



UPCOUNTRY

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

# CONNECTED



## Fresh Start

Cherokee Creek  
Boys School

HIKE FOR HOPE

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COMMUNITY  
CLASSES





By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## Ensuring Access for All

Supreme Court upholds  
Universal Service Fund

**M**oney raised by a small fee on your communications bill makes a critical difference throughout rural America. Earlier this year, a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the Universal Service Fund, or USF, to continue.

I can't emphasize enough how critical this ruling is in a journey that began in 1934, when the Communications Act decreed all Americans should have access to rapid, efficient and nationwide communication services at reasonable prices.

Then, the 1996 Telecommunications Act created the USF to better connect rural areas and make voice and broadband services more affordable for rural and low-income consumers, schools, libraries and rural health care facilities.

By affirming that the Federal Communications Commission has discretion to collect the fees, the court kept this foundational tool in place. A March survey of nearly 270 NTCA members indicated that the USF programs help keep rural broadband rates more affordable. Without this funding, rural consumer rates could be more than double those in urban areas.

Policymakers in Washington, D.C., are debating how to reform universal service programs going forward, so that they can continue to serve the needs of millions of Americans.

It is essential that our elected officials understand the positive impacts the critical USF programs have had—and continue to have—on the availability, affordability and sustainability of voice and broadband services for millions of consumers, businesses and anchor institutions in rural America.

Visit [ntca.org/universalservice](http://ntca.org/universalservice). 



# Secure Your Digital World

## Keys for success


**W**hile October is National Cybersecurity Awareness Month, protecting yourself requires year-long vigilance. And everyone's needs vary based on the online tools and resources you use.

Remember, bad actors are increasingly sophisticated—they want access to your information. The FBI offers a few tips for some of the key points of emphasis, and they provide a good starting point for planning your personalized security strategy.

**Create a sturdy defense.** Update systems, software and apps. Also, install a strong, reputable antivirus program.

**Connect carefully.** Be cautious when connecting to a public Wi-Fi network. Avoid sensitive transactions, including purchases. Create a strong and unique passphrase for each online account.

**Lock down all accounts.** Establish multifactor authentication. Examine the email address in all correspondence and scrutinize website URLs before responding to a message or visiting a site. Don't click on anything in unsolicited emails or text messages.

**Guard your information.** Be cautious about your information in online profiles and social media accounts. Sharing the names of pets, schools and family members gives scammers hints they need to guess your passwords or the answers to your account security questions. Never send payments to unknown people or organizations, particularly those urging immediate action. 

# RAISING HISTORY

## Heritage breed farmers preserve the past while protecting the future

Story by LES O'DELL

Farmers, ranchers, shepherds and homesteaders work to raise crops and livestock as efficiently as possible. Like any business, the goal is to maximize income and profitability.

Yet many agriculturalists also see themselves as conservationists, working to preserve the past while ensuring the future by using Earth-friendly farming methods and raising animals facing extinction.

In Pikeville, Tennessee, Amy Balog and her family raise endangered agricultural animals, also called heritage livestock breeds. “There are so many reasons why,” she says. “It’s not only keeping the genetics going. It’s the history and provenance of the breeds.”

Her Faverolles chickens, Sebastopol geese and Saxony ducks are among 180 breeds listed on the Conservation Priority List, an annual ranking of farm animals on the brink of disappearing. The list includes varieties of 11 different animals, from rabbits to cattle, horses and hogs. Many breeds fall out of favor in commercial agricultural settings. Perhaps they don’t put on weight as quickly as other breeds, for example. But they still have value.

### SUSTAINABILITY

Protecting biodiversity and genetic resources is an important reason for protecting heritage breeds, says Allison Kincaid, executive director of The Livestock Conservancy. But many producers choose heritage animals because they want to make a difference.

“None of us can predict what the future of agriculture will look like. This is about keeping these breeds around as a genetic

reservoir,” she says, adding these animals are key to food security. “If we didn’t have this diversity, eventually we would narrow our food system down to where it wasn’t sustainable. There would be no backup.”

Likewise, farmer Grant Breitreutz of Redwood Falls, Minnesota, takes a conservation approach to crop production. “We’ve been no-till for 12 years for all of our crops,” he says. Grant leaves farm implements that expose the soil, such as plows and discs, in the machine shed. Instead, he plants cover crops, grasses and other plants he sows without exposing the soil in order to replenish organic nutrients and to minimize erosion.

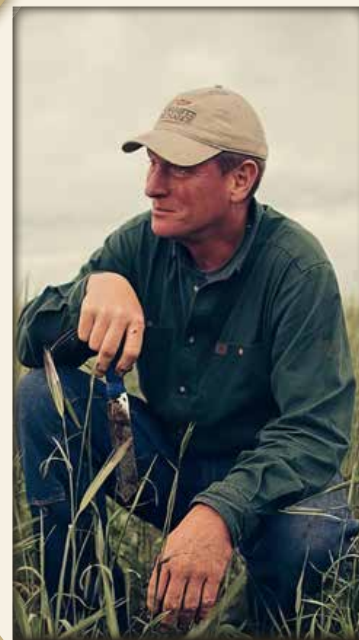
Grant pivoted to conservation farming practices to ensure his soil is healthy and hearty enough to produce bumper crops for generations to come. “If we’ve done this for 130 years of farming, how much time do we have left? So, that’s why we focus so hard on building our soils back,” he says. “It has made a world of difference, and the crops are much more drought resistant and are yielding more bushels per acre. Plus, our pastures have tripled in production over the years by taking care of the soil first.”

The Breitreutz family won the inaugural Minnesota Leopold Conservation Award, presented in 2024 by the Minnesota Soil Health Coalition. Grant says honors are not important, but preserving things for future generations is. Amy agrees.

“It’s more about quality over quantity and quality is what keeps these lines going. If we don’t do it, I’m afraid they’ll all get lost,” she says.



Amy and Daniel Balog, who live outside Pikeville, Tennessee, raise heritage animals like the Sebastopol goose she’s holding.



Grant Breitreutz uses no-till techniques that protect soil quality on his Minnesota farm.

For more about agronomic conservation, visit [sandcountymn.org](https://sandcountymn.org) and to learn about livestock conservation efforts, visit [livestockconservancy.org](https://livestockconservancy.org).

Photo courtesy of Amy and Daniel Balog

Photo courtesy of Grant Breitreutz

# Exemplary Service

## Our promise to you

There's a lot of noise out there these days. You've seen it—bright, catchy headlines, attention-grabbing deals and promises that seem too good to be true. And often, they are.



**CHRIS TOWNSON (L)**  
Chief Executive Officer  
West Carolina

**JIM LOVINGGOOD (R)**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Blue Ridge Electric

If you've ever found yourself squinting at the fine print, wondering what you missed, you're not alone. There's a lot buried in those details—fees that weren't mentioned up front, service that changes after a few months and conditions that seem to shift like sand.

Now, hear our hearts: That's not how we do things at Upcountry Fiber.

We believe in being straight with people. No gimmicks. No gotchas. We won't lure you in with one thing only to give you something else. Our commitment is, and always has been, to be honest, to be clear and to be here for you. That's the kind of service we'd want for our own

families. It's the kind of service you deserve.

At the core of who we are, you'll find two values that shape everything we do: Work the Dream and Serve with Heart.

Work the Dream is more than a motto, it's a mission. We believe in doing what's needed, not just what's easy. This isn't just a job to us. We show up every day because we care about this place and the people who call it home. Our dream is to help you live your dream, right here in the communities we share. Whether it's providing the fastest fiber internet in the region or simply showing up with kindness and a solution, we do it with purpose.

Serve with Heart means exactly what it says. You are not a number to us. You're not a transaction. You're a neighbor, a friend and a member of this community we love. So, when we answer the phone, install your service or solve a problem, that moment matters to us. We pour care into the little things because we know they add up to something much bigger—trust.

Upcountry Fiber's story is not just about technology, though we're proud of what we've built. It's a story about people, about communities banding together to make something good and lasting. We don't measure our success in megabits or minutes. We measure it in the difference we make right here at home.

So, when you choose Upcountry Fiber, know this: You're choosing a team that stays until the job's done right. You're choosing neighbors who care more about serving you well than selling you something you don't need. You're choosing a promise that still means something.

That's exemplary service. That's our promise to you, and we're honored to keep it. 🗨️

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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 West Carolina, Upcountry Fiber was created to bridge the digital divide across rural areas of South Carolina. Offering symmetrical internet speeds up to 8 Gbps over a fiber network, Upcountry Fiber offers the fastest and most reliable high-speed internet in the area.

UpcountryFiber.com  
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**Pioneer**  
UTILITY RESOURCES

### On the Cover:



Photo by Mark Gilliland

David LePere is executive director of Cherokee Creek Boys School, a year-round therapeutic boarding school with a rugged summer camp appearance. See story Page 8.



# UNFORGETTABLE SUMMER

Our employees enjoyed connecting with our community during our Summer Bash events. The high temperatures didn't stop the fun of seeing so many of the customers we serve.

We're grateful for your support, and these events are a small way of saying thank you. You're truly part of our family, and we couldn't do what we do without you.



It was an honor to welcome South Carolina Senate President Thomas Alexander, left, to our Summer Bash. Pictured with West Carolina CEO Chris Townson, the visit highlighted continued collaboration and community engagement.



Our team served up Skins' hot dogs during the Summer Bash events.



Brandon Smith, business solutions consultant for Upcountry Fiber, joined ROAR 105.5 live to share the latest on Upcountry Fiber's expanding business services and how we're supporting local companies.



## DON'T GET HOOKED BY A RANSOMWARE ATTACK

Ransomware is malicious software that locks victims out of data on their devices until they pay for access to be restored. The FBI recommends not paying the ransom.

Consider the common threats:

**Phishing emails** — These emails trick users into downloading a malicious attachment disguised as a harmless file.

**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, stolen credentials give cybercriminals direct access to download malware onto a device.

## HOW CAN I AVOID IT?

The best defense is to protect yourself and your devices before an attack can begin:

- Back up important data to eliminate most of the leverage an attacker might have.
- Regularly update your computer's software and operating system.
- Update your computer's cybersecurity tools.
- Always be aware of phishing, social engineering and other strategies that can lead to a ransomware attack.





## Mapping out your perfect road trip

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

**F**all is the perfect time for travel and new experiences with family and friends. And while flying can have its conveniences, most travelers prefer to hit the road when mapping out their next adventure. According to AAA's domestic travel forecast for a recent holiday weekend, 87% of travelers planned to make trips by car.

### PREPARE FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

"I usually tend to drive, and most people choose to drive. And the reason for that is, for most families and groups of people, it's the most affordable way to travel," says AAA Texas Communications Manager Doug Shupe. "It's also the most convenient. You can leave when you want to leave and return when you want to. But there definitely needs to be some preparation before taking a long road trip."

Before everyone piles into the car, make sure you're ready for the journey. That includes giving your vehicle a quick inspection, planning a route and having the supplies—and the tunes—to keep everyone happy until you reach your destination.

### SAFETY CHECK

Before any lengthy road trip, Doug recommends taking your vehicle for a tuneup at a trusted repair facility. But if you can't find time for that, it's still a good idea to do a few quick checks on your own.







Check your tires to make sure they're properly inflated and in good condition.

That includes the tread. If you can put an upside-down quarter in the grooves of your tires and see the top of George Washington's head, it's probably a good idea to replace them before taking a long trip.

If your vehicle's battery is more than 3 years old, consider having it tested before getting on the road. Vibration can also cause a battery to fail sooner, so check that the terminals are secure and free of corrosion.

Examine your radiator and cooling system to make sure they're in good condition. Check belts and hoses for cracks or fraying that could lead to problems after extended use.

Ensure your wiper blades are in good shape in case you pass through a rainy patch, and have someone help you check that your headlights, taillights and turn signals are all working properly.

## PLANNING YOUR ROUTE

One of the best parts of any road trip is mapping out a path, as long as there's a little room for improvisation. Plan ahead and make the most of these tools



that can help you find the right stops along the way.

**Know what's coming**—Apps like Roadtrippers and GasBuddy can help you pick the best place to make a pit stop. Get suggestions for must-visit restaurants and scenic drives or just scope out the most affordable gas prices so you can make the most of your detours.

**Go analog**—GPS is an invaluable resource on the road, but it's still smart to have a physical map to orient yourself just in case you lose signal or your battery dies. Maps can even be a fun distraction for kids and give them a hands-on way to follow along with where you are.

**Track your itinerary**—If you've already set up all your reservations for hotels, restaurants and attractions, TripIt can keep track of it all in one place. The app syncs with your inbox to compile an itinerary, so you don't have to search for each confirmation email, and sends you reminders so you can focus on having fun.

**Don't be afraid to rest**—If you're driving for multiple days, be realistic about how far you can go before resting for the night. It's better to lean toward too many stops than too few. You can even pull over for a quick 30-minute nap if you're feeling drowsy.

## FUN AND GAMES

Hitting the open road also means getting to spend plenty of time with your favorite people. So don't forget



to prepare the food, games and music that will help you make the most of it.

**State of play**—Road trip games are classic, from the Alphabet Game and I Spy to Two Truths and a Lie and 20 Questions. Make your own fun by taking turns thinking of a movie and describing it in the worst way possible to see who can guess it. Or, learn more about each other by picking a category like songs, books or foods and building your own top-five lists.

**Fight the munchies**—Stops at hole-in-the-wall restaurants are a must for



any road trip. But someone is bound to get hangry in between meals. Everyone's favorite snacks will vary, but it's hard to go wrong with some trail mix or jerky. You can even pack fruit and rice cakes for healthy options.

**The perfect mix**—Planning out a playlist that will make everyone happy is a tall task. You want music that will fit the mood and maybe even complement the terrain you're driving through. Fortunately, you don't have to do it alone these days. If everyone shares the same music service, you can make a shared playlist that everyone can contribute to. You can even make a game out of it, guessing who's the secret Swiftie or where all those oldies came from. 📱

# HEALING HILLS

Cherokee Creek helps boys thrive through nature, structure and support



English and language arts teacher Cameron Keer helps a student.

Story by PATRICK SMITH

For students attending Cherokee Creek Boys School, the time away from home has never been more fun — or more meaningful.

Employees describe Cherokee Creek, which opened in 2003, as a summer camp, plus a boarding school and therapy. Operating year-round, the therapeutic boarding school is licensed by the state of South Carolina and nationally accredited by The Joint Commission.

Cherokee Creek caters to boys ages 10-15, typically fifth graders through high school sophomores. The school usually hosts between 30-40 students who stay for 12-15 months. Parents often seek the benefits of Cherokee Creek if their son is dealing with ADHD, anxiety, depression, high-functioning autism, grief and loss, school bullying or school refusal, learning challenges and sometimes the struggles that may come from adoption or divorce.

“The goal is for the students to become more independent in their studies and self-manage their daily life,” says Shaler Cooper, senior director of marketing and admissions. “We help to figure out the complications of their challenges so they

can focus on academics. We help students through a lot of family involvement, adventure programming and other trips to help the student get going in a positive direction.”

## GETTING STARTED

After more than six years of work, Cherokee Creek founders Ron and Beth Black turned their self-proclaimed “wild idea” into a reality for Westminster.

“We sent our son to a therapeutic boarding school in Northern Idaho, and it was so helpful to our family,” Beth says. “We knew that opening our own school for young boys was an opportunity to help them and their families through the struggle. It was one way Ron and I wanted to pay it forward.”

To make the therapy as effective as possible and give families the best chance to make successful changes, the Blacks knew it was crucial to work with younger boys.

“We wanted to intervene at the time when a child is still interested in pleasing his parents instead of his peers and joining the crowd,” Beth says. “We created a curriculum that’s interesting and fun.

They’re outdoors in nature with creeks, forests, rocks, waterfalls, all the things that boys need to learn to be boys.”

A typical day includes some type of physical activity first, followed by core subjects like math, English, science and social studies. For lunch, the entire school community eats together, from the executive director to maintenance personnel and nurses. Afternoons and evenings usually include more elective classes, study time, group activities and free time for everything from board games and volleyball to golf, soccer, track, whitewater rafting, horseback riding and more.

## THE BENEFITS OF BROADBAND

While many schools across the country have long benefited from high-speed internet, true innovation and efficiency only began at remotely located Cherokee Creek Boys School when Upcountry Fiber delivered its game-changing service.

“We were disconnected for so long, and now technological advancements have allowed us to come into the 21st century,” Beth says. “With satellite, storms would disrupt our service. When you’ve got a





child that's away at school and you can't reach them, that's scary. High-speed internet was a confidence builder and a huge safety factor. It lets us better serve students and their families."

Broadband also helped to increase efficiency through access to online medical records. "Without reliable internet, we relied on paper files for medication management," Shaler says. "There were countless hours of labor to ensure we were compliant."

While the internet has changed school processes, it's also changed students' behavior. "We see some students who need time and space away from an overuse of technology," Shaler says. "Here they have access to nature and exposure to new activities or old activities they've forgotten."

To create a healthy relationship with technology, Cherokee Creek added a digital citizenship curriculum to teach safe online behavior and balance technology with other healthy opportunities.

"We work with students and their families on a technology plan," Shaler says. "Before our service with Upcountry Fiber, we didn't have the ability for students to reintegrate their cellphones on campus. Now, we can teach students and parents

with the WiFi here and help them transition home successfully. It's revolutionized our world."

### GRATEFUL GRADUATES

With more than 600 Cherokee Creek alumni, the school is proud to welcome students back for a firsthand perspective on how the time away helped them adjust.

"For our 20th anniversary, we had about 45 students come back to visit," Beth says. "It's sweet to see it come full circle, and it's so rewarding to see the positive mark we've left with these kids. It's truly wonderful." 🗨️



**ABOVE:** Academic Dean Calvin Croxton helps students with computer work.

**TOP:** Therapy huts are flanked by gardens students create and maintain.

Photos by Mark Gilliland

## JOIN THE BOTO THE BEAR CHARITY RIDE

The Cherokee Creek Boys School mascot, BOTO the Bear, short for Be Open To Outcome, is hosting a charity bike ride to help raise money and awareness for adolescent mental health challenges.

In 2024, BOTO hosted a ride for the Cherokee Creek scholarship fund from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. In September, school staff, area residents and alumni parents will cross much of Missouri in five days for the same goal.

Students will ride stationary bikes on campus, and virtual participants can also join to log their miles and raise awareness through social media. Learn more about the event at [cherokeecreek.net](http://cherokeecreek.net).



# HOW THE WEST WAS HEARD

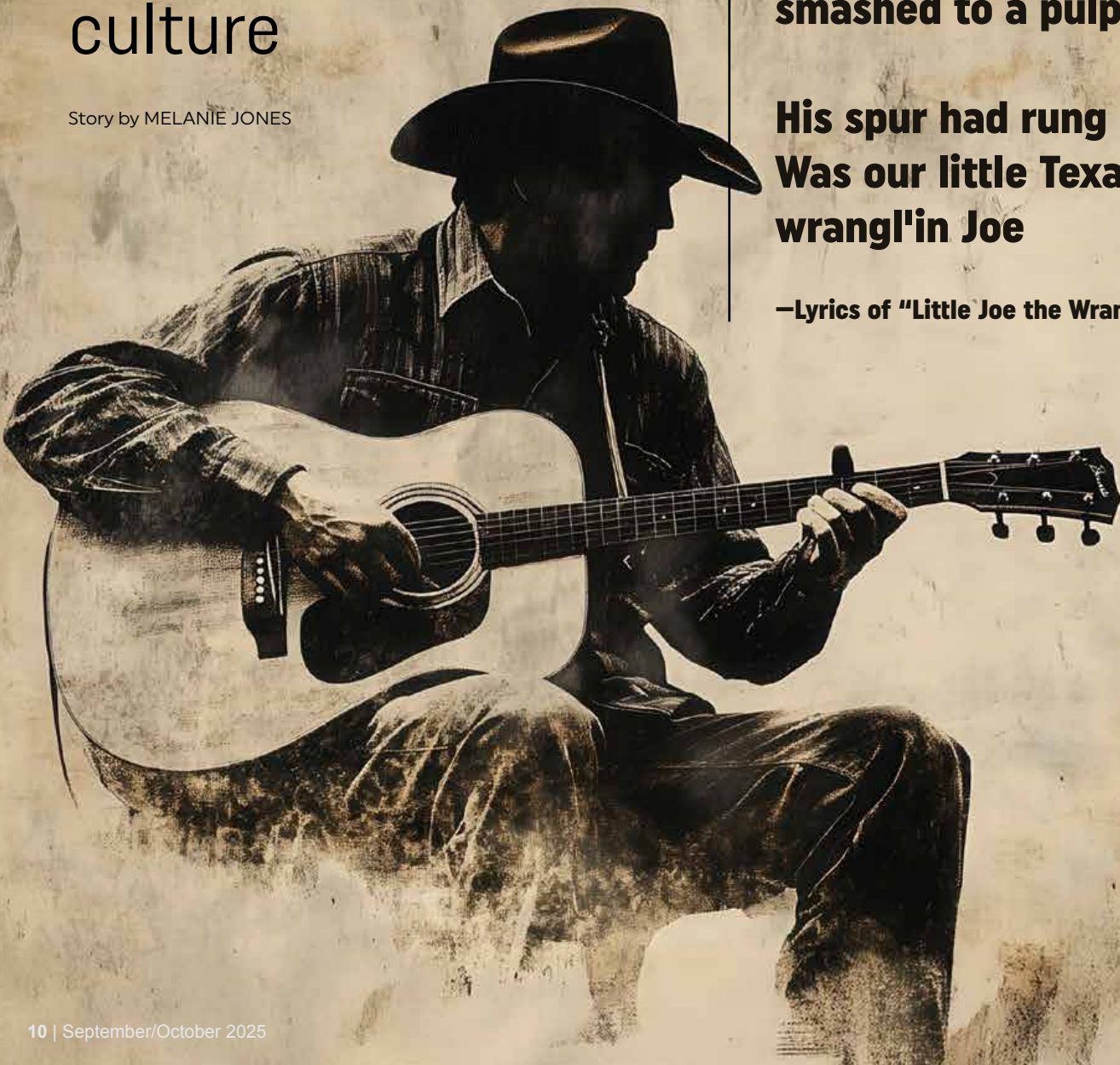
Poet and musician captures cowboy culture

Story by MELANIE JONES

**Next morn'in just  
at daybreak  
And beneath his horse,  
smashed to a pulp**

**His spur had rung his knell  
Was our little Texas Faithful,  
wrangl'in Joe**

—Lyrics of “Little Joe the Wrangler”







Andy Hedges plays several instruments favored by cowboys, including the banjo.

Andy Hedges, a cowboy poet, musician and podcaster, collects oral histories of the Old West the way rodeo champs collect belt buckles. He's a champion of cowboy culture, and he has the hat to prove it.

"I think there's something about that image that just resonates with people," he says. "They know cowboys represent some of the best of American values—independence, honesty, hard work. And when they hear it, they're hearing real, authentic stories from cowboy culture. They learn the real truth behind the cowboy image."

Cowboy poetry also extends to music, with songs like "Rounded Up in Glory" and "Little Joe the Wrangler." Roy Rogers and Gene Autry brought that style of music to the silver screen, although the Hollywood version is not at the heart of the genre.

Authenticity inspires events across the country, from the Cowpoke Fall Gathering in Loomis, California, to Old West Days in Valentine, Nebraska. Minnesota annually declares a Cowboy Poetry Week, and Andy is returning to Jonesborough, Tennessee, where he performed several times. Cowboy music has even made it to the world-famous Carnegie Hall.

## DISCOVERY

Andy, who lives in Lubbock, Texas, is part of a movement that began in 1985, when a group of cowboys met in Elko, Nevada, for the inaugural National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. It's where cowboys swap tales, sing songs of the range and recite poetry that fills lonely days and nights.

What makes a poet a cowboy poet? Andy says his friend Vess Quinlan explains it this way: "He told me there's two ways you can make a deposit in the cowboy poetry bank. One is by being a working cowboy who writes poetry. The other one is to be a non-cowboy who writes poetry that is so good, it becomes accepted by working cowboys. And, of course, it has to be authentic. It has to ring true to those people."

"A lot of people write or recite cowboy poetry or sing the old cowboy songs or write new songs," Andy says. "The truth is a lot

of us, including myself, have never made a living as a cowboy."

Andy has spent years immersing himself in cowboy culture's history, poetry and music. "I try really hard to represent the culture in an authentic way," he says.

He grew up hearing stories of his dad, who worked the rodeo circuit before becoming a Primitive Baptist preacher. He watched old Hollywood Westerns and listened to Western music. "All I really thought I wanted to do was be a cowboy," he says.

But his true obsession with cowboy culture began when he saw an episode of "Austin City Limits" featuring Michael Martin Murphy and friends. Those friends included cowboy poet Waddie Mitchell, cowboy singer Don Edwards and the groups Sons of the San Joaquin and Riders in the Sky. "It just opened that world up to me," Andy says. "I didn't realize there were people who still sang the old songs. I'd never heard cowboy poetry before I heard Waddie on that show."

A self-taught guitarist, young Andy learned some of the old songs. "It was really the beginning of a lifelong obsession with cowboy poetry and cowboy songs," he says.

By the time he could drive, the homeschooled teen was traveling to cowboy gatherings. By 20, he made it to Elko, where he's appeared 17 times. Since recording his album of duets, "Ride On, Cowboy," he and some of the album's guests have appeared on the Grand Ole Opry and practiced, practiced, practiced their way to Carnegie Hall, where they performed for an appreciative audience in March 2024.

The music has an international audience. While travelers come to the United States for gatherings, some performers also toured overseas. Andy even traveled to Turkmenistan as part of a cultural exchange. "The cowboy has always been the folk hero of America," he says. "People identify with that image. You know, when I traveled to Turkmenistan, or just travel overseas not performing, when I wear a cowboy hat, people love that and immediately associate that image with the United States." 🇺🇸

## SWAPPING STORIES

Cowboy poet and musician Andy Hedges will be the teller-in-residence at the National Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee, Sept. 2-6. Andy has participated in the National Storytelling Festival before.

"It's a really fantastic gathering of all kinds of storytellers from different traditions," he says of the festival. "I was honored to be there representing the cowboy tradition and sharing cowboy poetry with them." As teller-in-residence, he'll perform a concert every day, make media appearances and take part in other community events. For more information on the event, go to [storytellingcenter.net](http://storytellingcenter.net).

To learn more about cowboy culture, check out Andy's podcast, "Cowboy Crossroads." You can download episodes at [andyhedges.com/cowboy-crossroads](http://andyhedges.com/cowboy-crossroads).

# Hope on the Field

## Football games become platform for suicide prevention, awareness

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA and MATT LEDGER

While football fans are returning to the stands to cheer for their favorite teams, a local non-profit organization is gearing up to draw attention to a matter of life and death.

Making My Mark—an organization dedicated to raising awareness of suicide prevention, advocacy and education—hosts an annual fundraiser, Hike for Hope, in partnership with Oconee County Schools.

Hal and Lynn Dunlap founded Making My Mark in 2018, three years after their son, Mark, took his own life at the age of 27. Since losing their son, the couple dedicate themselves to destigmatizing mental illness, the public people and raising awareness.

Five years ago, the Dunlaps approached the School District of Oconee County about partnering in September, which is Suicide Prevention Month. The collaboration is an awareness campaign, including presentations designed to share ways for parents and friends to start crucial conversations.

“We want to keep this from happening over and over again,” Hal says. “Suicide happens once every 11 minutes in this country, and there are around 20 attempts for every one suicide.”

### PARTNERSHIP FOR PREVENTION

Hike for Hope was traditionally held at Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative, but last year Hurricane Helene barreled through the area, forcing organizers to shift gears and adapt. The 2024 event was moved to a September Walhalla High School football game.

This year, the hike will evolve into symbolic walks around the track during select

high school football games. Volunteers will be on hand at a table with resources, and the announcers will share public service messages throughout the game.


“Not only will Oconee’s schools be exposed to the message, by default, the three other communities playing against Oconee schools will hear it, too,” says Carrie Zimmerman, the district’s school and community liaison.

“It doesn’t matter what you look like, what your financial situation is, what your talents are,” Hal says. “Anxiety and depression are real. Stress and trauma are unprecedented in our society. Combustible events happen. Combine all those things together, you’ve got quite the problem.”

Carrie agrees, stressing that “suicide doesn’t have boundaries—it’s not just one

type of person that you could pick out in a crowd. It could be anybody. It’s so important to pay attention.”

“You matter, you are not alone, and you are loved,” Hal says.

While those words may seem simple, for some they are a lifeline. To learn more, go to [makingmymark.org](https://makingmymark.org) or follow Making My Mark Inc. on Facebook. 

### SHARING THE MESSAGE

Making My Mark will be taking its mission to raise awareness of suicide prevention to the following high school football games this fall:

- Sept. 5, Walhalla High School vs. Chesnee High School
- Sept. 12, West-Oak High School vs. Franklin County High School
- Sept. 19, Seneca High School vs. Travelers Rest High School

If you or anyone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, contact the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by dialing 988.



Many students take part in the Hike for Hope.

Photo courtesy of Making My Mark



# Community Lessons

## Upcountry Fiber staffers to lead digital literacy classes

Story by MATT LEDGER

**D**elivering the power of fiber broadband to local schools is one of many ways Upcountry Fiber goes above and beyond across our service area. When students and teachers are connected, the possibilities are endless.

"We're helping empower the next generation with the tools they need to learn, lead and thrive," says Shannon Sears, West Carolina director of commercial operations.

To enhance these tools, Upcountry Fiber began a series of broadband education classes for the community, taught by our staff members. Lessons like Digital Defense, WiFi X 101 and Streaming 101 are designed to help members gain confidence and control over their home networks.

### DIGITAL PRIVACY

Since October is Cybersecurity Awareness Month, it's the perfect time to level up your digital defenses. Senior Business Solutions Manager Zac Campbell hosts lessons covering several areas, including malware and phishing.

"When in doubt, delete it," Zac says. "If it's too good to be true, it's probably not true. If you aren't expecting it, then question it."

Network Operations Manager Troy Mack teaches WiFi X 101, which helps members better use Upcountry Fiber's app, allowing parents to set controls on their children's devices. "This can be done during study time to incentivize learning," Troy says.

"The top-of-the-line WiFi X router gives you peace of mind that we have support there 24/7," he says. "If you have any issues, we will work to resolve them and even replace systems if needed."

### CHANGING CHANNELS

Marketing and Communications Specialist Hannah S. Patterson teaches the Streaming 101 course and says streaming platforms were a lifesaver during her college years.

"As a student-athlete, rare days off were precious, and I loved spending them binge-watching Netflix or hosting movie nights with friends," she says. "Now, with my busy lifestyle, on-demand streaming continues to be a game-changer. It gives me the freedom to watch whatever I want, whenever I want, without being tied to a cable schedule." 📺



**Shannon Sears**

Director of Commercial Operations

**Fun fact:** Shannon Sears loves playing golf today, but in high school he mostly played basketball and soccer.

"How would Upcountry Fiber's service have helped when you were in school? Well, I'm fairly old, so I would have been a superstar student if I had Upcountry Fiber's internet when I was in school," he says.



**Zac Campbell**

Senior Business Solutions Manager

**Fun fact:** Zac Campbell attended Abbeville High School, where his favorite courses were math and agriculture. Zac also played on the baseball team.

"Upcountry Fiber would have been so useful in Mr. Raines' ag class," Zac says. "It would enable IoT—the Internet of Things—for ag-related cameras and environmental sensors to monitor the greenhouse."



**Troy Mack**

Network Operations Manager

**Fun fact:** Troy Mack went to Shelby Senior High School in Ohio, and his favorite courses were vocational agriculture and English literature. He also played golf.

"If I had Upcountry Fiber's service when I was in school it would have saved a lot of research time, not to mention the late fees at the library on overdue book returns," he says.



**Hannah Patterson**

Marketing & Communications Specialist

**Fun fact:** Hannah Patterson went to Lexington High School. She liked math classes and was a member of the golf team.

"Upcountry Fiber's high-speed internet would have enabled me to stream educational videos and download large files such as e-books or software, creating a faster and more seamless educational experience," Hannah says.

# Dinner on a Stick

Kabobs make for easy meals, quick cleanup

**D**o you ever crave an easy meal with meat and vegetables? Try putting kabobs on the menu. It's a tasty grill-friendly choice, and cleanup is easy.

Begin with a tender cut of meat like top sirloin, which is affordable. Filet also works well. If you'd like, substitute chicken or tofu. Just remember to cut your protein portions to about the same size so they cook evenly. You can add as many chopped veggies as you like.

Begin with a fresh marinade. Homemade chimichurri does double duty as a marinade and seasoning sauce—it works for any protein. Round out your meal with crunchy Asian coleslaw and a fresh apple cake for dessert.

Photography by **Mark Gilliland**  
Food Styling by **Rhonda Gilliland**

## GRILLED CHIMICHURRI STEAK KABOBS

### CHIMICHURRI SAUCE

- 1/2 cup fresh cilantro, packed, leaves and tender stems
- 1/2 cup fresh parsley, packed
- 3 tablespoons fresh oregano or 3 teaspoons dried
- 1 lemon, zested and juiced
- 3-4 cloves of garlic
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 teaspoons red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

Put all ingredients in a food processor

and pulse until blended. Taste and season with salt and pepper as desired.

### STEAK KABOBS

- 32 ounces top sirloin, or the protein of your choice, cut into 2-inch cubes
- 36-48 baby potatoes, golden or mini reds
- 2 medium bell peppers, any color, chopped into 2-inch pieces
- 2 small red onions, chopped into 2-inch pieces
- Kosher salt and ground black pepper





## CRUNCHY ASIAN COLESLAW

- 2 packages ramen noodles, any flavor
- 2 16-ounce packages shredded coleslaw mix
- 1 cup slivered almonds, toasted
- 5 green onions, chopped
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/3 cup rice vinegar

Reserve the flavor packets from the noodles for another use or toss. Crush the

noodles and set aside. Toss together the coleslaw mix, almonds and green onions in a large salad bowl.

Whisk together the sugar, oil and vinegar in a small bowl until mixed. Add the dressing to the coleslaw mixture and toss to coat. Mix in the chopped noodles. Serve immediately. Makes 12 servings.

Note: You may prepare the salad in advance, adding the noodles just before serving so they are crunchy.

## FRESH APPLE CAKE

- 1 cup oil
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 eggs
- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 cup pecans or walnuts, chopped
- 3 cups apples, peeled and chopped

### CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened
- 16 ounces powdered sugar

- 8 tablespoons butter
- 2 teaspoons vanilla

Measure oil into a large bowl, then whisk in sugar and eggs.

Mix together the flour, salt, baking powder and cinnamon, then add to the creamed mixture, beating well. Add vanilla, then fold in nuts and apples.

Pour mixture into a greased 9-by-13-inch pan. Bake at 350 F for 50 minutes or until cake tests done. Cover with foil if it gets too dark around the edges.

To make frosting: Combine all frosting ingredients and spread over cooled cake.

After reserving some of the chimichurri to use during cooking and for dipping the cooked kabobs, combine the rest of the sauce and the cubed protein in a sealable bag. Set aside to marinate. Meanwhile, soak the skewers in water a minimum of 20 minutes so they don't burn on the grill.

Add potatoes to a large pot, cover with water and 2 teaspoons of salt. Boil for 5-7 minutes or until fork tender. Drain and rinse the potatoes. Let them sit in cold water to cool. Chop veggies and have them ready to slide onto your skewers.

Now it's time to assemble: Using a soaked skewer, put either a potato or piece

of meat on first, so the rest of the veggies don't slide off the end. Then alternate between meat, potatoes and veggies.

Prepare the grill to about 500 F. Once it's ready, place steak kabobs perpendicular to the grill grates. Grill 3 minutes on each side for medium doneness. If you use chicken, cook for 5-7 minutes. Tofu needs to cook about 10 minutes. While cooking, brush the reserved chimichurri on the kabobs.

Remove the kabobs from the grill and let rest for 3-5 minutes. Use the chimichurri as an extra dipping sauce, if desired. 🍴





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