



JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024

CONNECTION



Oak Grove go-to

Fill up on food and more

ST. JUDE
AUCTION

ONE-POT
WONDERS



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association

Supporting the Universal Service Fund

For more than 100 years, America has embraced the belief that everyone should have reliable access to reasonably priced communications services. Today, the federal Universal Service Fund, known as the USF, continues its vital role in this mission. The fund helps rural consumers access services comparable in price and quality to those in urban areas, making services more affordable for low-income families. It also supports critical connections important to schools, libraries, health care and businesses.

As we work with NTCA members daily, we see the good the USF does for rural America. We proudly support the continuation of the USF even as new broadband programs expand access to unserved areas. Simply, it makes a practical difference.

Consider, for example, the economic value of broadband, which exceeds \$1.5 trillion annually. It sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs and adds billions of dollars to local economies. With the growing demand for broadband, the USF supports the advanced, sustainable services rural businesses need to compete globally.

Similarly, fast and reliable broadband access helps narrow health care disparities between rural and metropolitan communities. The USF expands the reach of medical services through telehealth and fosters improved patient communication as well as the adoption of electronic health records.

Join us in support of the USF and its essential mission to provide broadband access to all rural residents. I encourage you to learn more about the critical role of the USF by visiting ntca.org/universalservice. 📄



Help may be a click away

Thanks to telehealth services, a trip to a physician’s office isn’t always necessary, and when you’re fighting a winter bug, that convenience counts. Here are a few tips to make your telehealth visit as productive and easy as possible:

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPOT: Find a quiet, well-lit space for your telehealth session. It’s not a Broadway audition, but good lighting helps your doctor see you better. Eliminate background noise as much as possible — you don’t want the family pet stealing the spotlight during your appointment!

HAVE YOUR INFO READY: Make a mini cheat sheet with your symptoms, questions and any medications you take. It’s easy to forget things during a virtual visit. Plus, it makes you look like a pro patient!

DRESS APPROPRIATELY: Pajamas might be comfy, but consider saving them for bedtime. Dressing appropriately can not only help your doctor assess your physical condition but also put you in the right mindset for a serious health chat.

BE HONEST AND OPEN: Telehealth works best when you’re open about your symptoms and concerns. Don’t be shy. Doctors can only help if they know the whole story. 📄

Illustration by A.barks/Adobe Stock



Tugging at your purse strings

Online romance scams can break more than just your heart

Falling in love can make anyone vulnerable. Shady cybercriminals know this and are all too eager to steal hearts and much more.

According to the FBI, a romance scam occurs when someone creates a fake online profile and fakes romantic interest to gain trust to steal the victim's money or personal information. Also known as "catfishing," romance scams can be devastating, both financially and emotionally.

Nearly 70,000 people reported being the victim of catfishing in 2022, and losses hit a staggering \$1.3 billion, according to Federal Trade Commission statistics. But actual losses are likely much higher — romance fraud is grossly underreported due to its sensitive nature.

Romance scammers often prey on older people, who may be divorced or widowed. Online dating apps are just one place they lurk. They also reach out through popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. They target victims' insecurities and work to develop intimacy as quickly as possible — a practice known as "love bombing." Scammers attempt to make the victim feel special or like they're the "only one who gets" the culprit.

Sometimes a scammer will ask for a short-term loan to get out of a bad situation and start a new life with the victim. Or, they'll say access to a credit card would smooth the way to a relationship. Other gifts include asking for money to cover the customs charges for an expensive gift, or a crypto investor who wants to help the victim cash in on the trend.

Despite the warning signs, victims are often too lovestruck to realize it's a swindle.

Romance scam victims can be male or female, young or old. Their only common denominator is that they believe in true love, and they feel they have found it. 📧

Follow your head, not your heart

- Allow relationships to develop slowly and naturally.
- Set up a video chat to verify the identity of the person you are messaging.
- Research the person you are messaging.
- Conduct a reverse image search to make sure the person you are talking to is really the person in the photo.

If you've been scammed

Falling victim to a scammer can happen to anyone. Talking about your experience can lessen feelings of shame and help protect others from being victimized.

- Immediately contact your bank or financial institution.
- Report it as soon as possible to the FTC at reportfraud.ftc.gov.
- Alert the FBI's fraud division — the Internet Crime Complaint Center — at ic3.gov/. Be prepared to share any records of your communication with the scammer.
- Contact the platform where the scammer first contacted you, so it can prevent others from being victimized.

A communications network built for today and tomorrow

When NCTC committed to bringing a fast, reliable internet network to our community, we understood the work would be equal parts challenging and rewarding. Also, it would require a significant investment. However, our decisions are always guided by fiscal responsibility, and we've built with an eye on today's needs while planning for tomorrow's innovations.



**JOHNNY
MCCLANAHAN**
President/CEO

When it comes to technology, nothing is truly futureproof. Eventually something better will come along. But the systems and infrastructure that make our internet-based services possible are as close to futureproof as possible.

The start of 2024 is an opportunity to appreciate all the work that's gotten us this far. It's also a time to look at the exciting possibilities ahead, knowing NCTC is ready for a future we are only beginning to imagine.

First, let's look at some of today's less visible, but vital, uses of fast internet service. Consider medical records. Generally, these files have been digitized, making it possible to securely store information while allowing physicians locally and nationally to share the details needed for a modern medical system. The performance of our internet network is the link needed to give local health care

providers a quick, reliable way to share information.

Businesses often exchange large files or rely on videoconferencing to keep teams connected, meet with clients and collaborate. Even an industry such as agriculture — which at first seems far removed from the digital world — relies on the internet and connected devices to monitor machinery, soil moisture, weather conditions and more.

These are just a few of the ways services like those provided by NCTC are woven into the background of businesses, government services, education — all the fundamental parts of our lives.

But that's just the beginning. Our homes are increasingly tied to the digital world. Streaming music and video services are popular options. Countless songs, TV shows, movies, short films and more are just a click away.

Many new appliances can connect to the internet, and it's often very handy. Keep watch on a slow cooker simmering away while you're at work, thanks to a home Wi-Fi connection and smartphone app. Also, internet-connected security systems let you keep an eye on your world, even if you're away for a few days.

Gaming — including the use of virtual reality devices offering elaborate, immersive communities — is extremely popular. The key to the best performance and most enjoyable experience? A fast, reliable internet connection just like the one available to you from NCTC.

As the number of connected devices expands and cloud-based tools become even more important, experts forecast an ever-growing need for internet services capable of moving greater amounts of information even faster.

The network created by NCTC — one many major cities would envy — is capable and prepared to serve you in 2024 and beyond. Happy New Year to our valued customers and members. Thank you for being a part of NCTC. 📧

The North Central Connection is a bimonthly newsletter published by NCTC, © 2024. It is distributed without charge to all member/owners of the cooperative.



North Central is a member-owned corporation dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Northern Middle Tennessee and Southern Kentucky, including Macon County, Tennessee, Allen County and Warren County, Kentucky. NCTC also serves portions of Sumner, Trousdale, Smith and Clay counties in Tennessee.

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Pioneer
UTILITY RESOURCES

On the Cover:



Oak Grove General Store owner Bo Solomon strives for convenience and consistency in his Beth Page shop.
See story Page 8.

Photo by Tony Young

Thank you!

NCTC recognizes employees for service milestones



Charlie Bowman, 25 years



Casandra Mercer, 25 years



Brian Langford, 20 years



Anthony Morgan, 20 years



Jason Russell, 20 years



Cody Cherry, 10 years



Lisa Perrigo, 10 years



Eric Ramsey, 10 years

Campise and West honored with NCTC Community Service Awards

NCTC recently presented the cooperative's Community Service Award to two of the region's outstanding citizens — Nancy Campise, of Scottsville, Kentucky, and Lt. Larry West, a school resource officer with Macon County Schools.



Nancy Campise

Campise received the award for her tireless efforts to help others. She works at two food kitchens, visits the sick to relieve caregivers, provides meals and picks up medicines for homebound individuals, advocates for animals, mentors children and drives people to doctor appointments — some as far away as Nashville. NCTC donated \$500 on her behalf to St. Jude Children's Hospital and \$500 to the Bowling Green Warren County Humane Society.



Larry West

West, known by many as Mr. Larry, goes above and beyond to make students feel safe and loved. In addition to taking on additional training to ensure student safety, he works at after-school activities and gives kind words to the children. He also checks in on neighbors, helps them mow their yards and assists with various tasks. NCTC donated \$1,000 on West's behalf to the Macon County Sheriff's Office's Shop with a Cop program.

Janet Rich and Nelson White retire

NCTC recently announced the retirements of longtime employees Janet Rich and Nelson White. Rich worked in the Scottsville, Kentucky, business office as a customer service representative. She worked for the company for 24 years. White, who most recently worked in the central office as a technician, spent 27 years at the cooperative. While the NCTC family will dearly miss these friends, we also wish them a happy next chapter.



Janet Rich and Johnny McClanahan



Nelson White and Johnny McClanahan

Cumberland Caverns
near McMinnville,
Tennessee

BEAUTY LIES BELOW

Area caverns contain
links to the past

Story by KATHY DENES

Bones and footprints of prehistoric jaguars and their prey are preserved within many caves across the Southeast, but that's just the beginning. There are also works of art, as well as artifacts and writings of indigenous peoples — from the ancients to those who would face a Trail of Tears. There are even tools left behind by those who mined saltpeter used in multiple wars.

There are colonies of bats, ever-growing stalactites and stalagmites, as well as flowing underground waters. Some caves are easily found, offering entry through a vast visible gash in a mountainside. Others remain hidden until their accidental discovery, perhaps by a passerby on a hot day who notices cool air seeping out through a wall of rock. They range in size from shallow squeezes to soaring cathedrals, and their passages can stretch for hundreds of miles.

KENTUCKY



Kentucky's Mammoth Cave is the world's longest known cave system, with over 400 miles of its corridors mapped and surveyed. Within a short drive of Mammoth are numerous other caves with their own claims to fame, making the Park City area one of the most popular cave tour destinations in the country. Popular neighboring attractions include Diamond Caverns, a World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve that has offered public tours for more than 160 years. A good resource for learning more about these and other notable caves across the state is worldofcaves.com/the-best-list-of-caves-in-kentucky.

Photo courtesy of Cumberland Caverns

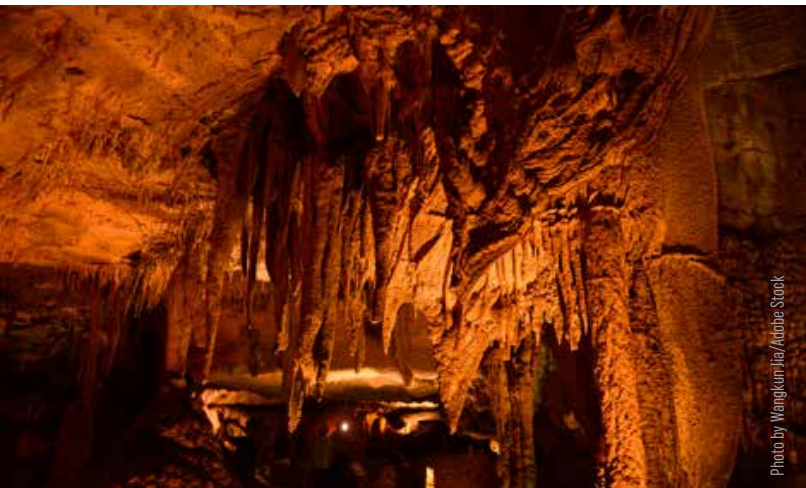


Photo by Wangkun Jia / Adobe Stock



Photo by K.A. / Adobe Stock

In Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, stalactites create a memorable natural spectacle.

The National Park Service manages Mammoth Cave.

TENNESSEE



Tennessee's caverns are spread far and wide. Near McMinnville are Cumberland Caverns, open daily year-round, and Big Bone Cave, named for the giant sloth bones found near where Civil War-era saltpeter vats remain. In the Chattanooga area, visitors can descend by elevator deep into Lookout Mountain to witness the beauty of Ruby Falls or can cross the interstate to visit Raccoon Mountain Caverns. A drive up I-75 brings visitors to Sweetwater, where boats glide across The Lost Sea in artifact-rich Craighead Caverns, open every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas. Continue toward the Great Smoky Mountains to find the Forbidden Caverns of Sevierville and impressive Tuckaleechee Caverns in Townsend. Read about some of these and more at explorationjunkie.com/caves-in-tennessee.

ALABAMA



Alabama is home to hundreds of caves stretching along the Appalachian foothills. Of those, six are touted by onlyinyourstate.com as among the very best and included in its Alabama Cave Trail. These renowned subterranean destinations include Russell Cave, Neversink Pit, Sauta Cave, Cathedral Caverns, Rickwood Caverns and Majestic Cave, formerly called DeSoto Caverns. Find information about these and other popular Alabama caves at enterthecaves.com/best-caves-in-alabama. 📍

DIG DEEPER

- » cavern.com/directory
- » worldofcaves.com/the-ultimate-list-of-caves-in-america
- » abackpackerstale.com/best-caves-in-the-united-states
- » Also, visit tripadvisor.com and search for "caves" to find options in your area and beyond.



TO SAVE A CAVE

Protecting the fragile ecosystems and histories of caves large and small is the mission of Southeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. The nonprofit has worked since 1991 to acquire and sustainably manage endangered caves. Through cave purchases and its EduBat and Project Underground programs, among others, SCCi has preserved historic Cherokee syllabary, written characters serving as an alphabet, found on cavern walls and created compelling curriculum and educator workshops. Check out the group's ongoing projects at saveyourcaves.org.



Photo courtesy of Cumberland Caverns

Cumberland Caverns near McMinnville, Tennessee, offers unique adventures, including a lantern tour.



Hometown convenience

Fill up your tank and your belly at Oak Grove General Store

Story by JEN CALHOUN

When Bo Solomon took over the Oak Grove General Store about five years ago, he focused on what made the store great so he could make it even better. For nearly a decade, the homey, barn-shaped convenience store situated in the community of Oak Grove had drawn customers with its tasty country cooking and proximity to home. But Bo knew there was still room for improvement.

“We just tried to carry more products,” says Bo, who worked in the convenience store business for years before taking over Oak Grove. “We also branded with Shell gasoline, so we could offer the Shell discounts from rewards cards.”

The store’s staff also worked hard to be consistent with



Bo Solomon owns the Oak Grove General Store. The convenience store offers groceries, gas and some restaurant fare.

their offerings and reduced the hours of operation, which saved money and helped retain employees. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, Bo says finding good employees grew increasingly difficult. “All businesses have to structure and run things differently these days,” he says. “You’ve got to do right by employees and do things better than before.”

SOUTHERN CHARMS

With all the changes, Oak Grove General Store stayed true to its mission of providing a place to shop for supplies without a long drive to the city. The wood paneled store still offers inside dining, along with rocking chairs on the front porch and picnic tables outside.

“We sell gas, a line of

snacks, some groceries and automotive items and beer and soft drinks,” Bo says. “We also have a full kitchen where we do breakfast, lunch and some evening foods to order.”

The kitchen has gained a following of locals and visitors, who show up for menu items that range from sausage and cheese biscuits to specialty items like fried egg, bologna and cheese sandwiches.

“We’re on Highway 52 East, so we have people traveling to work in Gallatin and Portland,” Bo says. “We try to have fuel at a good price, so when people stop for gas they’ll come in the store and say, ‘Oh, I didn’t know you had this.’ The convenience store part compliments the fuel, and the fuel compliments the store. The restaurant binds the whole thing together.”

The shop is open seven days a week, starting at 5 a.m. and closing at 8 p.m., Monday through Saturday. On Sundays, the hours of operation are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

CUSTOMER CARE

Pleasing customers isn’t always easy, but Bo’s always going to keep trying — mostly because he simply likes the work. “I’m at an age where I could probably retire, but I like what I do,” he says. “For me, it’s just working with people. I enjoy the customers.”

During the pandemic, the store never shut down. The staff did its best to find solutions to the many problems the pandemic presented. “I feel like we did the best we could — we’re still doing the best we can to help our customers,” Bo says. “Nowadays, everyone expects really good customer service, and it can be hard to find, but I’ve got a group of people who do their best to help.”

CHANGES

In the near future, Bo says the store will expand its fuel line and upgrade its point of service system, making it easier for the customers and staff. “It will be faster and help them get in and out faster,” he says. “It’ll give us the ability for self-checkout, and it also helps us manage credit card purchases. We’re not scared to spend money, because that helps make money. We’re



The barnlike store in the Oak Grove community gives off an old country store vibe.

constantly changing, but those changes might be small things.”

In recent years, convenience stores have gone from a largely cash business to a largely credit and debit business — something that’s caused shops all over the country to shift how they handle purchases.

“We have to keep everything up to date so we can manage it all correctly,” Bo says.

“And we do partner with Shell. They’re going to help us make sure we do the right things for us to be successful and for them to be successful. That’s always a good thing for a small business to have that kind of support.”

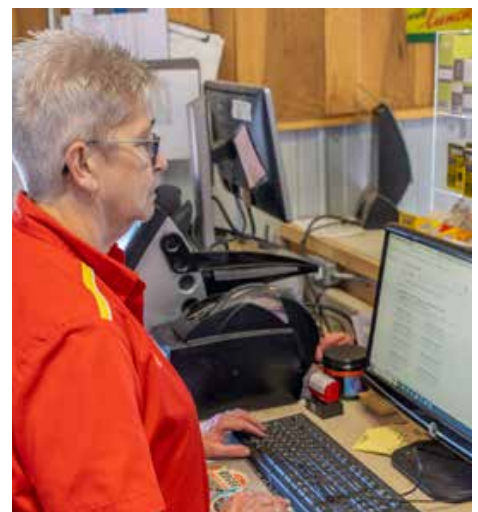
Even though the technology behind businesses continues to change and evolve, some things will always stay the same. “I just like to concentrate on the customer,” Bo says. “If I do a good job at that, then they’ll come back.” 📞



Employee Amber Banscum takes a call-in order.

Food, gas and a country vibe

Oak Grove General Store is more than just a gas station. It also offers breakfast, lunch, some dinner items, snacks, a few grocery and auto items, as well as a nice spot for gathering on the porch or inside. The shop’s address is 2708 Highway 52 East, Beth Page, Tennessee, in the Oak Grove community.



Employee Becky Davis works on a computer at the store.

IN THE GAME

Esports growth offers students community and opportunity

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

The Texas Wesleyan esports program started with a 2017 conversation that wasn't about video games at all. Eugene Friar, who was then working in student affairs and is now director of esports and gaming, approached the vice president of his division to talk about what the university could do to be a fun and exciting option for prospective students.

"I was hoping he'd give me some answers, but he flipped it on me and was like, 'Bring me some ideas, and we'll discuss it,'" Eugene says. "I wasn't thinking esports at all, even though I've been a gamer since the Commodore 64 days."

While brainstorming, Eugene came across fledgling esports programs at places like the University of California, Irvine, Missouri's Maryville University and Robert Morris University in Pennsylvania. Groups of students were coming together to compete in multiplayer games like Overwatch, Super Smash Bros. and League of Legends.

Today, the National Association of Collegiate Esports, or NACE, recognizes more than 240 schools with competitive esports teams. The experience not only opens doors in the gaming industry but can also help students develop skills for a variety of careers.

Texas Wesleyan's esports team evolved from a group focused primarily on competition to one that welcomes anyone from casual hobbyists to hardcore gamers. For Eugene, it's an important community that supports students who might not share other interests on campus. But it's also a

Trojan horse for helping them find their path through school and beyond.

"We tell our recruits early in the process my job is to trick you into learning," Eugene says. "If you want to try out for one of our teams, hopefully we'll go to the stadium and play. But what's your major? What are you going to do after you graduate? How is this going to help you get there?"

LEVELING UP

As access to high-speed internet expands from urban centers to rural areas, competitive gaming's popularity has soared. A study by Pew Research Center found that about 70% of college students say they play video games at least once in a while.

While the Texas Wesleyan Rams have teams for the squad-based shooter game Overwatch 2 and the fighting game Super Smash Bros., it's also important for Eugene to appeal to that larger audience. When the program was more focused on competitive gaming, he found that some students with a casual interest in gaming felt like they didn't belong. That's why the



The Texas Wesleyan University Overwatch team reviews video for a match.

Photo courtesy of Eugene Friar



ABOVE: University of Kentucky students enjoy competing in the school's new esports lounge.

RIGHT: Students try out the gaming lounge at the University of Kentucky's Latinx Open House.

club includes a team that creates, edits and streams content for platforms like Twitch and YouTube, as well as groups for fans of anime, Dungeons & Dragons and more casual gaming.

Eugene says overall participation increased by slightly deemphasizing competition and offering more ways to participate with casual gaming clubs, a social media team and an event team. "We went from having seven competitive teams to two, and the number of students in our program has actually gone up a little bit because there's more ways for people to get involved," he says.



Bryce Edwards, a junior, received a scholarship to help run the esports program and became captain of the school's Smash Bros. team. He says the social and leadership skills he learned in that role will be invaluable as he pursues a career in marketing.

For Kelvin Coker, a senior criminal justice major and wrestler, it's been a new way to connect with people. "People need a place that allows them to be themselves and interact with people of different backgrounds so that they can develop the skills necessary to go through life," Kelvin says. "It was a different vibe than wrestling, which was extremely refreshing. It felt good to be among people who shared interests in things outside of sports."

Heath Price, associate vice president of partnerships at the University of Kentucky, found the same enthusiasm when he first met with an informal esports club on his campus in 2018. With school resources behind it, the UK Esports Club has grown to include hundreds of members who enjoy the university's recently completed gaming lounge, along with approximately 70 students who play competitively.

"What we've seen is that the idea of a gamer just being someone who might be interested in building games is kind of a misnomer," Heath says. "A lot of these

young people have varying interests. I think as much of a career builder as anything is giving people some of those opportunities for exposure and to do things in the community."

TAILOR MADE

Eugene takes a similar approach at Texas Wesleyan. Whether it's a student who wants to start a clothing line designing the school's esports jersey or a mass communications major building the team's content roadmap for the year, he always looks for ways the program can help students pursue their larger goals.

"The content team isn't about making funny content. It's about project management," he says. "The student organizations aren't just about talking about the things you love. They're leading a meeting and organizing people."

With the gaming landscape constantly changing, that may even mean meeting students somewhere other than esports. Texas Wesleyan's teams currently compete in the second division of the NACE Starleague, the biggest collegiate esports league in North America.

The Rams had a national championship-winning team for the FIFA soccer game series. Today, that team doesn't exist because the game no longer exists. Earlier this year, Electronic Arts, publisher of the FIFA series of games, ended its branding partnership with global soccer organization FIFA. That left some competitive players out in the cold and highlights a unique challenge for esports.

"You don't win a national championship in football and a few years later it's like, 'Remember when we used to have a football team?' So when the publishers get involved it's tricky," Eugene says. "It wouldn't surprise me if the esports part of what we do goes away in time and you see the more content creation and pop culture things last. It's about meeting the students' needs and matching their interests in a really positive way."



The Texas Wesleyan University Super Smash Bros. team prepares for a competition.

A pair of hands, one larger and one smaller, are shown from the side, gently cupping a bright red, realistic-looking heart. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white and light blue, suggesting a clean, clinical or hospital setting. The heart is the central focus, symbolizing charity and care.

BIDDING *for a cause*

Lafayette gears up for the 14th Annual St. Jude Charity Auction

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Ben Bray didn't know what to expect the first time his company organized a St. Jude Charity Auction back in 2011. "I thought if we could raise \$10,000 we'd be doing well," he says.

But as the day wore on and the gavel pounded, Bray, owner of Ben Bray Real Estate & Auction, was astonished to see the fundraising total rise until it hit the \$20,000 mark. "It was a tremendous start," he says. "And, as luck would have it, we've been able to increase our donations every year. Last year, we raised over \$60,000. Since the very beginning, we've raised right at \$490,000."

The event returns this year on Saturday, Jan. 13, at the Sally Wells Building at the Macon County Fairgrounds in Lafayette. Anywhere from 200-250 people are expected to attend the auction, which starts at 9 a.m.

SHRINE FOR HOPE

Bray started the auction after brainstorming with some real estate agents, auctioneers and office staff about ways they could give back. Eventually, they

settled on helping St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. The Memphis institution focuses specifically on finding cures and prevention for catastrophic pediatric diseases through research and treatment.

Families with children admitted to the hospital never receive a bill from St. Jude for treatment, travel, housing or food. What's more, the hospital shares its scientific discoveries with the world.

"When you talk about kids, it kind of pulls at your heart," Bray says. "We wanted to make a positive impact on them, as well as their families. The one way we can definitely do that is to raise money to donate to them."

The research hospital was founded in 1962 by the late actor Danny Thomas, who believed "no child should die in the dawn of life," according to the St. Jude website. Thomas named the facility after St. Jude Thaddeus, the patron saint of hopeless causes.

COMMUNITY EFFORT

In the true spirit of giving, Bray says every penny of the money raised from the

auction goes directly to the hospital. "It's not one of those deals where you donate \$1 and 65 cents goes towards expenses," he says.

All the items to be auctioned, as well as all the advertising and equipment used during the event, is donated by businesses and individuals in the community. Bray and his team donate their time and talents, as well. In particular, the office's secretary, Stephanie Mungle, works hard to pull the event together. "She has a heart for kids, and she wants to make it a huge success," Bray says. "Because, at the end of the day, all that really matters is that we were able to make a difference."

Bray also wants to make sure people understand how the community works together to make the event shine. "We can't do this alone," he says. "It's the generosity of everyone who donates their items, their money and their services that makes this happen."

NCTC helps, too, airing free advertisements for the event on its local channel. The company's high-speed fiber internet service also plays a part by simply



The power of community

Local residents and businesses have raised about **\$490,000** for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital since Ben Bray Real Estate & Auction held its first St. Jude Charity Auction in 2011.

providing the infrastructure that helps Bray's business thrive.

"It allows us to do internet advertising on our social media accounts and our website," he says. "In my opinion, it plays a huge role in our advertising campaign — not just for the St. Jude campaign but for our business as well."

Local media companies are also helpful. "They know our goal and mission and don't charge us," Bray says.

As for his business, Bray knows NCTC gives his sales reps a boost — especially when out-of-town buyers come looking for properties. "The high-speed fiber network has undoubtedly given us an edge, and not just for our advertising," he says. "The first thing people want to know is what kind of internet service a property has access to. We hear that every day."

Photo by Gameover/Adobe Stock

DOING GOOD

Every year after Bray tallies the contributions, he and some of his team travel to Memphis to hand over the donation in person. They used to take a truckload of toys for the children until COVID-19 changed gifting regulations.

But that's OK, says Bray, who still gets emotional every time he arrives on the St. Jude campus. "It's amazing the feeling you get when you go there," he says. "By now, they know who we are and know us by name. In the grand scheme of things, the donation we make is not that big compared to others. But big or small, it doesn't matter. It's a common goal, and that goal is to cure childhood cancer. It's something we're very passionate about." 📞



Photo by Anna Stills/Adobe Stock

BEN DRAY

Don't hesitate.
PARTICIPATE!

The 14th Annual St. Jude Charity Auction starts at 9 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 13, inside the Sally Wells Building at the Macon County Fairgrounds in Lafayette. For more information, visit benbrayrealestate.com or find and follow the business on Facebook.

When one pot hits the spot

Simple, delicious and easy

Meals you can make in one pot are ideal for today's busy cooks for two reasons. For starters, little time is wasted going from one pot to another, making sure everything is cooking together nicely. Secondly, you're cooking in one pot, so there's minimal cleanup.

As the name implies, one-pot meals are just that. They are the secret to getting dinner on the table in a jiffy. Generally, the vegetables and protein are cooked together in the same pot. If any other side dishes are needed, it's usually nothing more than a green salad with buttery croutons or a nice piece of crusty bread.

One-pot meals are filled with comfort, something we all yearn for like a big, cozy blanket on a chilly winter's night.



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

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

CHEESEBURGER PASTA

This is the perfect easy wintertime one-pot meal. It's like having a cheeseburger and spaghetti at the same time, and the kids will love it!

- 1 yellow onion
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/2 pound ground beef
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 2 cups beef broth
- 8 ounces pasta shells, uncooked
- 4 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded
- 2 tablespoons pickle relish
- 2 green onions, sliced

Finely dice the onion. Add the onion, olive oil and ground beef to a large deep skillet, and saute over medium heat until the beef is fully browned and the onion is soft and translucent. Drain off any excess fat, if needed.

Add the flour to the skillet and continue

to stir and cook for 1 minute more. The flour will begin to coat the bottom of the skillet. Be careful not to let the flour burn.

Add the tomato sauce and beef broth to the skillet and stir to dissolve the flour off the bottom of the skillet.

Add the uncooked pasta to the skillet and stir to combine. The liquid in the skillet may not fully cover the pasta, but that is OK.

Place a lid on the skillet, turn the heat up to medium-high, and let the liquid come up to a boil. Once it reaches a boil, give it a quick stir to loosen any pasta from the bottom of the skillet. Replace the lid, and turn the heat down to low. Let the pasta simmer, stirring occasionally (always replacing the lid), for about 10 minutes, or until the pasta is tender and the sauce has thickened. Turn off the heat.

Add the shredded cheddar to the skillet and stir until it has melted into the sauce. Stir the relish into the sauce, then top with sliced green onions. Serve warm.



FIVE-HOUR BEEF STEW

Delicious smells will fill your home as this stew cooks slowly in the oven.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 1/2 pounds chuck roast, cut into bite-size pieces 1 cup celery, chunked 4 carrots, chunked 2-3 medium potatoes, chunked 1 onion, sliced or large dice 1/2 cup fresh bread crumbs 1 large can tomatoes 1 cup red wine, optional 1 tablespoon salt 2 tablespoons sugar | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4-5 tablespoons minute tapioca 2-3 generous splashes of Worcestershire sauce |
|---|---|

Do not brown the meat. Combine all ingredients in a large baking dish with a tight-fitting lid or cover securely with foil. Bake in a 250 F oven for 5-6 hours. Do not hurry this stew. The slow oven is the key to success.



ONE-PAN CHICKEN PASTA

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1/4 cup panko breadcrumbs
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon minced garlic, divided
- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 1 1/2 cups crushed tomatoes
- 8 ounces penne pasta
- 1/2 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1/4 cup shredded Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large broiler-safe skillet over medium-high heat. Add panko and 1 teaspoon garlic. Cook, stirring, until the panko is golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to a small bowl and set aside. Wipe out the pan.

Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in the pan over medium-high heat. Add chicken, Italian seasoning, salt and the



remaining 1 tablespoon garlic. Cook, stirring frequently, until the chicken is no longer pink on the outside, about 2 minutes. Add broth, tomatoes and penne. Bring to a boil and cook, uncovered, stirring frequently, until the penne is cooked and the sauce has reduced and thickened, 15 to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, position an oven rack in the upper third of the oven. Preheat the broiler to high. When the pasta is cooked, sprinkle mozzarella over the penne mixture. Place the pan under the broiler. Broil until the mozzarella is bubbling and beginning to brown, about 1 minute. Top with the panko mixture, Parmesan and basil.



ONE-POT PRIMAVERA

- 4 skin-on, bone-in chicken thighs
- 1 pound small red potatoes, halved
- 1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon olive oil, or as needed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 (1-ounce) package of ranch dressing mix
- 6 slices bacon, chopped

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place chicken thighs in a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

Toss potatoes, Brussels sprouts and garlic together with olive oil in a bowl until vegetables are lightly coated. Add vegetables around and between chicken thighs in the baking dish. Season with salt, pepper and thyme. Evenly pour the entire packet of ranch seasoning over the chicken and vegetables. Sprinkle chopped bacon on top.

Bake until chicken is no longer pink at the bone and the juices run clear, 30 to 35 minutes. An instant-read thermometer inserted near the bone should read 165 F.

Set an oven rack about 6 inches from the heat source and preheat the oven's broiler. Place the baking dish under the broiler, and cook until chicken skin becomes golden brown and crisp, 2 to 3 minutes. 🍴



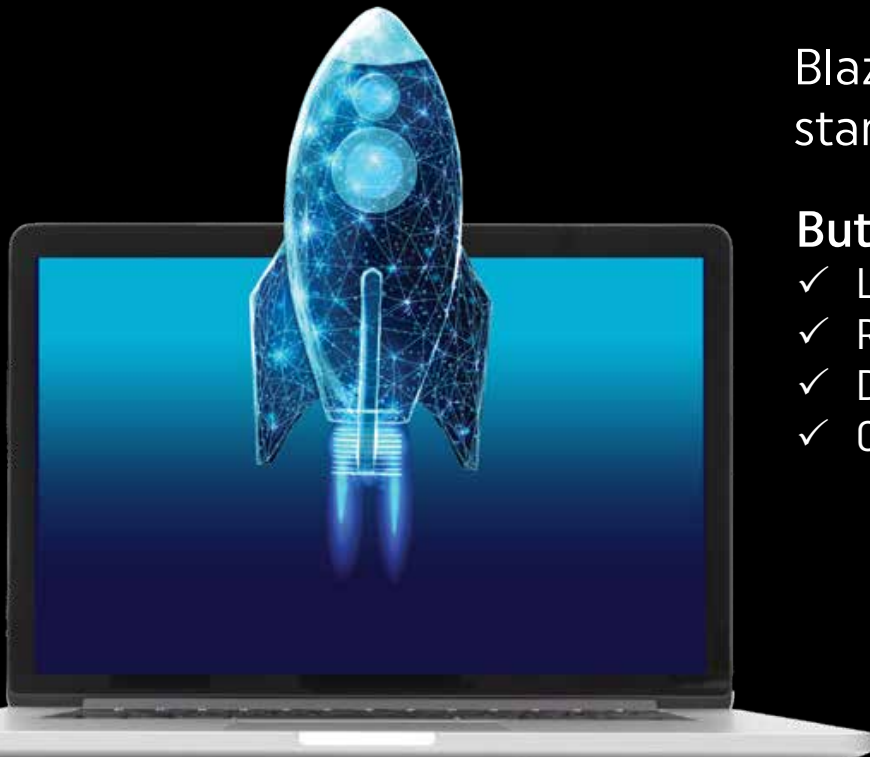
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