in the summer brings in a large portion of the foundation's funds, and the Monster Dash near Halloween celebrates Jack's excitement for the holiday.

But most importantly, the foundation strives to provide the kind of support network the Hoopers didn't have when they were first trying to help Jack and Will. "Most of the time, when a parent gets that diagnosis or finds out their child is maybe a little behind it can feel very lonely and isolating," says the foundation's Executive Director Destiny Psencik. "We want to make sure we're in their corner, and we have a whole network to let them know you're not alone. Even though we are rural, a lot of people don't realize the services we already have in our community."

In addition to matching families with care providers, the bulk of

the money Turtle Wing raises goes to families that need some financial help. Even if families don't go directly to the foundation, they can still receive scholarships for speech therapy, physical therapy, special tutoring and more through partner organizations.





"Some of our kids don't even have a formal diagnosis, like Emma, but they need assistance. The majority do have a diagnosis, but it could be anything from ADHD or anxiety to autism or Down syndrome," Psencik says. "If there is something hindering your child from learning like their peers, we want to be able to assist them."

In the past year alone, the foundation has provided scholarships to more than 240 individuals, giving them access to 1,500 hours of therapy, 500 tutoring sessions and more than 250 social skills sessions. Turtle Wing meant Emma was able to attend St. Rose of Lima Catholic School until fourth grade, where she had the help of a learning lab that provided extra work on things like social cues. Five years ago, she successfully transitioned into the public school system. She is in ninth grade now and enjoying the special education track, along with being a member of the Junior FFA and a Turtle Wing-sponsored 4-H Club.

"It still amazes me the number of lives that Jack's life is touching," says Kubala. "For the Hoopers to take their tragedy and create this legacy of hope is amazing to me. So many kids who weren't getting the services they needed are now because of Turtle Wing." 🗀

turtle wing FOUNDATION

turtlewingfoundation.org

- 1. Turtle Wing partners with area high school softball and baseball teams. Will Keilbach, right, got to throw out the first pitch with Evan Oeding, of Schulenburg High School Varsity Baseball, during the Schulenburg Baseball Autism Acceptance Game.
- 2. Turtle Wing founder DeeAnn Hooper started the foundation in memory of her son, Jack, who passed away from an infection when he was 9.
- 3. Emma Kubala enjoys a Grow Wings 4-H outing with horses.
- 4. Turtle Wing staff and board members at the 2022 Jack Hooper Day at the Ballpark, including, from left, Destiny Psencik, executive director; Phyllis Fritsch, outreach coordinator; Stacy Oeding, board member; Kari Tumis, board member; and DeeAnn Hooper, board president and founder.
- 5. Thanks to the Turtle Wing Foundation, Emma Kubala was able to attend a private elementary school, where she received the extra help she needed.

CVCTX



Story by DREW WOOLLEY

ew pets are always popular gifts around the holidays. But the new year is when the responsibility for all that feeding, walking and those never-ending bathroom breaks can really set in. Fortunately, technology is here to help you stay on top of all of your new best friend's needs, from training and wellness to games and socialization. Check out these apps to see how they can make pet care simpler, whether you're a new pet owner or an amateur zookeeper.



Puppr — Every new dog owner could use some help with training. With Puppr, you have access to training videos, over 100 lessons,

live chats with trainers, progress tracking and more. Celebrity dog trainer Sara Carson leads the programs, and your pup will be able to keep up with her "super collies" in no time.



Cat Training Tips — If you're looking to establish ground rules with a new feline friend, the more streamlined Cat Training

Tips app is a good reference for practical tips on common issues like litter box training and scratching.



Pet First Aid — Every pet owner worries about what to do in an emergency situation. The Pet First Aid app from the American Red

Cross has you covered. It offers step-bystep instructions for situations like your pet being attacked by another animal or eating something toxic. You can even learn how to give your pet CPR, check for warning signs and look up the closest veterinary hospital.



11pets — Keeping up with your pet's medical needs on top of your own can be a challenge, which is why it helps to have an app like

11pets to keep everything covered. Store your furry friend's medical history, medication and vet schedules, or track their weight and nutrition to make sure they're on the healthy path.



Cat Fishing 2 — Humans aren't the only ones who enjoy a good mobile game. Cat Fishing 2 from Friskies is designed specifically for

cats, and you can download it to your phone or tablet. Start it up, place your device on the floor and let your cat kill time swiping at colorful fish on the screen.



BarkHappy — If you're looking for dog-friendly people and places in your area, BarkHappy is the app for

you. Use the interactive map to find hotels, restaurants, bars and more where your dog will be welcome. You can also send out the call if your pup goes missing or find nearby dogs with whom to set up a play date.



Rover — Rover is the top pet sitting app with over 200,000 caretakers in the U.S. and Canada. Rover's team handles the vetting,

and over 95% of reviewed services on the app have earned a five-star rating. Despite the name, Rover offers services for all kinds of pets, not just dogs. The app is also great for pet lovers looking for new job opportunities.



Whistle — You probably know an adventurous dog who likes to explore every chance it gets. With the Whistle app and accompa-

nying GPS tracker, it's never been easier to

keep track of your pet. The app sends you notifications when your pet gets out so you can make sure it doesn't get too much of a head start. In addition to finding your wandering pet with pinpoint accuracy, the app tracks activity and wellness indicators like scratching, licking, eating and drinking. 🥽

SIT, STAY, BINGE

Your furry friends might fetch the remote for these programs



ith more TV shows streaming every day, there is more entertainment than anyone can keep up with. But did you know your pet might enjoy a good binge as much as you?

Programming for pets is on the rise but it's not a new idea. In 2012, the dog food brand Bakers began running a 60-second commercial targeted right at their canine consumers, complete with barking dogs to get their attention and high-pitched sounds human viewers couldn't hear.

If you're worried that your pets might get bored while you're away at work, or you just can't give them your full attention 24/7, consider some of this programming that can help stimulate, relax and even train your pet throughout the day.

DOGTV

When it comes to man's best friend, there's a dedicated streaming service to keep your dog happy and occupied. Available on major streaming devices like Roku, Chromecast and Apple TV, DOGTV offers a variety of programming.

Some programs offer playful sequences to prevent boredom and provide mental stimulation, while others offer calming scenes to keep pooches relaxed. Training programs help dogs get used to common

noises like doorbells and car sounds. There are even a few shows available for their humans.

SQUIRREL!

Think your furry friends might be getting bored while you're away from home? Many cats and dogs respond to videos of birds, squirrels and fish. Cats, in particular, are visual animals, making them more likely to be entertained and mentally enriched by watching the quick movements of prey across a screen.

Because dogs rely more on their sense of smell, breeds with better eyesight are more likely to show interest in the TV. They tend to respond to images of other dogs running or socializing and might try to interact as they would in real life by barking or sniffing. Fortunately, no matter what grabs your pets' attention, there are plenty of videos available on sites like YouTube designed to keep them occupied for hours while you're out.

FOR THE BIRDS

Birds can be extremely smart and emotionally sensitive animals, making it especially challenging to keep them occupied. Many birds have a natural interest in new sounds and colors, making the TV a

good way to keep them engaged throughout the day.

If you're trying to expand your feathered friend's vocabulary, some programming might even help to train them while you're out. Repetition is key for helping any bird pick up a new word or phrase, and there are numerous videos available that will repeat common phrases for hours on end. Hit play and run, keeping your bird mentally engaged while you're away.

FUN AND GAMES

If your cat likes to curl up next to you during a gaming session, consider adding "Stray" to your list. When BlueTwelve Studio released its cat-themed adventure game last year, it was an instant hit with cat owners. But it turns out the game was just as interesting to their feline friends.

Videos and photos of players' cats being entranced by the digital kitty on screen became so popular that PlayStation even put out the call for submissions for a charity event with the hashtag #StrayReactions. The best ones went into a digital photo book presented to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals along with a \$25,000 donation. That's a win for everyone. 🗅

TUNE Plum Piano breathes new life

Story by DREW WOOLLEY +

hen John Ginter moved to Houston for work in the '80s, he found himself with a lot of free time. Like many people, he decided to pick up an instrument: the piano. But unlike most others, it wasn't long before he was taking the instrument apart and putting it back together.

"If someone explains how one key works, it makes a lot of sense. The complication is that there's 88 of everything. So it looks more intimidating because there's a lot of it," John says. "My piano technician was like, 'Yeah, that's fine. If you get stuck just call me, and I'll tell you how to fix it.""

John couldn't have guessed that 20 years later, his hobby would lead to a new career path and ownership of his very own restoration shop, Plum Piano in La Grange. After taking advantage of a severance program at Shell — where he had spent two decades in project management and mechanical engineering — John reached out to the same piano technician about becoming one himself.

His contact directed him to Rice

University, where John was hired as an assistant piano technician. In the 10 years tedious and very expensive. B

University, where John was hired as an assistant piano technician. In the 10 years John spent at Rice, he worked routinely with Plum Piano and its original owner, Michael White. In 2010, when Michael was ready to sell the business, John took on the shop along with its two technicians, Marquis and Quinton Burkham.

"Part of why I bought the business was because they came with it," John says.
"They had a lot of expertise, even though they're half my age. So, between the three of us, we've got a lot of experience of tearing pianos apart and putting them back together. Our goal is that we want it to be as nice as it was when it was brand-new."

The division of labor breaks down neatly between the trio. Quinton handles finishing work, getting a piano's case back into like-new shape. Marquis is the bellyman, responsible for restringing the piano, replacing tuning pins and making sure the instrument's cast iron plate shines. John takes care of the action work — anything to do with the keys and hammers themselves — ensuring the piano plays and sounds top-notch.

The process can be time-consuming, tedious and very expensive. But clients come with their own specific expectations, depending on how the instrument will be used. "It's funny because professional musicians are more interested in, 'What does this thing sound like, and how does it play?" John says. "They don't care what it looks like, so they have some of the ugliest pianos you've ever seen."

While the majority of Plum Piano's work comes from churches and schools, which provide a steady flow of new restoration projects, John has noticed an uptick in business over recent years. He attributes that rise to more people staying home and rediscovering their instruments during the pandemic. Like John, they can't escape the piano's allure. "Pianos are fascinating on a lot of different levels. They're very intricate, mechanical devices that have a sculptural kind of beauty, even if they're not played," he says. "But if you listen to a skilled player, they can still make pianos do things that elicit real emotions from people."





The Colorado Valley Communications Business Team includes, front row from left: Megan Wells, Kenn Kasparek, Darlia Maxwell. Back row from left: Aaron Janda and Susie Polasek.



The Colorado Valley Communications Customer Relations team members are, front row, from left: Amber Sternadel Daniela Zavala and Kaitlyn Witt. Also, back row from left: Carol Osina, Robbie Hruska, Randy Freudenberg and Betty Vecera-Tucker.

SPOTLIGHT

Finding the right solution for everyone

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

ver the next several issues, we'll be taking a closer look at the teams within Colorado Valley Communications that help us bring customers the quality service they expect. This month, we're putting the spotlight on the hard work and dedication of those in the customer relations and business sales departments.

CUSTOMER RELATIONS

For many people, the customer relations department represents most of their interaction with Colorado Valley. That's why Customer Relations Supervisor Amber Sternadel believes it's so important for her team to be there for customers beyond the setup and installation of their service.

"We don't say, 'Here's your internet. Here's your phone. Good luck,'" she says. "We'll help them if they have questions about streaming, internet options, how to get their email set up on their phones or different routers. We really do want to help them use that service."

Achieving that goal requires those in the customer service department to know a little bit about everything. The process includes talking to customers to identify what services best fit their needs, along with walking them through scheduling, installation and paperwork. But it also means working closely with other departments, so they know all the resources a customer might need.

Customer Relations Assistant Carol Osina knows the quality of that service could make the difference between someone turning to Colorado Valley over a competitor. "We pride ourselves on excellent customer service to set us apart," she says. "We are the frontline and first point of contact in establishing an ongoing, longterm relationship with our customers."

Often, those interactions, where she can go above and beyond to help customers get the most out of their service, are Sternadel's favorite part of the job. "We get a lot of older customers who want to venture into streaming, but they aren't real sure about it," she says. "I love being able to help them make that leap so they understand the benefits of it, know how to do it and are comfortable with it. Seeing that lightbulb click on as they get excited about it is definitely my favorite part."

BUSINESS SALES

When local businesses could benefit from high-speed fiber service or an upgrade on their current service provider, the business sales team is on the job. Sales Representative Darlia Maxwell helped build the department six years ago when she went door to door selling fiber service to businesses in La Grange. "A lot of them know who we are already or have our residential service at home. I think what we offer is so different because we have a building they can walk into," she says.

That willingness to go the extra mile for both new and existing customers is one aspect that Kenn Kasparek loves about his job as Sales and Marketing Coordinator. And it's a desire he has seen shared across all of Colorado Valley Communications. "What makes our business successful is the fact that everyone does more than their assigned title," Kasparek says. "Everyone in our organization goes above and beyond their role to make Colorado Valley a special place."

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AIR FRYERS

can solve dinnertime dilemmas

The savior of simple dishes and leftover pizza

ir fryers have crisped their way into America's heart. Ranging from models with one knob and a basket to others with lots of bells and whistles, they've become as common in the American kitchen as toasters and coffeepots.

So how do you know which air fryer is the best fit for you?

You'll become a champion of the air fryer with the Ninja. Priced around \$150, it has a large basket and multiple settings that allow for dehydrating, reheating, baking and, oh yes, air frying. If you plan to do a good bit of cooking in your air fryer, this may be the model for you.

But if you're cooking for one, or just want to see if an air fryer is right for you, then a less-expensive option like Dash's air fryer — \$49.95 at online retailers — might be better. With just one setting and a compact size, it's perfect for one baked potato, a handful of French fries or a chicken thigh or two. It comes in multiple colors to add a little pizzazz to your kitchen counter.

It goes without saying that air frying is a healthier alternative to deep frying. Think of an air fryer as multiple appliances in one. It cooks quickly like a microwave, toasts like a toaster oven and fries like a deep fryer.

These kitchen wonders work magic on vegetables, proteins and baked goods because they're basically small convection ovens. They have a fan-and-exhaust system that blows hot air across your food for even cooking and browning. It works just as well whether you're making breaded onion rings from the freezer, roasting fresh broccoli or frying up some wings. Baking powder in the rub helps make air fryer wings crispy.



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AIR FRYER CHICKEN WINGS

- 12 chicken wings, whole
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
 - 1 cup Buffalo hot sauce

Cut the wings into pieces so you have 24 wings. Preheat the air fryer to 380 F. Spray the fryer basket after preheating. Place the wings in a large bowl and add olive oil, garlic powder, baking powder, salt, cayenne pepper and

black pepper. Toss wings until fully covered. Place the wings in a single layer — as many as will fit without overlapping — on the air fryer basket.

Air fry the wings at 380 F for 20 minutes, flipping them every 5 minutes. Increase the temperature to 400 F and cook an additional 2 minutes for extra crispy skin. Use a digital meat thermometer to ensure the internal temperature is 165 F.

Carefully remove the wings from the air fryer, cover with Buffalo sauce and serve with your favorite sides.



CRISPY AIR FRYER POTATOES

- 1 pound small Yukon Gold potatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1 teaspoon Cajun seasoning (optional) Kosher salt Freshly ground black pepper Lemon wedge, for serving Freshly chopped parsley, for garnish

In a large bowl, toss potatoes with oil, garlic powder, Italian seasoning and Cajun seasoning, if using. Season with salt and pepper.

Place potatoes in basket of air fryer and cook at 400 F for 10 minutes. Shake basket and stir potatoes, and then cook until potatoes are golden and tender, 8 to 10 minutes more. Squeeze lemon juice over cooked potatoes and garnish with parsley before serving.

AIR FRYER EGG ROLLS

- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 1/2 pound ground pork or ground chicken
 - cups coleslaw mix
- 1/2 cup matchstick-cut carrots
- 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
 - 2 garlic cloves, minced
 - 3 green onions, sliced
 - 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons rice or white vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/8 teaspoon Chinese 5-spice seasoning
- 12 egg roll wrappers Nonstick cooking spray
- tablespoon olive oil Sweet chili sauce, duck sauce or hot mustard sauce, for dipping

Heat sesame oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the pork and cook until crumbled and cooked through, about 4 minutes. Add the coleslaw mix. carrots, ginger and garlic. Cook 2-3 minutes or until the cabbage has wilted. Remove from the heat; stir in the green onions, soy sauce, vinegar, pepper, salt and 5-spice seasoning. Transfer to a plate and let cool slightly.

Place 1 egg roll wrapper flat on a work surface with the points of the wrapper facing up and down (like a diamond). Place about 1/3 cup of the pork/chicken mixture in the middle of the wrapper. Dip your fingers in water and dampen the edges of the wrapper. Fold the left and then right points of the wrapper in toward the center. Fold the bottom point over the center just like you would a burrito, rolling the wrapper toward the remaining point to form a tight cylinder. Press edges to seal. Place on a plate and cover with a dry towel. Repeat the process with remaining wrappers and pork/chicken mixture.

Preheat the air fryer to 375 F and spray the air fryer basket with cooking spray. Brush the tops of the egg rolls with olive oil. Working in batches, place the egg rolls in the basket and cook 7 minutes. Flip the egg rolls over and brush with more oil. Cook for an additional 2 minutes. Serve with your favorite dipping sauce. 🗀



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