

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2020

CONNECTION

WINTER WONDERLAND

Enjoy a genuine
Christmas tree
experience

BROADBAND:
HELPING YOU SERVE



VIRTUALLY CONNECTED

Technology helps the
continuity of education

SERVICE AND SOLACE

Broadband powers
community outreach





By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Being thankful for broadband in 2020

When you're making your list of things to be thankful for this season, make room for this:

"access to broadband from a reliable, community-based provider." This year has taught us many things, one being that broadband is vital to so many areas of our lives — work, school, health and more.

I recently spoke with a journalist who has been covering the gaps in broadband connectivity across our country. She lives in a beautiful community in the mountains of Vermont and is lucky to be able to download emails — forget anything like streaming or VPN access. She has learned from working with NTCA and some of our members that building broadband is not a cheap proposition. There are physical hurdles (Vermont mountains?) that make the task even more formidable.

Several months into a remote world, her office is closed and her options for connectivity are limited. She joins the ranks of local school kids in nearby fast-food parking lots trying to complete their homework while she tries to upload her stories. In the most prosperous country in the world, in 2020, she has realized the hard way that having a broadband connection has become a lifeline and a necessity — and that speed and capacity actually do matter.

If you are holding this magazine, you are served by a community-based provider committed to keeping you connected. And that's a reason to be thankful! 📶



Wired up Hot spots rely on fast internet networks

Connecting rural communities to reliable broadband networks represents a vital challenge for not only individual states but also the nation as a whole. Jobs, education, health care and more increasingly rely on fast internet access.

As state and national policymakers consider strategies to expand broadband networks, weighing the benefits of an often misunderstood technology might prove beneficial.

Hot spots are described by NTCA The Rural Broadband Association as wireless on-ramps to the internet that cover a small area. Many consumers and policymakers associate hot spot technology with cellular phones, because many phones have the capability of becoming hot spots to serve as gateways to the internet for other devices.

NTCA, however, notes that these mobile connections represent only one form of hot spot. A fixed hot spot is created by use of a Wi-Fi router connected to a physical internet source such as a fiber optic network. These hot spots are common in homes, coffee shops, offices and more. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many rural telcos used this technology to provide free Wi-Fi connections at schools, churches and public spaces.

The important point to remember is that wireless connections do ultimately need wires. Fast broadband networks make these Wi-Fi-based hot spots possible, because those wired links provide the final connections to the internet.

NTCA emphasizes it's important for policymakers to remember that the term "hot spot" is associated with far more than mobile phones. Robust rural broadband networks make Wi-Fi-based hot spots possible, bringing their power and convenience to your homes, businesses and more. 📶

The 2020 gift guide



\$200



Senstroke

Giving that budding Buddy Rich in your household a full-size drum kit is the fastest way to put yourself on the outs with your neighbors and less-than-appreciative family members. So, the Senstroke is a great gift for everyone. The Bluetooth sensors attach to drumsticks, as well as to your feet, allowing you to mimic a bass drum and hi-hat. Connect to a free app to play and practice drums on most surfaces. The app includes a learning mode for beginners and can also record, playback and export your performance in MIDI format. Complete kit: \$280. Essential kit: \$200.



\$59.99

SHOP FOR THE TECH THAT'S SURE TO PLEASE

Getting the right holiday gift for that special person in your life can be difficult. But whether they're into technology, music, sports or "Star Wars," our gift guide has something for everyone on your list. 📺



\$69.99



The CrazyCap

The CrazyCap uses ultraviolet light to kill germs inside your water bottle. This means you never have to worry about a smelly bottle again, even if you leave it overnight in your gym bag. It self-cleans every four hours. And forget about running low on water during a hike. The manufacturer claims you can safely disinfect any debris-free water, so you can refill your bottle from rivers, lakes or streams. The rechargeable cap can also disinfect surfaces or objects, such as your smartphone or keys. CrazyCap can be purchased with its bottle or separately, and it fits most cola-style bottles. The company donates 5% of every sale to water.org, a group that helps people around the world have access to clean water. The CrazyCap with 17-ounce bottle: \$69.99.



Gadget Discovery Club

\$96

For year-round giving to that tech junkie in your family, you may consider getting him or her a subscription to the Gadget Discovery Club. Every month, the service mails a new mystery gadget for you to discover upon opening the box. The promise from the company is that you will receive a high-quality item at a cheaper price than retail, with a one-year guarantee and a 30-day return period. Don't expect to get an iPhone, but past deliveries have included gadgets such as fitness trackers, Bluetooth speakers and wireless earphones. Subscriptions range from \$96 for three months to \$276 for 12 months.



The Child Animatronic Edition

The creators of the hit Disney+ show "The Mandalorian" want you to call him The Child, while the internet knows him as Baby Yoda. Whatever his name is, he is undeniably adorable and ready to come home for the holidays. The Child Animatronic Edition giggles, babbles and makes Force effect sounds. It also features motorized movements, including eyes that open and close and ears that move back and forth. The Child even lifts his arm as he prepares to use the Force, after which he may need a "Force nap." Demand will be high, so you may need an intergalactic bounty hunter to snatch one up or be quick on the draw at your favorite online retailer. \$59.99 MSRP.

Thank you to 'the helpers'

When times are tough, it's probably a good time to go back to one of America's most respected and revered voices: Mr. Rogers. And, let's face it. We've had some tough times in 2020.



KEVIN BEYER

Chief Executive Officer

I'm not even exactly sure what to call Fred Rogers. He was more than a TV personality. To multiple generations of Americans from all backgrounds, he became a teacher, guru, attitude coach, theologian and maybe even a long-distance friend.

And while he's famous for asking people to be his neighbor or telling people he likes them "just the way they are," this year I believe one of his messages rings through especially strong.

Throughout his time on PBS and especially in his appearances after the Sept. 11 attacks of 2001, he would remind viewers of what his mother told him to do in a bad situation: look for the helpers.

Even though he may have meant it for children, I think it's also pretty sound advice for us grown-ups. In times when things seem out of control and we feel helpless, we can often look at the situation and focus on those trying to help. Ideally, I think we try to become a helper if we can. In those situations when we can't help, focusing on the people in need will almost always add order to how we feel.

This year has had no shortage of troubling events, but with that, we can hopefully recognize all the people doing what they can to make situations better. Where there were wildfires in Oregon and California, there were thousands of firefighters doing their part to help. When devastating hurricanes slammed into the Gulf Coast, emergency personnel and aid organizations rushed in to assist those affected by the storms.

Since the pandemic hit, doctors, nurses and scientists have worked to study it, limit the spread and find a vaccine. Near the top of that list of helpers has to be our local educators, and I would be remiss if I didn't recognize them for their efforts to essentially reinvent school this year.

I would humbly suggest that in our own way, many of the community-based internet providers like Acira around the country have been among the helpers as we've connected or upgraded the services to people in our neighborhoods who needed broadband to work or attend school online.

Even when we face struggles as a nation, as a state or as a local community, I believe there will always be helpers who work hard to serve where they can.

In this issue, we highlight some of those helpers and look at how they use technology to strengthen their mission. Whether through fundraising, recruiting volunteers, connecting with similar organizations or raising awareness of their causes, dozens of organizations in our region alone use broadband to do great work in serving their communities.

As we move into what may be a very different kind of holiday season, may we all pause to give thanks for those helpers. 📺

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AND FEDERATED TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE

Farmers Mutual Telephone Company

301 2nd St. South
Bellingham, MN 56212
farmers@farmerstel.net
320-568-2105

Federated Telephone Cooperative

201 State Hwy. 9 S. • P.O. Box 107
Morris, MN 56267
emailftc@fedtel.net
320-324-7111 or 320-585-4875

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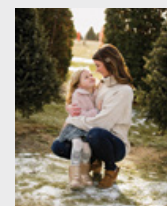
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WORDSOUTH

A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY

On the Cover:



Jenny Setterholm and her daughter, Maren, cuddle up as the snowflakes fall at Wayne and Jean's Evergreens in Morris.

See story Page 12.



Looking for your favorite local channels?

► Download Locast

The **FREE** streaming app, Locast, is a not-for-profit service offering users access to broadcast television stations over the internet. It provides crisp resolution for local channels, including ABC and NBC. It's a nice option to have in rural Minnesota, and better than a digital antenna.

Locast, available in only 23 markets nationally, covers most of Minnesota. Download the app from your app store or visit www.locast.org to start streaming your local channels today!

Comfort and Joy **TO YOUR FAMILY**

Farmers Mutual Telephone Company and Federated Telephone Cooperative are incredibly thankful for our loyal members. We hope you all enjoy a happy Thanksgiving and a joyful Christmas.

In recognition of these holidays, our offices will be closed on the following dates:

Nov. 26 and 27 | Dec. 24 and 25 | Jan. 1

Start the year off with fewer unwanted calls

The National Do-Not-Call Registry gives you a choice about whether or not to receive telemarketing calls at home. The registry applies to all telemarketers with the exception of 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 number, 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 1-888-382-1222. For TTY, call 1-866-290-4236. You must call from the telephone number you wish to register. To obtain additional information or register online, please go to www.donotcall.gov.

Inclusion of your telephone number on the National Do-Not-Call registry is effective 31 days following registration. You may remove your number from the list at any time. Farmers Mutual Telephone Company and Federated Telephone Cooperative are happy to provide you with this information, as required by the Federal Communications Commission.



It's easy to add your number to the **Do Not Call Registry.**

Register online at

www.donotcall.gov

or call 888-382-1222. For TTY, call 866-290-4236.

You must call from the telephone number you wish to register.

Winter wonderland

Lights warm up the night at holiday time



The annual **Holidazzle** in Minneapolis' Loring Park is just one way to brighten the season.

The holidays sparkle with lights and finery as Holidazzle turns downtown Minneapolis into a wonderland of enchantment. It's an annual celebration of the season in Loring Park that brings thousands to witness a spectacular, colorful light display, as well as lots of activities for families — movies, bingo, craft demonstrations, shopping, food, fireworks, Santa Claus and more.

Warm your bones at one of the bonfires, take that perfect Instagram post with a variety of fun lighting backdrops and visit Mr. Claus. Enjoy a cold brew in the beer garden or simply roam the paths around the park to see the colorfully decorated trees and celebrate the spirit of the season.

"Our goal," says Mark Remme, communications manager for Minneapolis Downtown Council, "is to provide a festive place with a very Minnesotan feel to celebrate the holidays,

highlighting small businesses and offering a variety of fun, free programming for all ages and abilities throughout the event."

Holidazzle is scheduled for Thursdays through Sundays from Nov. 27 to Dec. 20, though Remme says this year's dates and activities may change due to the pandemic.

Different activities are available each day, making no two visits the same. Bring the kids every day — there's a special zone just for them. On weekends, Holidazzle typically offers stories from Santa, along with The Thwing — an interactive swing — and visits from the Minneapolis Fire Department. Every day, enjoy a massive Yeti interactive art installation and lots of play equipment to keep the little ones entertained.

Parking is available in specified lots surrounding the park for \$5 per carload. For more information and to get the latest updates, log on to holidazzle.com.



MANKATO, MINNESOTA

The Kiwanis Club of Mankato will turn on the lights — 1.8 million of them — for its ninth annual Kiwanis Holiday Lights show scheduled for Nov. 27-Dec. 31 at Sibley Park, 900 Mound Ave. Hours are 5-9 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and 5-10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday.

The show, which you may either walk or drive through, features horse-drawn wagon rides, a skating rink and other activities.

- Admission: Free
- Information: kiwanisholidaylights.com



DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Bentleyville's Tour of Lights at Bayfront Festival Park is the country's largest walk-through illuminated display. The 20-acre park is located on the shores of Lake Superior, which offers the perfect setting for the more than 5 million lights. Get your photo taken with Santa and his reindeer and enjoy complimentary hot chocolate, cookies, popcorn and roasted marshmallows. Tour of Lights happens Nov. 21-Dec. 27 from 5-9 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and 5-10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday.

- Admission: Free
- Online: bentleyvilleusa.org

The lights are on

Nothing spreads holiday cheer as much as the sight of sparkling lights against a backdrop of glistening snow, which usually comes about this time of year.

Here are some towns with shows that light up the state when the sun goes down during the holiday season. Check websites for current information regarding any changes due to the pandemic before you go.

SLEEPY EYE, MINNESOTA

Christmas displays will wake up the town of Sleepy Eye for its annual Sleepy Eye Holiday Lights in Motion, with more than 250,000 lights illuminating the night sky from Thanksgiving through Christmas. Drive or walk through Sportsman's Park on

the north side of Sleepy Eye Lake.

- Online: sleepyeyeholidaylights.org

SHAKOPEE, MINNESOTA

Sever's Holiday Lights is a drive-thru spectacular that features a display of more than 1 million lights sparkling in the night sky to synchronized music. The lights will shine Nov. 26 to Jan. 3 from 5-9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and 5-10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Plan on taking about 45 minutes to make the half-mile drive through the show, which is at 3121 150th St. W.

- Admission: \$7 per person or \$25 per carload. Proceeds go to support Toys for Tots.
- Online: seversholidaylights.com

LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN

Drive, walk or take a carriage ride through Riverside Park as the Rotary Club of La Crosse presents the 26th annual Rotary Lights display with more than 3 million lights. Different events each day — including a parade, live entertainment, breakfast with Santa and a 5K Ugly Sweater Run — are what make this event one that draws nearly 160,000 visitors every year. Dates for this year are Nov. 27-Dec. 31, 5-10 p.m. daily. The show will end at 9 p.m. on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But the lights will stay on until 1 a.m. on New Year's Eve.

- Admission: Free. Monetary and food donations are appreciated.
- Online: rotarylights.org



HI! I'M JADE GEHRKE!

In this column, you'll learn about technology and read simple tips to get the most out of your electronics. For more tips or help with your devices, be sure to read this column in future publications. I'm always happy to help!

DEVICE OF THE MONTH



LED lights by Twinkly

Thanks to a smartphone app, the innovative LED lights from Twinkly allow you to control the colors and patterns of your holiday displays. Available at stores such as The Home Depot, Lowe's and online retailers like Amazon, prices begin at about \$60.



Tune up your tech

Three tips — and a bonus — to make your devices hum

Gadgets, gifts and gizmos can brighten the holidays. And a few prudent steps can help you keep pesky tech gremlins out of the fun.

Consider a trio of tips for getting the most out of your games, TVs, computers and more.

1. GET THE SPEED YOU NEED

Remember, the more devices you connect to the internet, the more bandwidth you need. If it helps, think of this as the speed of your internet connection. Faster connections allow for more devices.

How much speed do you need? For starters, many gamers prefer connections of at least 15-25 Mbps. Plus, streaming of high-definition video typically needs about 5 Mbps. Faster service becomes even more important if you have one person streaming a movie on one device while someone else is gaming on another. Each device must share the total available bandwidth.

2. UNRAVEL YOUR CONNECTIONS

Perhaps you wish to connect your smartphone or tablet to a stereo or speaker. Or maybe you want to link your smart TV to the internet. It helps to understand the two technologies.

Wi-Fi: This makes wireless internet possible. Radio waves replace the need for cables, allowing your computers, tablets, phones, security cameras, smart speakers and more to connect to the internet. Think of Wi-Fi as the gateway to the online world or to devices connected to your home network.

Bluetooth: Like Wi-Fi, Bluetooth also uses radio signals to make a short-range connection between devices. Think of this as a one-to-one link between two devices. For example, Bluetooth is often used to connect a smartphone to a Bluetooth-enabled speaker for streaming music. Or, Bluetooth can connect earbuds or headsets wirelessly to a phone for calls and other audio.

3. PROTECT YOUR DEVICES

A power spike, whether from a storm or other problem on the electrical grid, can damage your devices. Consider buying a surge protector. Make sure the one you choose has a joules rating of at least 2,000.

BONUS TIP: TEND YOUR PASSWORDS

Take the pain out of keeping up with passwords with a good password manager. And you're in luck, because most web browsers such as Chrome, Safari, Edge or Firefox have basic password management built in.

For an extra level of security and convenience, consider tools such as 1Password and LastPass. These allow you to use multiple browsers, offer suggestions for generating solid passwords and can warn about bad practices such as duplicate passwords or sites that have become security risks. ☞

Going the distance

Virtual classrooms have changed the game in education

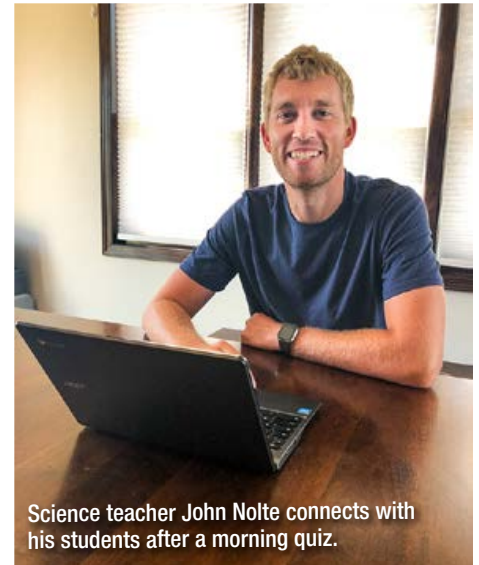
Story by JOHN CLAYTON



Tenth-grader Jacob Bringle plays the trombone while reading sheet music during a virtual lesson with teacher Nichole Markworth.



Band director Nichole Markworth held virtual calls with music students and revamped the LqPV Band website with a daily checklist of assignments and resources.



Science teacher John Nolte connects with his students after a morning quiz.

The shift from the classroom to distance learning has changed the way many educators think about teaching, but it has also endangered one of the most hallowed institutions of childhood — the snow day.

Those wintry days can now be filled with distance education via virtual classrooms, video chats and more. Call it an unexpected side effect of COVID-19. “It’s not what we’ve ever done before, but it’s what we’re leaning toward,” says Dave Baukol, superintendent of Chokio-Alberta Public Schools.

When the pandemic struck this year, school districts across the country sought new ways to stay connected with students. If the students couldn’t come to the classroom, then educators had to take the classroom to students. Whenever possible, they did so online with virtual classrooms. “We’re fortunate here in this school system to have a very progressive

telephone company that has put in fiber, basically, everywhere,” says Baukol about the Farmers Mutual Telephone Company and Federated Telephone Cooperative.

Making sure every student has a device — whether it’s a laptop or a tablet — to access the virtual classroom is another matter. Chokio-Alberta Public Schools is solving the problem by using federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act funds to purchase needed devices for students. “That’s exactly how we plan to spend our CARES money and that type of thing — on improving technology for our students,” Baukol says.

FINDING THEIR WAY

Communication among teachers and students has become the main ingredient of successful distance learning. “One of the biggest challenges we face is making sure we’re getting through and getting students the help that they need,” says John Nolte, a science teacher at Lac qui Parle High School.

While distance learning has created challenges for educators, Nolte says it has also provided opportunities. “I’ve had

some ideas rolling around in the back of my mind that I tried and that I think have had some positive effects,” he says. “They are things like a little bit less paper-and-pencil testing and a little more use of some standardized grading, leaving the option open for students to prove what they’ve learned in their own way.”

Like in any classroom, Nolte has also found that some students can thrive while others struggle. He says he spends a lot of time on the phone just staying in touch with his students. “Some just struggle with screens, so we have to provide other means with them to be able to learn,” he says.

But some students begin to flourish and gain confidence as they learn to work independently, finding their way through science courses without traditional hands-on labs, field trips and in-person instruction. “I’ve seen some students really take ownership of their learning and be a little more self-motivated and self-driven,” Nolte says. “I think that’s a positive for students.” 📞



CHOWGIRLS

Making a change

High-speed connections power service organizations across the country



Chowgirls Killer Catering in Minneapolis leveraged online tools to better serve their community.

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

In March 2020, Chowgirls Killer Catering in Minneapolis was busy preparing for its Sweet 16 party, complete with signature food and a swing band. Like many events in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the celebration was ultimately called off. The next day, while watching Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz recommend against large gatherings across the state, it occurred to co-owner and CEO Heidi Andermack that one canceled party was the least of her problems.

“We had a big leadership meeting about what to do, because all our events were canceling,” she says. “Our chef, who had been working with Second Harvest Heartland, thought of calling them to see what they were going to do. We would have a big empty kitchen, so maybe we could work with them.”

As service organizations, charities and churches throughout the nation

learned, creating connections to serve their communities meant relying more on online tools, broadband access and digital communication. They learned to talk, collaborate and succeed with the help of technology.

Chowgirls had first partnered with Second Harvest Heartland, a member of the Feeding America network of food banks, on a food rescue program around the 2018 Super Bowl. The two groups met once again and created the Minnesota Central Kitchen to feed families in need.

Chowgirls is now one of eight kitchens cooking for Minnesota Central Kitchen, preparing 30,000 meals weekly for hungry populations in the Twin Cities area. Large-scale donors such as restaurants, grocery stores and food distributors contribute ingredients, which are managed using Feeding America’s MealConnect app.



Chowgirls prepared 30,000 meals weekly.

“It’s a lot of meals to keep track of, so our high-speed internet has been pretty key to keeping it all coordinated,” Andermack says. “We also organize all of our meals and what is available using Google Spreadsheets. We’re not just tracking our kitchen but tying together a whole network of kitchens.”



In Smithville, Tennessee, the Rev. Chad Ramsey of Smithville First Baptist Church used online tools to stay connected to members.

WORSHIP ON DEMAND

While the importance of online tools is nothing new to service organizations across the country, they have become all but essential over the last year. Rev. Chad Ramsey at Smithville First Baptist Church in Smithville, Tennessee, has relied on the ability to stream services online to reach parishioners who might find themselves homebound.

“Streaming is huge everywhere,” he says. “We see that in the media world with Netflix, Disney+ and all the streaming services. But the same is true for the church.”

Smithville FBC not only streams live services for parishioners who can’t make it to the church but also has its own studio for recording and uploading training videos for everyone from new members to those preparing for mission trips. With so many demands on the church’s internet service, Ramsey isn’t sure what they would do without a fiber connection.

“We saw where things were going in this world and knew that having that ability to connect with each other would be important, whether it’s sharing files, videos, streaming or uploading to social media,” he says. “People are so much more connected than they have been, and if you don’t have that consistent and quality connection, you’re going to be left behind.”

That approach has helped Smithville FBC build a church that appeals across generations, attracting millennials and seniors alike. And while their

preferences for how they worship may not break down as neatly as expected, the fiber connection provides the flexibility to meet everyone’s needs.

“You might see someone really young who wants things to be done the way they were decades ago, and then there are other people who are much older who want to know why we aren’t making the changes we need to be around for another 100 years,” says Ramsey. “That’s the challenge: Getting the focus not on style but the purpose. We’re here to serve God, not ourselves. That’s what makes us tick.”

DIGITAL LITERACY

At Families & Literacy in Kerrville, Texas, it’s opening doors to people’s futures that makes them tick. The organization serves adult learners throughout the community and inmates of the Kerr County Jail, helping them to earn their citizenship or GED or learn English as a second language.

While most of the classes Families & Literacy organizes take place in local churches or other off-campus locations, the in-office broadband connection has been particularly helpful in getting prospective students on the path to learning as quickly as possible. Not every student has access to a reliable internet connection at home, so the organization provides Chromebooks on-site so they can take placement tests and register for the appropriate classes.

Families & Literacy even offers an




ESL class that incorporates computer skills, helping prepare students to be ready to communicate in the workplace and to better understand the tools they will be using day to day.

“Computer technology is prevalent in pretty much every job you go to now,” says Families & Literacy Executive Director Misty Kothe. “It’s important that not only can our students speak the language and do the work but they can also efficiently use that technology. It just makes them more employable in the future.”

Moving forward, broadband connections offer new opportunities for all three organizations. Families & Literacy aims to offer limited-size classes on location, outdoors if necessary, while Smithville FBC is eager to explore the possibilities of Bible study streaming services. Meanwhile, the Minnesota Central Kitchen project has proven so successful that Andermack now plans to incorporate its mission into Chowgirls’ regular operations even when the pandemic has passed.

“We have always had a mission of reducing food waste, but now we’re looking at it as hunger relief,” she says. “It’s become essential to our business, helping us give jobs to chefs who would otherwise be unemployed and keep the lights on at our facility. Sometimes you just need to support each other, and it comes back in ways you don’t expect.” 📺



Jamie Beyer walks her granddaughter, Millie Kampmeier, through the field of evergreens toward Wayne-n-Jean's classic truck, often used for family photos.

Winter wonderland

Christmas traditions made at Wayne-n-Jean's Evergreens

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

With snow on the ground and the aromas of fresh-baked cookies and hot cider wafting through the gift shop, Wayne-n-Jean's Evergreens near Morris is a classic Christmastime setting.

Owners Wayne and Jean Lesmeister supply trees, including hardwoods and evergreens, to landscapers, builders and homeowners throughout the year. Then, the day after Thanksgiving, they turn their nearly 60-acre tree farm into a holiday wonderland.

"It's really a little bit of everything through the year that we do," says Wayne Lesmeister. "The Christmas tree thing is just a part of it, but it is a large part of it."

Lesmeister worked in the agriculture department at the University of Minnesota, Morris until his recent retirement. His wife, Jean, still works at a local bank when she's not running the gift shop they added at the farm several years ago.

"It started out as a hobby," Lesmeister recalls. "Back in 1997, I said, 'Let's plant some trees.'" The couple started with 8 acres, and the tree farm has grown exponentially. Their son, Lloyd, who works full-time in agriculture, and his wife, Courtney, help out, especially during planting and Christmas seasons. Their daughter Kayla, who is now in graduate school in Utah, also grew up working on the farm and in the gift shop.

Starting the family business was a happy agricultural accident that a state mandate caused, Lesmeister says. "It wasn't a plan. We actually just wanted to drain some marginal land. It was a little marshy area, and they'd allow us to drain it if we'd plant some trees. So, we planted it all in evergreens."

One thing led to another after that, and they began selling a few trees. Then, word spread, and a regard developed among landscapers. The gift shop opened. People began driving to the farm to cut their own Christmas trees or to purchase a pre-cut one. "It all just kind of blossomed from there," Lesmeister says.

'TIS THE SEASON

Each year, the Lesmeisters sell around 350 trees during the Christmas season. Families who trek through the snow with a saw to cut down their own trees purchase about half of that number. "That number has grown," Jean Lesmeister says. "More people want that experience of cutting down their own trees."

She also began noticing that the same families come back year after year to visit the farm and the gift shop. "Our customers have been really good about telling us what their ideas are, and Wayne is pretty creative about being able to satisfy their needs," she says. "We're always looking at things for the gift shop, so we have unique gifts for people to purchase. We make our own wreaths and decorations for porches and decks and things like that."

Friends supply a little added staffing at the gift shop to prepare for the Christmas season. The Lesmeisters usually work with local artists and artisans throughout the year to display and sell their work there.

Last year, the Lesmeisters added the option of family photo sessions on the tree farm with local photographer Paula Kill, owner of Pics by Paula. Kill does posed and candid shots by appointment.

SPREADING THE CHEER

It takes about eight years to grow a typical Christmas tree. After starting the farm in 1997, the Lesmeisters began selling Christmas trees in 2000. Since then, the farm has become a big part of Christmas traditions for many families in and around Morris.

Word of mouth was the main way people heard about the farm and gift shop early on, but now the Lesmeisters use social media — primarily Facebook — to communicate with customers.

“It’s kind of fun that, for the 20-something years we’ve been selling trees, we’ll see one family member drive in and wait in their car. Then, another family member drives in and waits in their car, until we have six family members get here,” Jean Lesmeister says. “Then, they all go out at one time and cut their own Christmas trees. It’s become something of a tradition with everyone, and it’s kind of cool to see.” 📱

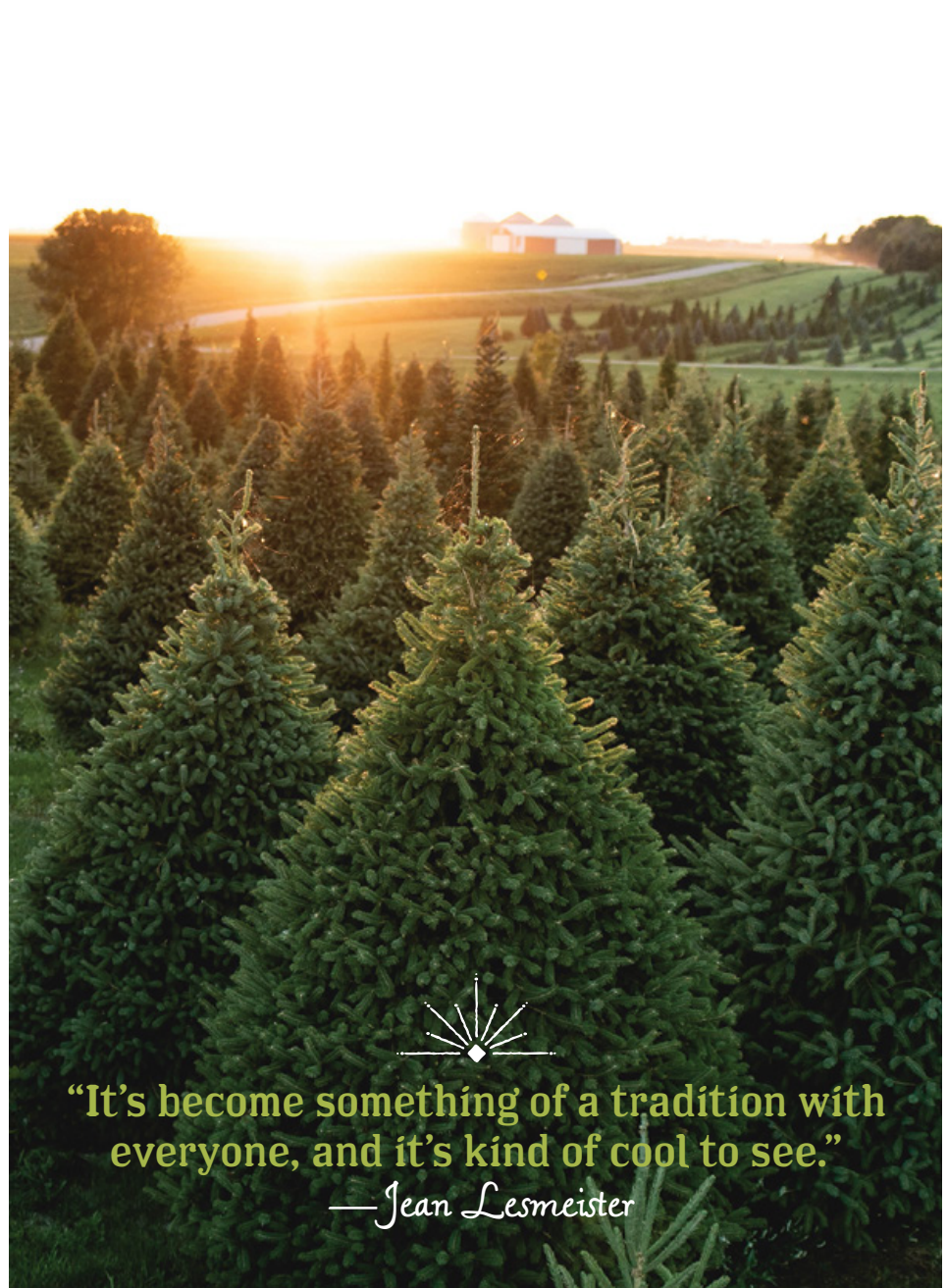
Wayne-n-Jean's Evergreens

46298 180th St., Morris, Minnesota
(located 3 miles north of Morris on Highway 59)

Open daily: 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

320-589-3609

waynenjeansevergreens@gmail.com



“It’s become something of a tradition with everyone, and it’s kind of cool to see.”

—Jean Lesmeister

Wayne and Jean Lesmeister’s business has steadily grown over the years, much like their trees.



Etta and Beckett Green smile for a family keepsake that their parents will treasure forever.



A tart treat

Cranberries are a longstanding staple at holiday time



They're great with turkey and stuffing or baked in your morning muffin. Dried, they're known as raisins and perfect sprinkled on a salad. A fixture on Thanksgiving tables or even wrapped around trees as a Christmas garland, the jolly red cranberry takes center stage at holiday time.

People have been eating cranberries for centuries. Native Americans first used them as food and medicine, well before Pilgrims set foot here. The absence of sugar in the colonies in the early 1600s meant cranberries, which benefit from sweetening, were probably not at the first

Thanksgiving table. Nonetheless, it didn't take long for them to become a part of that holiday's menu, and today, consumers eat more than 80 million pounds of cranberries from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

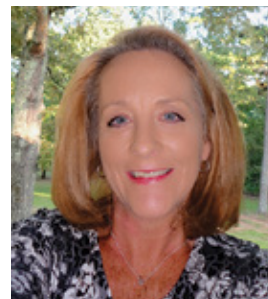
Every year, holiday celebrators enjoy more than 5 million gallons of the canned sauce that jiggles like Santa's belly, and cranberries are a simple way to add color to your table and a sweet, tart flavor to your turkey. But as Americans are latching on to the farm-to-table trend, fresh cranberries are outselling the canned variety.

Here are several tips from Vitamix for cooking with fresh cranberries:

- **Baking with cranberries** — Cut cranberries in half before adding them to baked goods to prevent them from swelling and popping.
- **Cooking cranberries on the stovetop** — Simmer whole berries gently in a small amount of water, uncovered, since

too much steam might cause them to swell and explode.

- **Freezing cranberries** — To freeze and enjoy them throughout the year, spread the berries in a single layer on a cookie sheet and place it in the freezer. Once they are completely frozen, transfer the berries to freezer-safe bags or airtight containers. There's no need to thaw your cranberries before cooking. Just give them a quick water bath before using.



FOOD EDITOR
ANNE P. BRALY
IS A NATIVE OF
CHATTANOOGA,
TENNESSEE.

CRANBERRY APPLE HOLIDAY BREAKFAST CASSEROLE

Make this casserole a day ahead.

Casserole:

- 2 tablespoons softened unsalted butter, divided
- 3 large, firm, sweet tart apples, diced
- 2/3 cup fresh cranberries
- 8 large eggs
- 1 cup vanilla Greek yogurt
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1/4 cup maple syrup, plus more for serving
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 6 cups stale bread cubes, crusts removed

Streusel topping:

- 1/3 cup flour
- 1/4 cup rolled oats
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Pinch kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts or pecans

Make the casserole: Melt 1 tablespoon butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the apples and cook, stirring until they are starting to brown and become tender — 4 to 6 minutes. Remove from the heat. Stir in the cranberries.

Grease a 9-by-13-inch casserole dish with the remaining 1 tablespoon of butter. Whisk the eggs in a large bowl. Add the yogurt, milk, maple syrup and cinnamon, then whisk to combine. Add the bread cubes and the apple mixture, and stir until combined. Transfer to the prepared baking dish. Cover it with foil and refrigerate up to 24 hours.

Make the topping: Stir the flour, oats, sugar, cinnamon and salt in a medium bowl. Drizzle 3 tablespoons melted butter over the oat mixture, tossing with a fork until the crumbs are evenly moist. Add



Cranberry Crumble Bars

Crust and topping:

- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup ground slivered almonds
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup chilled butter
- 1 egg
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon

Filling:

- 4 cups fresh cranberries
- 1 cup sugar
- Juice of half an orange (4 teaspoons)
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Preheat oven to 375 F. Grease a 13-by-9-inch pan.

In a large bowl, mix the flour, 1 cup sugar, almonds, baking powder and

salt. Cut in the butter, using a pastry blender or pulling 2 table knives through the ingredients in opposite directions, until the mixture looks like coarse crumbs. Stir in the egg. Press 2 1/2 cups of crumb mixture in the bottom of the pan. Stir cinnamon into the remaining crumb mixture. Set aside.

In a medium bowl, stir together the filling ingredients. Spoon the filling evenly over the crust. Spoon the reserved crumb mixture evenly over the filling.

Bake 45 to 55 minutes or until the top is light golden brown. Cool completely. Refrigerate until chilled. Cut into 6 rows by 4 rows. Store tightly covered in the refrigerator.

the nuts and stir to completely combine. Refrigerate.

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Remove the casserole and topping from the refrigerator. Bake the casserole, covered, until heated through and steaming, 35 to 40 minutes. Break up any large topping pieces if necessary.

Remove the casserole from the oven, remove the foil cover, and sprinkle the top with the streusel topping. Continue baking until the topping is golden and the casserole is puffed, 25 to 30 minutes. Allow the casserole to cool 10 minutes before cutting it into squares to serve. Serve with additional warm maple syrup, if desired. 🍷

Check our Facebook page in December. We'll share some of our favorite Christmas classics.

Family traditions

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