

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2021

# CONNECTION

## HOLLY AND JOLLY

Christmas decor at  
Heather Nursery  
and Floral

## TAKING A TURN

Zach Hodgson steers  
career from the garage

## NOVELS IN NOVEMBER

Broadband boosts rural writers





By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## Committed to a fiber future

For several years, NTCA has encouraged policymakers to think with a hand in the present but an eye toward the future. But in Washington, D.C. — where every technology and every interest has lobbyists and political champions — that mission is easier said than done.

Many of the nation's internet providers believe in a fiber-or-bust approach. As long as it's physically possible, which is not always the case in rural areas, fiber should be the goal. As lawmakers weigh infrastructure investments, why should internet providers settle for less?

Many NTCA members are working diligently to extend fiber optic networks, despite challenges like slow supply chains limiting access to the materials needed to build these robust networks. They are making strides.

In our most recent broadband survey, 70% of NTCA members' customers enjoyed fiber to the premises. It's a technology that makes it possible for internet providers such as yours to easily scale their services to meet demand.

Fiber infrastructure is also a key component of building a better future that includes higher-performance services, real-time applications, smart communities, precision agriculture, 5G superiority and better access to health care and education. To achieve our goals as a nation, we need a strong foundation of fiber connectivity.

Connecting rural communities to the rest of the nation and to the resources they need to excel matters. Broadband matters, because its speed and capacity are the new baselines for working, learning and growing the economy — from wherever we might be. Investment in fiber optic internet ensures rural America will not be relegated to second-class status. It's more than a worthy investment in infrastructure development, it's an investment in our nation's future. 📺

# SOS

## FBI program helps keep kids safe online

The holidays often bring new gadgets and devices, as well as some free time for kids enjoying a break from school. This time of year is a good opportunity to remind younger technology users of the risks of being online and to share strategies to keep themselves safe.

The FBI offers tools to help build a digital defense to protect kids online. These tools include the agency's free computer literacy program, Safe Online Surfing, or SOS. Designed for children in grades three through eight, it's available to teachers, administrators and parents, who can introduce children to the concepts one-on-one.

The program engages children through a series of online games that mix fun with education on a variety of topics, including online etiquette, managing cyberbullying, the importance of strong passwords and double authentication, and more. Visit [sos.fbi.gov](https://sos.fbi.gov) to access the guide. 📺

### The FBI offers a few additional tips for parents:

- Discuss with your children what kind of information, photos and videos are appropriate to post online — and what's not.
- Emphasize that kids should limit the information they post on social media platforms, such as their full name, date of birth and school information.
- Teach that, while free software and apps seem enticing, using them may open phones and computers up to malware or worse.



# Tech the halls

## GIVE GREAT GADGETS

Great tech gifts don't have to be expensive. There are plenty of options under \$50 that will make the holidays merry. We've got some suggestions, whether you're shopping for a more budget-friendly gift for that gadget-crazy person on your list or a fun stocking stuffer that won't break the bank.

\$29.99

MSRP at  
us.tomy.com



### KIIPIX PORTABLE PHOTO PRINTER

This one's a neat gadget that reproduces images from your smartphone without the need for Wi-Fi or even batteries. You just place your phone on top of the KiiPix, and it takes a picture of your screen and prints a photo in minutes. Reviews point out that the device can be finicky with ambient light, and the quality will be closer to those instant Polaroid pictures from the '70s than a professionally printed photo, but the retro look is part of the fun. Available in pink, blue and black.

### 8BITDO SN30 PRO+

Any gamer would appreciate the SN30 Pro+, a customizable controller compatible with a variety of systems. Featuring rumble vibration, motion controls and 20 hours of play off a four-hour charge, the controller can also be used wired through USB or wirelessly via Bluetooth. Compatible systems include Windows, macOS, Android, Steam, Nintendo Switch and Raspberry Pi. Free software allows you to customize buttons, adjust stick and trigger sensitivity, and create macros with any button combination. The controller is available in black and in color combinations reminiscent of the classic Nintendo Entertainment System and the Super Nintendo.

\$49.99

amazon.com

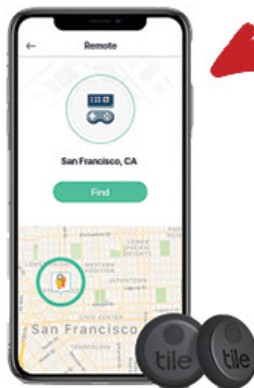


### POWERUP 2.0 PAPER AIRPLANE CONVERSION KIT

Even if your design skills are more Wright brothers than Boeing, you can still transform a regular paper airplane into a dream flying machine, while kids can learn about basic principles of physics and working with simple electronics. The POWERUP 2.0 kit includes two sheets of high-quality paper to get you started, a charger, a carbon fiber propeller shaft and an ultratough rear propeller — for those inevitable crash landings. The POWERUP 4.0 model, which is \$69.99, comes with stabilization technology and can be controlled with your smartphone. Either way, get ready to take to the skies!

\$69.99

poweruptoys.com



\$24.99

thetileapp.com

### TILE

The best Bluetooth finder on the market, the Tile line of products can be attached to your keys, backpack, purse or TV remote — anything that can be lost or misplaced. A free app for iOS or Android can then be used to find the missing Tile within 150 to 400 feet — depending on the Tile size — or you can ask Siri, Google Assistant or Alexa for help. When outside of Bluetooth range, the app will show the Tile's most recent location, which is updated whenever another Tile user comes within range of your device. You can also subscribe to Premium service, which includes free battery replacement and smart alerts that warn you when you've left something behind, or Premium Protect, which reimburses you up to \$1,000 if Tile can't find your things.

# Giving thanks

## Find reasons for appreciation in day-to-day excellence

As the year winds down, this is the season when the pace of everyday life just seems to pick up. Family gatherings, sports, special events, shopping — the list of chores, commitments and celebrations gets long. It's always a whirlwind, and 2021 is no different. While time is at a premium during the holidays, I think it's important to find a few minutes for reflection, to make time to take stock and to give thanks.



**KEVIN BEYER**  
Chief Executive Officer

There's plenty to be thankful for. I could list the projects we've accomplished, the services we've provided and all the work we've done this year. I am thankful for all of those, and they're all important parts of keeping our community current and connected. But this year, I'd like to offer thanks for the often unsung day-to-day interactions, people and services at the core of who we are as a company. Because when quality performance is the norm, it's easy to take it for granted.

For example, I'm thankful for our team of Customer Experience Specialists, a group whose role is to make your lives and the business you do with us as seamless as possible. They answer questions, solve minor issues and initiate new services — seemingly basic tasks that make a big difference every day. By being the

professionals they are, they make others' lives better.

We have another team of professionals whom you might rarely notice. On any given day, there's likely a crew hard at work somewhere near you maintaining the physical infrastructure that allows us to provide the services you rely upon. Often, these crews work in inclement weather and the most trying of conditions. After a storm, they lead the effort to restore service so you can get back to living your life and conducting business as quickly as possible.

At the office, we have others with the financial expertise needed to keep our house in order, and they do the painstaking work needed to make us what we are now. There are also technical experts and so, so many more. Thank you, everyone. You and your efforts are valued and appreciated.

There are also the members of our board of directors who contribute their time and expertise to creating the oversight that defines us as part of this community. We do not serve outside investors. Instead, our board is the link to you, and board members are charged with ensuring we keep your needs at the forefront.

Now, let me ask you something. The last time you picked up the phone, did you consider all the miles of cable, the sophisticated hardware and human expertise needed to make that call happen? Or, when you connected your computer to the internet, did you think about the complexity of the network needed to link your home to the online world? Of course you didn't, and we wouldn't expect you to.

The services we provide should be out of the way, even invisible. They should just work, and all the people I've described make that possible.

Because everyone at Farmers Mutual & Federated Telephone performs well, it's easy to take our team's work for granted. Often, it isn't flashy. It's not going to make news. But every day, their work benefits those around them. When you're helping others, can there be a better reason to be thankful?

From everyone at Farmers Mutual & Federated Telephone, we are thankful for you. Enjoy the holidays. 📞

## CONNECTION

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2021

VOL. 5, NO. 6

Connection is a bimonthly newsletter published by Farmers Mutual and Federated Telephone, © 2021. It is distributed without charge to all of our customers.



POWERED BY FARMERS MUTUAL TELEPHONE COMPANY  
AND FEDERATED TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE

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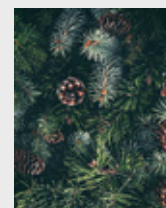
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**WORDSOUTH**

A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY

On the Cover:



Heather Nursery and Floral has natural holiday decorations for Christmas in their Dawson, Madison and Montevideo locations. See story Page 13.

© Jukov studio/Adobe Stock



# AN END TO CABLE TV SERVICE

**WHAT:** Federated Telephone will no longer provide cable TV service

**WHEN:** Existing service will be discontinued on Dec. 31, 2021

**WHY:** Broadcaster price hikes that get passed to subscribers and network repositioning forced this change.

**WHAT NOW:** A range of streaming options exist. Please contact one of our experts for details — 320-324-7111

We thank you for your loyalty. We will continue to offer our core services which includes Phone and high speed Internet.



## 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 numbers, including wireless numbers, on the National Do Not Call Registry at no cost, either by telephone or via the internet. To register by phone, call 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](http://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 and Federated Telephone is happy to provide you with this information, as required by the Federal Communications Commission.

**[www.donotcall.gov](http://www.donotcall.gov)**  
or call 888-382-1222.  
For TTY, call 866-290-4236.



Wishing you a  
*happy* Thanksgiving  
& a joyful Christmas

Farmers Mutual Telephone Company and Federated Telephone Cooperative are grateful for your support. We hope you enjoy a holiday season filled with family and friends.

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

*Thanksgiving:*

Thursday, Nov. 25, and Friday, Nov. 26

*Christmas weekend:*

Thursday, Dec. 23, and Friday, Dec. 24

*New Year's Eve:*

Friday, Dec. 31



# The celestial landscape

## Finding spaces to gaze at the starry skies

Story by ANNE BRALY

There's nothing quite so spellbinding as looking up into a starry sky filled with constellations and planets as they perform their cosmic waltz around the universe.

With so many small towns around the Midwest and wide-open spaces, you'd think there were plenty of opportunities

to marvel at the heavens. But even the smallest interference of light can make it difficult, says Tawnya Schoewe, public relations officer at Voyageurs National Park near International Falls, Minnesota.

Voyageurs National Park recently received Dark Sky certification, making it one of just 29 Dark Sky Parks in the

country and the only one to achieve the status in Minnesota. It offers viewers the chance to move from couch potato to explorer, venturing to some of the state's darkest regions to ponder the skies.

"There are few places in the Midwest one can go to see the night sky that are uninterrupted by light pollution. But Voyageurs is one of those places," Schoewe says.

What made Voyageurs eligible for Dark Sky certification? It had several things going for it. It has limited light pollution, which was determined by yearly light meter reading. "That confirmed the visibility of the night-sky objects as exceptional," Schoewe says. Also, the dedication of the park management to interpreting the night sky to visitors was taken into account.

Another factor was the park's commitment to changing its existing lights to those that are more night-sky friendly. "As a park, we started at 22% compliant with outdoor lights and are now 65% compliant to get the certification," Schoewe says. Within the next five years, the park has a goal of being 90% compliant and by 2031, 100% compliant.

"This means the lights we install are animal-friendly, don't produce night glare

A couple looks for stars while camping at Newport State Park in Ellison Bay.



Destination Door County



upwards, are shaded and of the right light temperature as to not impede the night sky, yet still offer safety for visitors,” she says.

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, also along the Canadian border, is the second place in Minnesota that has received designation by the International Dark-Sky Association. It is certified as a Dark Sky Sanctuary, one of just nine in America.

And in Wisconsin, Newport State Park is the first in the state to have the distinguished Dark Sky Park certification.

Eric Hyde, park superintendent at Newport, says that from its conception as a state park, Newport was planned to be only minimally developed to protect its wilderness state. “That sets it apart from the other state parks in the region, and this Dark Sky designation further recognizes the efforts of those who meant to preserve it from overdevelopment,” he says.

### PEAK VIEWING TIME

The best time to stargaze is during the winter months when there are more hours of darkness.

Voyageurs is a park within a system of waterways, and Schoewe says the best spot to view the heavens there is from aboard some kind of watercraft. If you don’t have one, she suggests parking at the lot for Voyageurs Forest Overlook on Meadowood Road near the Ash River Visitor Center. Another good spot is in the upper parking lot at the Rainy Lake Visitor Center.

“If one brings a watercraft, any one of the more than 270 campsites offer amazing views uninterrupted by light pollution,” Schoewe says. “In winter, if the ice roads are open, driving out on the lake ice road is a great place to view the sky.”

Newport State Park’s Dark Sky certification has brought about an increase of sky gazers from around the Midwest, Hyde says.

If you are outdoorsy enough and plan in advance, it’s best

to reserve an overnight stay at one of the 17 hike-in campsites. Newport offers 11 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline with unobstructed views of the sky. With an absence of artificial light, the nights are remarkably dark, providing an ideal spot for enjoying truly dark skies.

“It’s recommended to come during the day to scope out a prime location and familiarize yourself,” Hyde says. “Nights with clear skies during a new moon and crescent phases of the moon offer the best times for viewing stars.”

The best viewing times are in the evenings and early mornings just before sunrise.

Another plus for wintertime viewing? There are no mosquitoes. But come prepared to embrace the cold night air and clear skies. Schoewe recommends dressing in layers, bringing a good pair of binoculars — fancy telescopes are not needed — and being prepared for a spectacle in the skies.

While Orion and Cassiopeia are a couple of the amazing constellations you’re likely to see, the glow and overall enormous size of the entire Milky Way can be seen with the naked eye.

“That’s often the biggest reward for making the nighttime trek,” Hyde says. 📷



John Nienhuis of Destination Door County

*"Nights with clear skies during a new moon and crescent phases of the moon offer the best times for viewing stars."*

— Eric Hyde, park superintendent at Newport





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



### 1Password

Long, complex passwords protect your online accounts and personal information. However, keeping up with that information can prove tricky. Consider a password manager, such as 1Password, which simplifies the process. There are accounts for both families and individuals: [1password.com](https://1password.com).

# Don't fall for it

## Surge in scams leads to billions in financial losses

Scammers have upped their game in recent years, and they're only getting better. In 2020 alone, 47% of Americans experienced financial identity theft with losses of more than \$712 billion, according to the latest report from the Aite Group. Those losses include phone scams, text scams, application scams and more.

Modern technology and communications services create seemingly endless opportunities, but do take care. They also open the door to those up to no good.

The scam trade is a growing animal of an industry that's always finding new ways to feed itself. Scammers are hungry for your personal information. They'll take over your bank and credit card accounts or use your information to create new accounts. They hit you when you're sick, vulnerable and scared.

Don't fall for it. The Federal Trade Commission offers many ways to spot and avoid scams.

First, make sure you can recognize a scam. Scammers will say anything and do anything to get an advantage, including posing as representatives of the Social Security Administration, the IRS, Medicare or an official-sounding utility or charity company.

Scammers like to say there's a problem — usually something you did wrong — so they can gain access to your information. Other times, they'll say you've won a prize, like a laptop, an iPad or money.


Scam artists prey on people's good natures, fears and vulnerabilities. Using these tactics, they try to pressure you to act immediately.

"They might threaten to arrest you, sue you, take away your driver's or business license, or deport you," the FTC website says. "They might say your computer is about to be corrupted."

Often, scammers ask for money through a money transfer company or gift cards. Or they'll send a fake check with instructions for you to deposit and send them money.

Recognizing a scam, however, is only the first step. Try to avoid the risk entirely.

- Make them unwelcome — Block unwanted calls and text messages.
- Slow down — Resist the temptation to act fast.
- Keep it private — Never give your personal or financial information in response to a request you didn't expect.
- Don't click on it — Don't click on links or attachments, even if you think an email or a text comes from a company you believe is real. Instead, go to the company's website or call them.
- Stop and think — Hang up on that pushy caller, and do your own sleuthing if you think there's a problem with your accounts.

The FTC website offers several examples of scams along with a way to report them. To learn more about identifying and avoiding scams, as well as printable information, visit [ftc.gov](https://ftc.gov) and click on "Tips and Advice" and "Consumers." 







# Are you having trouble using the telephone due to a hearing or speech disability?

Minnesota Relay is a free telephone service that uses specially trained communications assistants to facilitate telephone calls between people with hearing and speech disabilities and other individuals. Calls can be made to anywhere in the world, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. All calls are completely confidential. To make a relay call dial 7-1-1. Once connected to the relay service, tell the communications assistant the type of relay call you wish to make. Or, you may dial the specific toll-free number for the type of relay service.

## Captioned Telephone Service (CTS)

CTS uses a special telephone with a text display screen so that a person who is hard of hearing can listen to and read captions of everything the other person on the call says. You speak directly to the other person on the call, and a relay communications assistant transcribes everything the other person says into captions, which appear on the display screen of your CTS phone.

## Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service (IP CTS)

Internet-based forms of CTS are available for those who would like to use CTS on a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Go to: [www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/internet-protocol-ip-captioned-telephone-service](http://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/internet-protocol-ip-captioned-telephone-service).

## Computer (ASCII): 1-800-627-3529

Computer users can access Minnesota Relay. Set your communications software to the following protocols: speeds ranging from 300 to 2400; 8 Bits; No Parity; 1 Stop Bit; Full Duplex. When calling at a rate of 300 or below, follow the above using Half Duplex.

## Hearing Carry Over (HCO): 1-800-627-3529

HCO allows a person who can hear clearly but who has very limited or no speech capability to make phone calls. Using a special text telephone, you type your conversation for the relay communications assistant to read to the other person, and listen directly to the other person's response.

## Hearing User: 1-800-627-3529

A hearing person may use a standard telephone or mobile phone to place a relay call and speak with a person who is deaf, hard of hearing, or speech disabled.

## Internet Protocol (IP) Relay

IP Relay combines text-based relay service with the ease of the Internet – no need for a TTY. You are able to make your relay call using a computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone. Go to: [www.sprintrelay.com](http://www.sprintrelay.com).

## Spanish Relay: 1-877-627-5448

Spanish speaking persons with a hearing or speech disability are able to make relay calls. This is not a translation service – both parties must speak Spanish, and at least one party must have a hearing or speech disability.

## Speech-to-Speech (STS): 1-877-627-3848

STS allows a person who has difficulty speaking or being understood on the phone to communicate using his or her own voice or voice synthesizer. The communications assistant revoices your words so that the other person on the call can understand them, and the other person speaks directly to you.

## Text Telephone (TTY): 1-800-627-3529

This service allows a person who is deaf, deafblind, or speech disabled to use a TTY to communicate with the other person on the call.

## Video Relay Service (VRS)

VRS allows a person who uses American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate over the phone. The VRS user connects to the relay communications assistant via an Internet-enabled device with a video camera. The communications assistant relays the conversation back and forth between the parties – in ASL with the VRS user and by voice with the called party. Go to: [www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/video-relay-services](http://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/video-relay-services).

Source: Minnesota Commerce Department

## Voice Carry Over (VCO): 1-877-627-3024

VCO allows a person with a hearing disability, but who wants to use his or her own voice, to speak directly to the other party. The communications assistant then types the other party's response, which is displayed on the VCO user's text telephone.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MINNESOTA RELAY SERVICES:

[www.mnrelay.org](http://www.mnrelay.org)  
1-800-657-3775

### Emergency Assistance

TTY callers should dial 9-1-1 directly in an emergency. All 911 centers are equipped to handle TTY calls. Minnesota Relay can process emergency calls, but this may delay the response to your call.

To file a complaint regarding Minnesota Relay:  
1-800-657-3775  
Email: [mn.relay@state.mn.us](mailto:mn.relay@state.mn.us)

You will need to provide: the date and time of the relay call, the calling from and to phone numbers, the CA's identification number, and the nature of your complaint.

You may also file a complaint with the Federal Communications Commission:  
[www.fcc.gov/complaints](http://www.fcc.gov/complaints)  
Voice: 1-888-225-5322  
TTY: 1-888-835-5322  
ASL via VP: 1-844-432-2275

## TELEPHONE EQUIPMENT DISTRIBUTION (TED) PROGRAM

The TED Program provides free specialized telecommunications equipment to income-eligible Minnesotans who are having trouble using the telephone due to a hearing, speech or physical disability. [mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing](http://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing) Voice: 1-800-657-3663 ASL via VP: 651-964-1514





# NaNoWriMo

## November challenge helps writers write

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Growing up in rural East Tennessee, Dani Honeycutt dreamed of writing for a living. She devoured books and wrote poetry as a teen. She'd even study the encyclopedia to pack as much knowledge into her brain as she could. Writing was the natural next step. It was a place to put all her thoughts — a place to create.

Then she learned about NaNoWriMo, a nonprofit organization that grew out of an international creative writing event of the same name. Short for National Novel Writing Month, NaNoWriMo gives participants a goal of writing a 50,000-word manuscript during the month of November.

"I liked the challenge," says Honeycutt, who grew up in the small town of Rogersville and now lives in Greeneville, Tennessee. "Even though 50,000 words is more like a novella, I liked the challenge of saying, 'OK, you have 30 days to do this.' I felt like there was an accomplishment there."



Writers gather at a local NaNoWriMo write-in at a Florence, South Carolina, coffee shop.

Dani Honeycutt and Ashley Long

For a few years, she participated in the event but couldn't quite reach the 50,000-word goal. Until she did. So far this year, Honeycutt has published three nonfiction books through Amazon Self-Publishing.

### HOW DOES IT WORK?

NaNoWriMo events primarily take place online — especially during

pandemic times — but official subgroups are generally paired off regionally within states in the U.S. Honeycutt volunteers as a municipal liaison for one of NaNoWriMo's East Tennessee groups. In that role, she markets the program regionally, organizes in-person and online events, and generally serves to support other writers in her group.



Ashley Long, another municipal liaison who lives in a small community near Morristown, Tennessee, says she first tried the NaNoWriMo challenge in 2010. “I wasn’t very successful,” she says. “I didn’t go to meet-ups, and I didn’t take advantage of all the resources the nonprofit offered.”

But in 2011, things changed for Long. “I was able to write 50,000 words in 30 days,” she says. “It wasn’t a full novel, but it was a good beginning.”

Since then, Long has written two rough drafts for two different stories, she says. “NaNoWriMo helps with motivation,” she says. “Writing is a very solo thing. But with this, there’s a collective energy when you do a virtual or in-person event.”

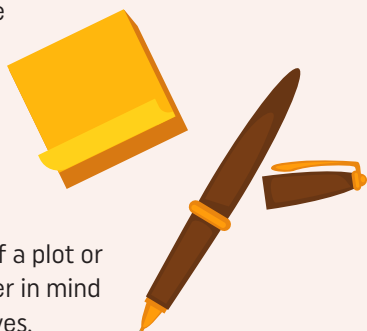
## THE BENEFITS OF TRYING

While writing 50,000 words in 30 days sounds like it could be difficult, Long believes the event itself can be freeing for burgeoning writers. “NaNo is about getting the words on the page,” she says. “You write as much as you can in those 30 days. It’s about getting something that’s valuable in front of you that you can actually work with instead of having it run around your brain.”

NaNoWriMo is also a great way to make lasting friendships, Long says. She and Honeycutt became friends after meeting through the organization. “You get to meet like-minded people with the same goals and interests as you,” Long says. “Some of my best friends now are people I’ve met through NaNo over the years.” 🗨️

## Writing tips for National Novel Writing Month

- **Just write** — Don’t worry about editing, reading and rereading your words. Just get them down.
- **Don’t listen to THAT voice** — You know the one — that overly critical voice of doubt that tells you nothing’s good enough. While constructive criticism is important, there’s no place for THAT voice.
- **Read** — Reading what other writers write can help you structure and build your own words. It can also free up your imagination and allow you to see how they develop characters and move a plot.
- **Prep** — Whether you’re what NaNoWriMo calls a “plotter” or whether you’re a “pantser” who flies by the seat of their pants, it’s generally best to have a scrap of a plot or even a vague character in mind before November arrives.



# Finding the muse

## NaNoWriMo and the Great American Novel

Writing is hard. It’s time-consuming and solitary, and it can fill a person with more doubt in their intelligence and abilities than they’ve ever known. But it can also help stretch the limits of the imagination and bring a sense of accomplishment like nothing else.

Chris Baty, the founder of NaNoWriMo, realized this after struggling to write his own book. So, back in 1999, he and a group of friends with similar goals decided to focus on getting words on the page. They gave themselves one month to write a novel. “That was the genesis of the movement,” says Tim Kim, programs director at NaNoWriMo. “Then, word just spread.”

## Internet spreads the word

As the internet grew, so did NaNoWriMo. In 2006, the annual writing event also became a nonprofit, Kim says. “We were seeing so much energy behind National Novel Writing Month, and so many people wanted to give back. So, we started thinking about how we could do so much more.”

Now, in addition to National Novel Writing Month for adults, the nonprofit offers a Young Writers Program that serves about 100,000 students and educators across the world in about 2,000 classrooms. In addition, the organization offers Come Write, which helps libraries, bookstores and community centers to double as creative writing centers.

Since its beginning, many books that got their start during National Novel Writing Month have gone on to become bestsellers, including “Water for Elephants” by Sara Gruen, “Fangirl” by Rainbow Rowell and “The Forest of Hands and Teeth” by Greenville, South Carolina, native Carrie Ryan.

One of the things the NaNoWriMo organizers are proudest of is how it’s helped writers from all walks of life to find their voices, Kim says. “In places like New York City or Los Angeles, there are so many resources for people being creative and writing novels,” he says. “But we’ve seen with our programs that writers are coming from all over the U.S. — urban places and rural places, and across the world, as well.”

## Getting started

National Novel Writing Month challenges people to write 50,000 words in 30 days. Some finish, some don’t. But everyone involved makes more progress than they may have otherwise. It happens every November and is open to everyone. Find more tools, pep talks, help with structure and a writing community near you at [nanowrimo.org](http://nanowrimo.org).



# On track

## Hodgson steers Turn Racing in the right direction

Story By JOHN CLAYTON

**Z**ach Hodgson's hobbies have always been unique, so when he decided to roll a couple of them into a one-man startup, that business became just as distinctive.

Driven by a passion for simulated, or “sim,” racing and with an affinity for high-end computer hardware gained in his high school robotics classes, Hodgson created Turn Racing in 2016. Working out of his parents' garage in Alexandria, Minnesota, Hodgson began building high-tech steering wheels for sim racing competitors.

He saw a need among his fellow racers and an opportunity to do something he really enjoyed. “There were really three main people in the world that were making custom, high-end steering wheels for sim racing,” Hodgson recalls. “So, I built a prototype out of wood. I posted on some forums, and somebody said they would actually buy it, and that gave me the idea that I could maybe make a business out of it.”

Hodgson did not let the fact that he was not an electrical engineer and that he had a promising career he would have to leave stop him. He dove into self-education, reading books, taking online courses and watching YouTube videos to learn more about putting together the electronic components of Turn Racing's steering wheels.

The business started and built slowly over the first two years. Hodgson processed the orders, built the wheels and shipped them out to his new customers. Then, it exploded. He made \$10,000 in sales one month and realized Turn Racing was no longer a side hustle. “That was when I finally accepted that it was a real business,” Hodgson says.

He even enlisted the help of then-fiancee Jolynn Warnes, whom he married last month. She helped part time while working as a manager at Legacy Assisted Living. “I am only able to do this with her full support,” Hodgson says. “I work very long hours, and she helps out where she can to fill in the gaps.”

### SERIOUSLY DRIVEN

Like Hodgson, sim racers are passionate about their hobby, spending hundreds — if not thousands — of dollars on “rigs,” the computer driving setups that allow them to race on virtual courses all over the world. They need the high-tech steering wheels to drive with pinpoint control.

Hodgson is clear, however, that sim



Zach Hodgson, owner of Turn Racing of Chokio, Minnesota, solders a component.

racing has only a passing resemblance to arcade or console games. Auto racing fans got a small look at sim racing when Formula One and NASCAR broadcast simulated races in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

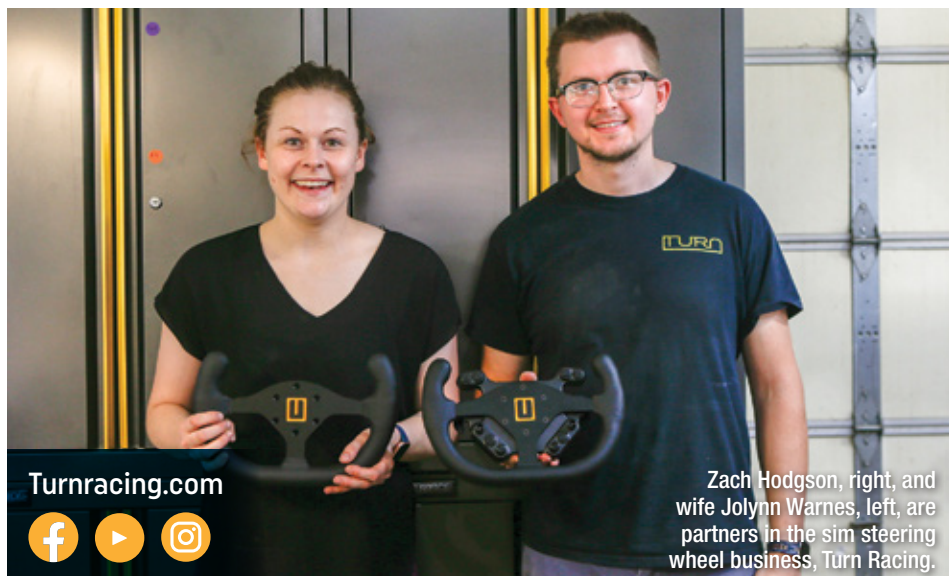
“The market that I appeal to are the people who want to take it more seriously,” Hodgson says. “They love motorsport in general, and they want to be competitive in sim racing.”

Sim racing allows people with an aptitude for racing to perform on the simulators in just about any series or type of race car while not incurring the costs or risks that come with auto racing.

Part of Hodgson's mission is to help grow the sim racing hobby, which is, in turn, good for business at Turn Racing. He is active on social media, with around 18,000 followers each on Facebook and Instagram and another 5,000 subscribers on YouTube.

He still calls rural Minnesota home, and with access to dependable, high-speed internet he is able to continue his racing hobby and build his business. The bulk of Turn Racing's sales are through the internet to customers all over the U.S. and around the world.

“I was extremely thankful to find out that we have fiber internet out here,” Hodgson says. “It's kind of a dream, really. I don't have to deal with living in town, and I have internet speeds as fast as you could ask for anywhere.”



Turnracing.com

Zach Hodgson, right, and wife Jolynn Warnes, left, are partners in the sim steering wheel business, Turn Racing.



# Steady growth

## Heather Nursery changes with the seasons

Story By SHEILA FLYNN

It wasn't surprising when customers outside of the regular rural Minnesota area served by Heather Nursery and Floral began liking photos of plants and housewares on its Facebook page. Also not too surprising was that one of the nursery's main attractions turned out to be the business's resident celebrity, a cat named Simba.

"He's about 3 years old, and he catches mice, and he actually loves water — so whenever we're watering in the greenhouse, he can be nowhere around, and next thing you know, he's there and wants a little bath," laughs owner Randy Leppke, 47, who's been involved with the nursery since he interned with the business in the mid-1990s.

"That's different, a cat that likes water. If we shut the hose off, he'll meow and want a little more. He lives at the nursery, he's a resident. Whenever we get mail for 'the resident,' we give it to him. People come in just to see him."

People also follow Simba online on the nursery's social media page, which has expanded business and raised awareness of the rural Minnesota gardening and landscaping powerhouse. Heather Nursery

and Floral opened its doors in 1979 and now offers services that range from funeral, wedding and event flowers to lawn seeding, tree planting and everything in between.

"We've been around a long time, and everybody knows us and our good work and our products. And we just try to keep that up," says Leppke, who studied horticulture at South Dakota State University after developing a love of plants at a young age.

"I've always been growing things since I was little, and I didn't really want to farm, but I still wanted to grow things, and this was a good way of doing it," he says. Leppke first came across the nursery when he stopped in to buy plants with his mother. He then embarked upon an internship, finally taking over the business three years ago.

Heather Nursery and Floral currently has three locations — in Dawson, Madison and Montevideo, mostly farming communities — and Leppke lives on a nearby farm in Boyd. Simba watches over the Montevideo nursery while Leppke is away.



### BROAD REACH

While the business has a great local reputation, Leppke says the proliferation of the internet and broadband — particularly when service is regular and fast — has aided growth. "People Google us, and they find us, but we still like word of mouth and the old-fashioned way, too," he says. "We do it both ways, but it's going toward more of the internet-type stuff."

Regardless of how people find them, the business and its staff of approximately 10 — which adjusts with seasonal demand — has more than enough options for customers. With a 2,000-square-foot greenhouse, it doesn't matter whether patrons are looking for mums in the fall, poinsettias at Christmas or a manicured backyard year-round.

Leppke says he loves the different aspects of the business and can't even pin down a preferred plant after decades in the industry. "I really don't have a favorite," he says. "I'm around all of them all the time. Every day is different, but it's all fun." 🗨️



Creative and crafty customers try their hands at designing seasonal centerpieces during a Make and Take event.





# A tasty tuber

## Sweet potatoes offer a holiday treat

**S**weet potatoes evoke strong feelings, bringing back tasty memories for some and not-so-good memories for others. It all depends into which camp you happen to fall — pro-marshmallow or anti-marshmallow.

Those white, fluffy confections are the go-to topping for many cooks. But have you tried a savory version? Sweet potatoes aren't necessarily sweet until you begin adding all that sugar and butter to the mix. Instead, consider some recipes that take your holiday sweet potatoes in a different direction.

Try adding cream cheese and chipotle peppers to your sweet potatoes, along with onions and celery. Or jazz them up with garlic, herbs and a sprinkling of parmesan. And don't forget to bake a couple alongside your turkey — mashed and mixed with the turkey drippings, they make an incredible, gluten-free gravy.

No matter the recipe, sweet potatoes are one of nature's superfoods, loaded with an alphabet of vitamins — A, C, B1, B2, B4 and B6 — not to mention fiber, potassium and other minerals important to our diets.

Here are some recipes for putting savory into your sweet potatoes this season. 📖



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

### *Roasted Parmesan Sweet Potatoes*

- 2 1/2 pounds (about 3 medium) sweet potatoes, peeled and diced into 1-inch cubes
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3-4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 1/2 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme leaves
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 cup melted butter
- 1/3 cup finely grated parmesan cheese
- 1 1/2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley leaves

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place diced sweet potatoes on a baking sheet. In a small mixing bowl, stir together olive oil, garlic and thyme. Then pour the mixture over the potatoes. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and toss to evenly coat. Spread into an even layer.

Roast in the oven until tender, tossing once halfway through, about 30 minutes total. You may want to broil the potatoes during the last 1-2 minutes for more golden-brown, crispier potatoes. As soon as you remove the potatoes from the oven, drizzle and toss them with the melted butter, sprinkle them with parmesan and parsley, and serve. Makes 4 servings.



Miller Photography





## SAVORY MASHED SWEET POTATOES

- 1 stick butter
- 2-3 stalks celery, diced
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese
- 1-2 chipotle peppers, chopped, or to taste
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 6-7 sweet potatoes, peeled, cooked and mashed

Melt butter in a skillet and add the celery and onion. Saute until tender. Add cream cheese and stir until melted. Add chipotle peppers a little at a time. You don't want the mixture too spicy. Add salt and pepper to taste, then combine the mixture with the mashed sweet potatoes. Serve warm. Makes 6-8 servings.

## TWICE-BAKED GOAT CHEESE & BACON SWEET POTATOES

- 4 large (about 3 pounds) sweet potatoes, scrubbed and halved lengthwise
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 ounces bacon, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 tablespoons evaporated milk or heavy cream
- 1/2 teaspoon each salt and pepper
- 5 1/2 ounces fresh goat cheese, divided
- 3 tablespoons maple syrup, divided
- 1 tablespoon chopped chives

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Prick the cut side of the potatoes with a fork in a few places. Rub the potatoes all over with oil and put them on a baking sheet, cut side down. Roast the potatoes until they're tender when pierced with a fork, about 45 minutes. Let them cool until you can handle them easily — about 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, cook the bacon in a large frying pan over medium-high heat, stirring often, to very crisp. Drain the bacon on a paper towel, and then roughly chop half of it.

Scoop the sweet potato flesh out of the skins and into a bowl, and reserve the skins. Mash the flesh with a fork until smooth. Add the chopped bacon, milk or cream, salt, pepper, half the goat cheese and 1 tablespoon maple syrup to the mashed potatoes. Stir just until blended. Spoon the mixture into the reserved sweet potato skins, dividing evenly and using all of it. Chill.

When ready to serve, bake the potatoes at 350 F until they are warm in the center, 15 to 20 minutes. Sprinkle the warmed potatoes with the unchopped bacon, crumbles of the remaining goat cheese, drizzles of the remaining maple syrup and the chives. Makes 8 servings.



## Sweet potato rolls

- 1 cup mashed sweet potatoes, unseasoned
- 3/4 cup milk, divided
- 2 1/4 teaspoons active dry yeast
- 1/2 teaspoon plus 1/4 cup granulated sugar, divided
- 4 1/4 to 4 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 2 large eggs
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, partly melted
- 2-3 tablespoons melted butter (for brushing)

If using a whole sweet potato: Peel the potato, chop it into 1-inch cubes and put the cubes in a small saucepan with water to cover. Cook over medium-high heat for 20-30 minutes or until fork-tender. Drain. Mash the potatoes with a few tablespoons of milk. Measure out and set aside 1 cup of the mashed sweet potatoes.

Heat the rest of the milk to 115-120 F. Dissolve the yeast and 1/2 teaspoon sugar in the warm milk. Allow to proof for 5 minutes.

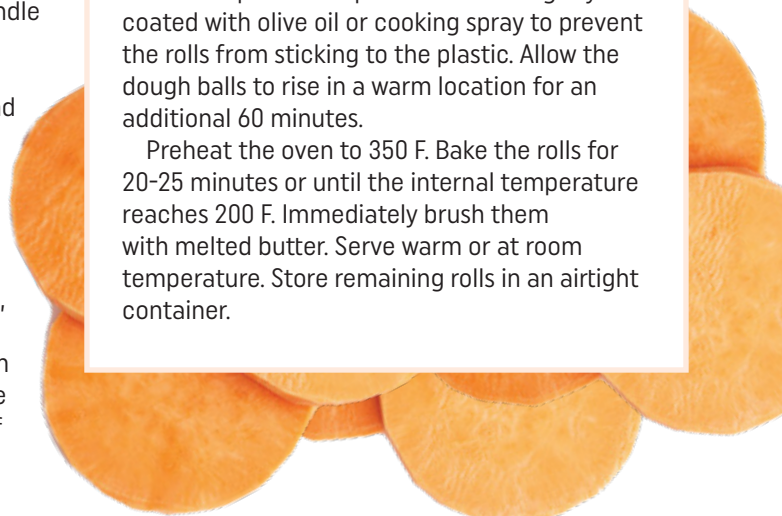
Meanwhile, combine 1/4 cup of sugar, 4 cups of flour and the salt in the bowl of a stand mixer. With the dough hook attachment in place, turn the mixer on low. Add the eggs, one at a time, followed by 6 tablespoons of butter, the mashed sweet potatoes and the yeast mixture. Increase the mixer speed, mixing until the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. If necessary, add up to an extra 1/2 cup of flour.

Transfer the dough to a lightly greased large bowl. Cover, and allow the dough to rise in a warm location until doubled in size, 1 to 1 1/2 hours.

Grease a 9-by-13-inch pan. Set aside.

Divide the dough into 12 equal portions and shape each portion into a ball, pinching the seams together. Place each ball, seam-side down, into the prepared pan. Cover the rolls with a sheet of plastic wrap that has been lightly coated with olive oil or cooking spray to prevent the rolls from sticking to the plastic. Allow the dough balls to rise in a warm location for an additional 60 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Bake the rolls for 20-25 minutes or until the internal temperature reaches 200 F. Immediately brush them with melted butter. Serve warm or at room temperature. Store remaining rolls in an airtight container.



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