



# UPCOUNTRY CONNECTED

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023

## Supporting schools

ACP helps  
students thrive

IMAGINATION  
LIBRARY

SEASONAL  
DESTINATIONS





By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association

## Committed to service and security

I always love hearing stories from the NTCA members who are bringing fast, reliable internet service to communities throughout rural America. It's exciting to see our providers pave the way for new jobs, better health care, fresh educational opportunities and so much more.

But their commitment to serving you goes beyond simply providing an excellent broadband network — they also want to help you navigate that online world safely.

Much of that work happens behind the scenes on their systems before you ever turn on a computer or search for something on your phone. But that's just the first line of defense in a world where your personal data — and, yes, even your money — are targets.

The experts at the National Cybersecurity Alliance, a nonprofit organization devoted to creating a more secure interconnected world, can help you figure out where to begin.

Multifactor authentication is a valuable way to add an extra layer of security to your online accounts but many people are unaware. Password manager software makes using complex and secure passwords easier, while keeping software updated and being aware of phishing attempts are also wise strategies. 📧

## Add a layer of protection to your online journeys

The nonprofit National Cybersecurity Alliance is focusing its efforts in four specific areas: multifactor authentication, password management, software updates and phishing awareness.

### HERE ARE A FEW OF OUR TIPS FOR YOUR SECURITY:



**Multifactor authentication:** For your online accounts, you likely have a password. But if there's an option for using multifactor authentication, go for it. Once activated on an account, you'll still need a password. But access will also require a one-time code delivered by text message or email.



**Password management:** Rather than trying to remember long, complex passwords, consider using software designed to not only store passwords but also make them easily accessible. There are several options, and most work in a similar fashion. You only need to remember one master password to unlock the rest.



**Software updates:** Both hardware and software manufacturers prioritize protecting you. Often when there's a potential problem discovered, they roll out software updates. So, it's important to be mindful of those changes and install updates regularly.



**Phishing awareness:** Whether it is a fake website or a bogus email that seems reputable, there is a range of phishing strategies designed to capture your personal information, money or both. They can be convincing, too. So, be cautious when receiving unsolicited messages, and verify requests for sensitive information before responding.

To learn more about online safety visit the National Cybersecurity Alliance at [staysafeonline.org](https://staysafeonline.org). 📧

# Capture the season

## Learn to make your photos pop

**W**hether it's Apple or Android, the photo technology in modern smartphones can create stunning images, complete with automatic adjustments for lighting and other effects. You don't have to look hard in the world of social media to see the results.

But give those images a closer look. Are they as good as they can be? While mobile software can clean up many of the more technical trouble spots, a few tried-and-true tips from the world of traditional photography can upgrade your seasonal or holiday photographs from passable to truly memorable.

**SEEK THE LIGHT:** For photography, there's a magical time just before sunset or after sunrise — the golden hour. The warm, soft light adds a natural artistic element, whether you're shooting a landscape or a portrait. So, when possible,

avoid the harsh light of the hours around noon and seek the golden rays instead.

**KNOW THIS RULE AND WHEN TO BREAK IT:** The idea of the rule of thirds is an artistic standard. An image is framed using two horizontal and two vertical lines to create nine equal parts. One strategy is to place the subject of the photo at one of the intersections to create a balanced composition. But you can also use the idea to know when to break the rule, shift the frame and take a unique photo.

**GET THE CLOSE-UP:** Don't be shy. Most phone cameras have a zoom feature. But you've got a better choice. Physically get closer to your subject, whether it's a person, flower or delicious dinner dish. Proximity not only makes it easier to frame the image but it also adds a sense of intimacy.

**STEADY AS IT GOES:** The latest phone cameras do well even when light is scarce. But there are limits, and sometimes when you're shooting in a dim room or when the sun is fading the resulting image can turn out blurry. A small tripod — there are plenty of phone-sized options — can help keep your photos sharp.

**GIVE 'EM A BOOST:** There's nothing wrong with a little editing, and most phones have great software built in. There are options for automatic adjustments, but don't be shy about exploring the possibilities. A little creative cropping or adjustments to settings like brightness can make a difference. You can even consider converting a photo to black-and-white for a classic look. 📱



Photos by Jenkoltaman and Mayatimstudio/Adobe Stock





## A season of progress and gratitude

**G**reetings and welcome to the “ber” months. Fall, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s Eve punctuate the months of September, October, November and December. Some employees even call it “the cozy season.”



**JEFF WILSON (L)**

Chief Executive Officer  
WCFIBER

**JIM LOVINGGOOD (R)**

Chief Executive Officer  
Blue Ridge Electric

We recently toured the construction in the Upstate. To see the crews working collaboratively and swiftly to connect the underserved areas of South Carolina was so gratifying.

We’ve had a record-setting year with construction. More than 1,000 miles of fiber have been laid throughout the Upstate, and more than 14,000 orders have been taken since the start of the project. The multiyear project comprises 6,000 miles and, when complete, will pass 65,000 addresses. We’ve heard the need from many of you, and we’re working hard — often well into the night — to serve you.

Today fellow South Carolinians are being left behind by the digital divide. The numbers and statistics in those communities do not lie. Fortunately, our federal and state governments recognize that internet is no longer a luxury, it’s a necessity. So they, too, are rolling up their sleeves and doing something about it. We’re grateful to be their partner. This past year, the state of South Carolina entrusted us with \$40 million in federal funding to help connect the Upstate.

We do not take this responsibility lightly. We understand your need, and please know we are committed to serving you.

Other highlights from 2023 include strides in enrollment in the Federal Communications Commission’s Affordable Connectivity Program. Launched in spring 2020, ACP provides a \$30 monthly savings on internet service for qualifying households.

This past year, we’ve more than doubled our ACP enrollments. In fact, students enrolled in a public school within our area may be eligible to receive this benefit. For example, Oconee County K-8 public school students are eligible, and Pickens County K-12 public school students are eligible. To learn more, go to [upcountryfiber.com/acp](http://upcountryfiber.com/acp) or call our office at 888-760-2111.

In our last column, we announced the addition of 2.5 Gig and 10 Gig service plans. The response has been overwhelming, with many customers opting for our 2.5 Gig plan. In many ways COVID transformed the way we use the internet. Work from home. Video calls. Connected fitness devices. Streaming movies vs. going to theaters. Esports. Smart appliances. It isn’t uncommon to have several people in the house requiring optimum internet performance with no buffering and lag. Our 2.5 Gig plan offers just that.

Lastly, we can’t touch on 2023 without again mentioning WiFi X, which was launched in late spring this year, and it is a game-changer for your home WiFi experience.

WiFi X not only protects your home from incoming threats and viruses, but it puts YOU in the driver’s seat of your home WiFi. It enables you to run speed tests, set up guest networks, change your WiFi password easily, prioritize bandwidth and, for our parents, it gives you greater control and insight into your child’s internet usage. It’s just a better experience, and that is our promise to you. We don’t offer products and services — we provide an experience, hopefully a good one.

We wish you a wonderful holiday season, and we are humbled and honored to help connect you to the world and each other. 📶

The Upcountry Connected is a bimonthly newsletter published by Upcountry Fiber, ©2023. It is distributed without charge to all its customers.



is a high-speed fiber internet provider to the five counties of Anderson, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens and Spartanburg. Founded by Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER, Upcountry Fiber was created to bridge the digital divide across rural areas of South Carolina. Offering symmetrical internet speeds up to 10 Gbps over a fiber network, Upcountry Fiber offers the fastest and most reliable high-speed internet in the area.

[UpcountryFiber.com](http://UpcountryFiber.com)  
888-760-2111  
Email us at [info@UpcountryFiber.com](mailto:info@UpcountryFiber.com)

Construction Updates & FAQs:  
[UpcountryFiber.com/Updates](http://UpcountryFiber.com/Updates)

24/7 Repair Line:  
888-760-2111 – select option for repair

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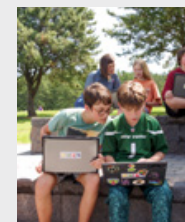


Photo by Matt Ledger

The Affordable Connectivity Program makes broadband more affordable, which helps keep students connected and learning when they’re not at school. See story Page 9.

## May the beauty of the holidays warm your spirit



The employees of Upcountry Fiber are grateful for the support of our customers. We hope you enjoy a holiday season filled with family, friends and joy.

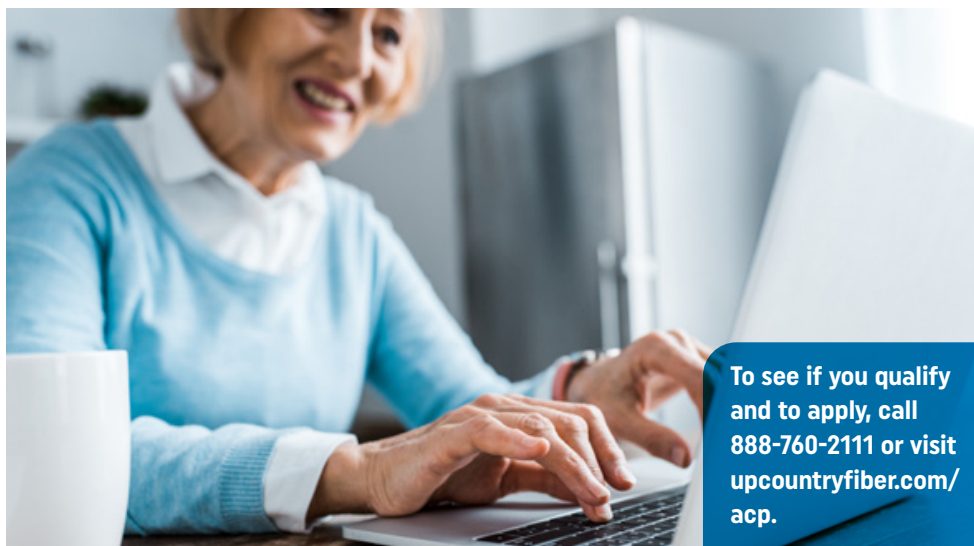
In observation of the holidays, Upcountry Fiber offices will be closed on the following dates:

- Thanksgiving: Nov. 23 and 24
- Christmas: Dec. 25 and 26
- New Year's Day: Jan. 1



## Need help paying for internet?

The Affordable Connectivity Program is a Federal Communications Commission initiative to assist families and households struggling to afford internet service. The ACP provides a discount of up to \$30 a month.



To see if you qualify and to apply, call 888-760-2111 or visit [upcountryfiber.com/acp](http://upcountryfiber.com/acp).

## 'Tis the season for easy payments

We're all looking for ways to save time as the holidays draw near.

Upcountry Fiber aims to make paying the monthly bill easier with SmartHub. Sign up for SmartHub text reminders about when the bill is due, or make it even easier with the autopay option.

To learn more, and to register for SmartHub, go to [wctel.smarthub.coop](http://wctel.smarthub.coop). Smartphone users may download the SmartHub app from your app store. You'll need your account number and most recent billing statement to register.

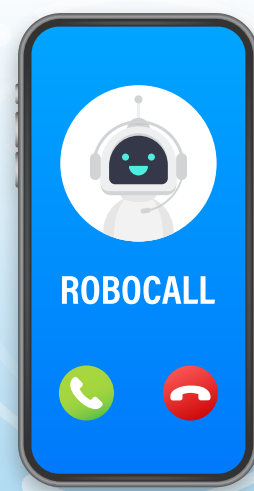
## Do Not Call Registry

The National Do Not Call Registry gives you a choice about whether to receive telemarketing calls. The registry applies to all telemarketers except businesses with whom you have an existing relationship and certain nonprofit and political organizations.

Commercial telemarketers are not allowed to call you if your number is listed on the registry. Consumers may register their residential telephone numbers, including wireless numbers, on the National Do Not Call Registry at no cost, either by telephone or via the internet.

To register by phone, call 888-382-1222. For TTY, call 866-290-4236. You must call from the telephone number you wish to register. To obtain additional information, or to register online, please go to [donotcall.gov](http://donotcall.gov).

Inclusion of your telephone number on the National Do Not Call registry becomes effective starting 31 days after registration. You may remove your number from the list at any time.





# Seeking a dose of CHRISTMAS CHEER?

## These towns embrace the holiday spirit

Story by ANNE BRALY

The annual tree-lighting is a favorite event during Christmas celebrations in Childersburg, Alabama.



Photo courtesy of the Alabama Tourism Department

Santa greets the crowds at the Christmas parade in downtown Franklin, Tennessee.



Photo courtesy of Visit Franklin

**S**outherners celebrate Christmas in a big way. Whether it's light displays so outrageous they'd impress the Griswolds or picture-perfect trimmed trees, no time or expense is spared to make sure the holidays are truly magical.

Every town celebrates the holidays a bit differently, but one thing they all have in common is an undeniable spirit of the season. Here are several Southern towns that roll out the red carpet during the holiday season.

### CHILDERSBURG, ALABAMA

"There's something special about small towns in Alabama, like Childersburg, during the holiday season," says Brooklyn Lundy, public relations manager for the Alabama Tourism Department.

During the holidays, Childersburg takes advantage of its natural features, primarily the limestone caves found around this central Alabama town in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, including Majestic Caverns. It becomes a magical fantasyland during the holidays as it's transformed into Adventus, an event filled with Christmas shows, performances and holiday characters around every corner. It's a fun event for the entire family that happens for four evenings only — Dec. 9, 10, 16 and 17 from 5-9 p.m. Tickets can be purchased at [majesticcaverns.com](http://majesticcaverns.com).

There's more to Christmas in Childersburg, though. The annual tree lighting, scheduled for Nov. 28 at 6 p.m. at the Butler-Harris Rainwater Museum, is a town favorite with hot chocolate and carriage rides offered to all those who attend. And the Christmas parade brings St. Nick to downtown on Dec. 21 starting at 6 p.m.

### FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE

Franklin turns Christmas into a monthlong celebration. "Every weekend is a special event or festival in its own right in Franklin," says Matthew Maxey, director of public relations for the city of Franklin.

One of the most popular events, the two-day Dickens of a Christmas festival — set for Dec. 9-10 — draws at least 100,000 people to town each year.





Photo courtesy of Helen CVB

Downtown Helen, Georgia, lights up for the holidays.



Photo courtesy of Harrodsburg-Mercer County

The good citizens of Mercer County sing carols on the streets of Harrodsburg, Kentucky.

“Franklin’s charm, relaxed pace and Hallmark-movie feel throughout the historic downtown are a significant draw for visitors,” he says. “From window shopping the holiday displays along Main Street to catching holiday movies at our 1930s-era Franklin Theatre, visitors are able to step back in a simpler, classic holiday time.”

On Dec. 1 there will be a tree lighting, and the city will shine with local celebrity talent — this year hosted by popular Christian artist Matthew West — followed by the Christmas parade down the town’s historic Main Street on Dec. 2. For more ideas to fill your holiday weekends, log onto [visitfranklin.com](http://visitfranklin.com).

## HELEN, GEORGIA

The population of this small mountain town in north Georgia swells from 256 to more than 2,500 during the holiday season as visitors clamor to enjoy an Alpine Christmas.

The Lighting of the Village will be held on Nov. 24 at 6 p.m., followed by the 16th annual Christkindlmarkt in downtown Helen on Nov. 25-26 and Dec. 2-3. The traditional German event features gifts, decorations and assorted foods, both sweet and savory. The Mistletoe Market is another favorite event and ideal for checking things off your Christmas list. It takes place Dec. 2-3 at the Helen Arts & Heritage Center.

And what would Christmas in Helen be

like without its annual Christmas parade? That takes place on Dec. 9. For a list of all Christmas happenings in Helen, go to [whitecountychamber.org](http://whitecountychamber.org).

“Helen has quickly become one of the top Christmas towns in the United States,” says Jerry Brown, executive director of the Alpine Helen/White County Convention and Visitors Bureau. “During the holiday season, the town turns its amazing village into a Christmas wonderland with a sprinkle of Bavarian charm that heightens the Christmas spirit.”

## HARRODSBURG, KENTUCKY

“Santa’s elves are busy this year in Kentucky’s oldest town, trying to make Harrodsburg feel as much like a Hallmark movie as possible,” says Daarik Gray, executive director of Harrodsburg-Mercer County Tourist Commission. “One of the special things about being in a small town is that it truly does feel like you’re stepping into a Christmas movie, as everyone’s spirits seem to be a little higher, and the overall general mood of the community is jolly.”

Stores come alive with their windows decorated for the season. This year, the season kicks off on Dec. 1 with Christmas on Main, an event with food trucks, caroling, live music and more, including the Christmas parade at Anderson-Dean Community Park. The annual tree lighting happens on Dec. 2.

For more on Harrodsburg’s holiday festivities, visit [mercercountyky.com](http://mercercountyky.com).

## GREER, SOUTH CAROLINA

Downtown Greer, best known as Greer Station, transforms itself into a Christmas fantasyland come the holiday season. With brick-paved streets and lampposts wrapped in garland and twinkling lights, as well as the two main roads leading into town festooned with candy canes, Christmas trees and shooting star lights, the city looks like a movie set, says Lindsey Shaffer, tourism specialist for the city of Greer.

The holiday season kicks off with Christmas in Greer, a one-weekend celebration that begins with arts, crafts, roaming carolers, s’mores and more before Santa comes to town and reads “T” was the Night Before Christmas.” Then the countdown to the lighting of the tree begins. It all happens at Greer City Park on Dec. 1.

The City of Greer will host Breakfast with Santa on Saturday, Dec. 2, and the Greer Farmers Market will be open Dec. 2-3 with local artisans so you can check off some items on your gift list.

Christmas in Greer weekend comes to a close with its annual Christmas parade on Sunday, Dec. 3.

For a complete rundown of all holiday festivities, go to [discovergreer.com](http://discovergreer.com). 📱



# SADDLE UP!

## The wild ride of starting The Orange Horse Store

Story by CHERÉ COEN

Carmen Eaton grew up in a household that believed in giving back. Her father, Floyd Yoder, helped many community startups and did missionary work overseas. “That was our culture growing up,” says the Westminster native.

It’s no wonder that both Carmen and her husband, Ben Eaton, use that philosophy at The Orange Horse Store in Westminster, a retail outlet that sells overstock and surplus items, as well as new furniture.

It all began during the recession of 2008 when Ben’s construction business slowed. The couple discussed changing careers, but they wanted to do something unique, Carmen says. They leased a section of her father’s building and started acquiring overstock from distributors such as Walmart. “Now there are other stores like ours,” Carmen says. “Back then, it was a hard market to break into.”

The Orange Horse Store buys overstock, surplus and seasonal items left over from retail outlets such as Target, JCPenney and Kohl’s. The Eatons make purchases by the truckload, never knowing what’s inside. There are no guarantees and no returns. It all comes down to trusting



Photos by John Clayton

**ABOVE:** Cash, the official mascot of The Orange Horse Store, is a big attraction for customers.

**RIGHT:** The Orange Horse Store owner Ben Eaton pushes a hand truck to load a customer’s purchase.

the distributor, Carmen says, adding that in the beginning it was trial and error. “But we have been blessed with our distributors,” she says.

### A BOOMING BUSINESS

Since opening in June 2010, the business has grown to encompass the entire building, which the couple now owns. Most of their shelf inventory comes from Target and Sam’s Club as overstock, but they also offer new furniture from Ashley and other name brand distributors. Items include housewares, beauty products, furniture, clothes and home decor, to name a few — basically everything from doorknobs to blenders.

“We sell pretty much



Ben and Carmen Eaton, owners of The Orange Horse Store in Westminster, pose next to Cash, the store’s mascot.



anything you would find in a Target or a department store,” Carmen says. “Our goal is to provide a great product at a great price to our customers.”

In the process of discovering what was to become their niche, the Eatons found a large item in the back of the building that prompted them to change the name of their business, then known as Warehouse Surplus. “We found a horse when we were cleaning out the building,” Carmen says. “My husband got the idea to paint it orange and put it on top of the

building, like a landmark. People started calling us the Orange Horse Store.”

And it stuck.

So did Carmen’s belief in giving back. The couple donated blankets after devastating tornadoes roared through the area in 2020. They give out coats to people without homes and backpacks to schoolchildren. They donate or sell at cost mattresses and furniture to Fostering Faithfully, an organization supporting foster families. “We look for ways to give back to the community,” Carmen says. “That’s a huge passion for us.”

► The Orange Horse Store, at 2352 Sandifer Blvd. in Westminster, is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays. Visit the business online at [theorangehorsestore.com](http://theorangehorsestore.com).



# Fiber finances

## Students, families can save money on internet through ACP

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Access to reliable broadband internet has become an increasingly vital part of education as teachers and students depend on it the way previous generations once relied on textbooks and encyclopedias.

Providing that access was the motivation behind the launch of Upcountry Fiber, and now more students, residents and businesses are online in previously underserved areas in the Upstate of South Carolina.

“When you look at the mission of Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative even 80 years ago to provide electricity to rural areas, it’s much the same now with Upcountry Fiber providing broadband access,” says Zach Hinton, vice president of support services for Blue Ridge Electric, partner of Upcountry Fiber.

### MAKING THE INTERNET AFFORDABLE

Now, a federal program is helping more students and their families reduce the cost of high-speed internet service in their homes. The Affordable Connectivity Program — or ACP — is a need-based program that provides discounts up to \$30 a month on internet bills for those who qualify.

“We’re really excited about the opportunity because we know having internet connectivity in the home has become critical for our students and their families today,” says Jessica Preisig, assistant superintendent for technology services for the School District of Pickens County. “It plays a pivotal role in their journey through school, and we’re just excited to be able to make it happen.”

Under ACP guidelines, students who qualify for free meal programs through their local school district also qualify for ACP discounts through internet providers such as Upcountry Fiber. Jessica says all 16,200 students in the Pickens County



Photos by John Clayton

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Teacher Cora Wichelns works with junior Zarazua-Cabrera to create graphics for the school’s social media and create custom products for the new school store.

Jessica Preisig, assistant superintendent of technology services for the School District of Pickens County, looks over the work of Colin Russell in class at R.C. Edwards Middle School.

R.C. Edwards Middle School teacher Jimmy Bardusk takes advantage of a beautiful day and his school’s internet service to let his seventh grade geography students work outdoors with their laptops.

school district are eligible for the ACP discounts due to the district’s participation in Community Eligibility Provision, which has made free breakfast and lunch available for all students.

“As a district, that means all of our students, regardless of income, have access to free breakfast and lunch every day,” she says. “And then all of our students, regardless of internet provider, have access to the ACP.”

Upcountry Fiber, which has partnered with Pickens County schools, continues to expand its reach in Pickens County and the South Carolina Upstate. Jessica says that has been a major factor in getting students in her district the internet

access they need. “People were hungry to get service to their homes, and the service was unavailable in some places,” she says. “By partnering with Upcountry Fiber, we were able to get homes in those communities that had no other options for internet up and running. Upcountry made a commitment to serving the families here in Pickens County and getting connectivity to homes that are in the most rural areas.”

► For complete information on ACP requirements and benefits, visit [upcountryfiber.com/acp](https://upcountryfiber.com/acp).

► All K-8 public school students in Oconee County also qualify for ACP.



# Passion project

## Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program inspires a love of learning



Story by JEN CALHOUN

Getting a book in the mail always made Andrea Robertson's children hop with joy. "Kids hardly ever get mail, so they just loved it," says the Lafayette, Tennessee-based educator and mother of three. "I think that excitement most definitely helped fuel their interest in reading and learning."

Andrea's children received the monthly books through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a program that sends free books to children from birth to 5 years old no matter the family's income.

Although her children have aged out of the program, Andrea believes it has had a positive impact on their futures. "Having books from an early age helps children build content knowledge that they might not get otherwise," she says. "It helps give them a foundation that's so important when they get to school."

### FOR THE LOVE OF BOOKS

Today, more than 2 million children are enrolled in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

The programs, which are established and maintained locally, are available in all 50 states, including 15 statewide programs — with more starting up every year.

The Macon County Education Foundation in East Tennessee was one of the earliest adopters of the program, says Linda McCrary, one of the founders of the foundation and its president at the time. "Our board was approached by a member of the Tennessee Library Association Board to be a champion for this new program that the library board was sponsoring," says Linda, a former educator and the program's local coordinator.

The foundation's board agreed readily, she says. Soon after in 2004, then-Gov. Phil Bredesen and the Dollywood Foundation partnered to create the Tennessee Governor's Books from Birth Foundation. The governor's foundation paid 50% of the program's costs while local organizations funded the rest in their communities. Today, the Macon County Education Foundation also receives help paying for the program from the county commission and school board.

### Set it up!

If your city or county does not offer an Imagination Library program, there are ways to set one up. Visit [imaginationlibrary.com](http://imaginationlibrary.com) to learn out more or to find a program in your area.



## POSITIVE PARTNERSHIPS FOR A BETTER COMMUNITY

These partnerships are good for the community at large, says Nora Briggs, executive director of the Dollywood Foundation, which launched the first program nearly 30 years ago. “Simply getting books into the home changes the trajectory of children, families and communities,” she says. “Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library is an accomplished, simple and effective way to make communities better places to live by supporting and nurturing a love of books, shared family time and early learning.”

While the goal is to inspire a lifetime love of reading to give children opportunities to succeed, research shows an even greater impact. The program has led to significantly stronger reading skills and a better understanding of letter and word concepts when children start school. In addition, the establishment of reading routines has been found to bring about increased stability, emotional well-being and an improved family atmosphere, according to summaries of research distributed by The Imagination Library.

## ON A MISSION

Dolly Parton started the book-gifting program in Sevier County, Tennessee, in 1995, as a tribute to her father, Robert Lee Parton Sr., who worked as a share-cropper and went on to farm his own acreage. Despite his lack of education, he had a knack for turning a profit. “He was the smartest man I have ever known, but I know in my heart his inability to read probably kept him from fulfilling all of his dreams,” Dolly says.

Now, Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library has gifted nearly 200 million books to children in the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the Republic of Ireland. More than 24 million books were gifted in 2022 — a nearly 12% increase over 2021.

And while the program started small, Dolly’s ambitions for it grew as other organizations and volunteer groups implemented the Imagination Library

concept in their own communities. “Inspiring kids to love to read became my mission,” she says.

## WORKING ON A DREAM

Communities that invest in children from a young age show a commitment to bettering their cities and towns, says Linda, who was an educator for 37 years and founder of the Macon County Education Foundation.

To make sure education ranked high in children’s minds, they need a strong foundation from birth. Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library fit the bill. “Placing books in the hands of children is the basis of educating children,” Linda says. “It’s the basis for preparing them for school.”

The importance of the work done by volunteers, government officials and local businesses isn’t lost on Dolly. “The seeds of dreams are often found in books, and the seeds you help plant in your community can grow across the world,” Dolly says. 📖



Photos contributed by Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

## Dolly's daddy



Robert Lee Parton, Dolly Parton's late father, never learned to read or write — not because he didn't want to, but because he needed to work to help his family survive. His parents raised 15 children in the mountains of East Tennessee, where food was scarce and the one-room schoolhouse was more than a mile away, Dolly wrote in her 2020 memoir, “Songteller: My Life in Lyrics.”

As an adult raising 12 kids of his own, Robert planted tobacco in the rugged and rocky hills of East Tennessee but often took on construction jobs to make ends meet. Money was always tight. When Dolly was born, he paid the doctor with a sack of cornmeal instead of cash.

“He was such a smart person. I always thought that if Daddy had an education, there's no telling what he could have been,” Dolly wrote. “Because he knew how to barter, he knew how to bargain. He knew how to make everything work, and he knew how to count money. He knew exactly what everything was worth, how much he was going to make from that tobacco crop, what he could trade and how he could make it all work.”

While he was embarrassed about his lack of literacy skills for most of his life, Robert took pride in Dolly's efforts with the Imagination Library. “I got him involved helping me with [the Imagination Library], and he felt so great about that,” she wrote. “I told him, ‘Daddy, there are probably millions of people in this world who don't know how to read and write, who didn't get the opportunity. Don't be ashamed of that. Let's do something special.’”



# Giving back to our community

## Upcountry Fiber Foundation offers a new voice for local nonprofits

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

**O**n the stage of the Southern Fried Circuit concert in July, Darius Rucker sang, “When was the last time you did something for the first time?”

The lyrics were fitting, as the South Carolina music legend headlined the fundraising concert for the Upcountry Fiber Foundation, which is in its first year of operation.

“Everyone has been really, really pleased,” Daja Davidson, a marketing specialist with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative who works closely with the foundation, says of the fundraising concert. “For me, it’s probably the highlight of my career at this point. It was really magical to see months of work come together.”

### CONNECTING WITH LOCAL NONPROFITS

The Upcountry Fiber Foundation was founded with the goal of helping local nonprofit organizations make a difference in the community. In its first year, it has already awarded more than \$20,000. “We’re really focused on hyperlocal nonprofits, the groups that are doing big work in small towns that don’t receive national funding,” Daja says.

The foundation is the charitable arm of Upcountry Fiber, a partnership between Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER providing high-speed internet to five counties in Upstate South Carolina. While the foundation launched just this spring, it follows a long tradition of giving back. Daja says Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative held an annual charity event for more than 20 years, raising millions of dollars.

The Upcountry Fiber Foundation accepts grant applications four times a year and awards project-based funds to groups that aid the local community. A golf tournament last fall generated its first round of funds.



Darius Rucker sang many songs spanning his musical career, including “History In the Making,” “Have a Good Time,” “Alright” and “Hold my Hand.”

**RIGHT:** From right, Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative CEO Jim Lovinggood and WCFIBER CEO Jeff Wilson share the stage and information about the mission of the Upcountry Fiber Foundation.



Darius headlined the Southern Fried Circuit concert in July at the Civic Center of Anderson, with musician Lindsay Ell also playing. Key to its success were its sponsors, especially ElectriCom, Burr & Forman and Segra, Daja says. Daja is still waiting on final numbers, but she says the amphitheater was “packed.” She spoke to the attendees about the foundation from the stage before introducing the headliner.


The foundation could hold an event similar to the Southern Fried Circuit in the future, but it might opt to do something different. “I think the opportunities are endless, considering this is a brand-new venture,” Daja says.

### HELPING LOCALLY

Earlier this year, the foundation gave its first set of grants, totaling \$24,320, to three

nonprofits: the Golden Corner Food Pantry in Seneca; Lakes and Bridges Charter School in Easley; and the Upstate Institute of Youth Programs Inc. in Seneca.

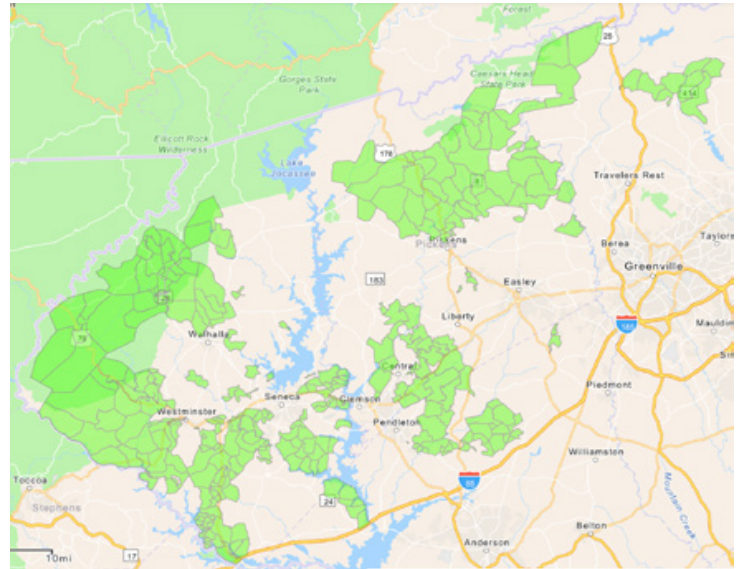
Golden Corner’s grant helped provide groceries for those struggling with food insecurity. Lakes and Bridges Charter School used the funding for its Learn, Experience, Apply, Participate program, to help students with dyslexia. The Upstate Institute’s grant went toward providing precollege and career programming to first-generation high school students and their parents with limited income.

To learn about future events or submit a grant application, visit the foundation’s website, [upcountryfiberfoundation.com](http://upcountryfiberfoundation.com). 

# BUILDING BROADBAND in the Upstate

Since launching in 2021, Upcountry Fiber has, on average, deployed more than 100 miles of fiber optic cable each month. We are committed to expanding the reach of our high-speed internet to underserved and unserved areas. The collaboration of teams at Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER will continue as we deploy this vital utility to our neighbors and businesses.

▶▶ Upcountry Fiber service is available in the green areas shown on our network map. Fiber crews are currently working in other parts of our service area to further expand broadband availability.



**TO LEARN MORE** about Upcountry Fiber, and to register your interest in signing up for service, go to **[upcountryfiber.com](https://upcountryfiber.com)**.

## EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

### *Marketing Assistant Jess Bowie*

Jess Bowie is the marketing assistant for Upcountry Fiber. For the past five years, she has created social media posts, taken photos and designed graphics for WCFIBER in Abbeville. Jess also answers customers' emails about products and services.

She lives with her three dogs — a Boykin spaniel named Lettie, a labrador/pit bull mix named Nirvana and a male basset hound named Sue, inspired by the Johnny Cash song “A Boy Named Sue.”

Jess' hobbies include spending time at the lake, hiking and hanging out with her friends. She likes to sing karaoke at Michelle's in McCormick, and her go-to song is “Me and Bobby McGee” performed by Janis Joplin. She also enjoys trying new restaurants.

Her favorite project was definitely the Southern Fried Circuit with Darius Rucker. “I love music and concerts,” Jess says. “Being a part of a concert that is also helping the community is one of my biggest career accomplishments.”

Jess loves streaming movies and TV with high-speed internet. She just finished binging the second season of “The Bear,” but her all-time comfort show is “Parks and Recreation.” 📺





# A tasty tradition

Whether in your PJs or your Sunday best, holiday brunch hits the sweet spot



A holiday brunch has two musts: The time served — just a bit later than the usual morning rush hour. Then, there's the menu with dishes that put a little flair into the typical breakfast fare.

A brunch can be quiet and cozy or a grand seated affair that shows off all your culinary talents and best china. You can make it whatever you want it to be. After all, there's a special connection between brunch and the holidays — a wonderful combination that satisfies the stomach and the soul. Whether you're hosting or joining friends for brunch, the magic of this midmorning meal will weave its spell.



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## STUFFED FRENCH TOAST

- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 1 tablespoon plus 1/2 teaspoon vanilla, divided
- 1/2 cup chopped pecans or walnuts
- 1 (16-ounce) loaf French bread
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- Butter for frying
- 1 (12-ounce) jar apricot preserves
- 1/2 cup orange juice

Beat together cream cheese and 1 tablespoon vanilla until fluffy. Stir in nuts. Cut bread into thick, 1 1/2-inch slices. You should get 10-12 slices per loaf. Cut a pocket in the top of each slice and fill with 1 1/2 teaspoons of cream cheese mixture.

Beat together eggs, heavy cream, 1/2 teaspoon vanilla and nutmeg. Dip stuffed slices into egg mixture.

Melt butter in frying pan and fry slices until golden brown on both sides.

Heat together preserves and orange juice and serve alongside the hot toast. Makes 5-6 servings.





## EGG BRUNCH

- 4 slices bacon, diced
- 2 packages (4 1/2 ounces each) sliced dried beef, cut into thin strips
- 2 small cans sliced mushrooms, drained
- 1/2 cup butter, divided
- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper
- 4 cups whole milk
- 16 large eggs
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

In a large skillet, cook bacon until almost done, then add dried beef, mushrooms and 1/4 cup butter. While hot, add flour, then stir in milk. Simmer sauce, stirring constantly, until thick and smooth.



In a large bowl, whisk eggs, evaporated milk and salt. In another large skillet, heat remaining butter until melted. Add egg mixture. Cook and stir over medium heat until eggs are completely set, but not dry.

Add all ingredients to a casserole dish and bake, covered, at 275 F for 1 hour.

**Note:** May be made a day ahead and refrigerated, covered, then baked as directed. Very good served with baked curried fruit.

## MAMA'S CINNAMON ROLLS

*Easy and delicious, these cinnamon rolls make a mouthwatering addition to your holiday table and are perfect for brunch or any meal.*

- 5 tablespoons butter
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup water
- 1/2 cup chopped pecans
- 2 (8-ounce) cans crescent rolls
- 3 tablespoons butter, softened
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon

Heat oven to 375 F. In a 9-by-13-inch baking pan, melt the 5 tablespoons of butter. Stir in brown sugar, water and pecans.

Separate each can of crescent roll dough into four rectangles; seal perforations. Spread the rectangles with the 3 tablespoons of softened butter. Combine granulated sugar and cinnamon; sprinkle over butter dough rectangles. Roll up each rectangle from the short side. Cut each roll in four slices and place in prepared pan over butter-pecan mixture cut side down.

Bake for 20-25 minutes. Invert immediately onto rectangular serving platter or sheet of aluminum foil. Spoon any remaining sauce on top of rolls. Makes 32 small cinnamon rolls.



## CURRIED FRUIT

*Rich, buttery, sweet and savory, this baked fruit dish is a delicious change of pace as a side dish for brunch.*

*Maraschino cherries in green and red add a holiday touch.*

- 1 can peach halves (see tip)
- 1 can apricot halves
- 1 can pear halves
- 1 can pineapple chunks
- 10-12 maraschino cherries (red or green or a combination of both)
- 1/2 cup pecan halves
- 1/3 cup butter
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons curry powder

Drain fruits and arrange in baking dish. Add nuts. Melt butter and stir in brown sugar and curry powder. Bake, uncovered, at 325 F for 1 hour, basting every so often with drippings in dish. Makes 8-10 servings.

**Tip:** Whole fruit makes a lovely presentation, but cutting the fruit into bite-sized pieces makes it easier to serve and eat. 🍴





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