

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025

CONNECTION



On Pointe

Local studios teach love of dance

GNOMETOWN
GROUNDS

FILM FESTIVALS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

An Ongoing Mission

NTCA supports rural broadband

As we begin a new year, our NTCA members are on my mind, specifically how they do so much to create a better tomorrow by deploying and sustaining reliable broadband networks that connect rural communities to the world.

We've come a long way since the creation of NTCA in 1954, and I wanted to start 2025 with a reminder—or possibly an introduction—to who we are and how we serve the people who work so hard for you.

We represent about 850 independent, family-owned and community-based rural telecommunications companies. Without NTCA members, many communities would continue to be left behind by larger, national internet providers. So, we strive to advance policies that help these companies close the digital divide. This includes supporting programs like the Universal Service Fund, which helps rural consumers get and stay connected to high-quality, affordable internet.

I'm proud to note how well our NTCA members do their jobs. The robust and reliable broadband they provide enables businesses to connect to customers, doctors to patients and teachers to students. And the work they do in their communities goes beyond providing internet service. Many host digital literacy classes, sponsor STEM and esports initiatives at schools, support economic development initiatives and so much more.

In short, NTCA members are dedicated to improving the communities they serve.

As we enter a new year, we continue to support our members as they work to make your lives the best they can be. 🗨️

HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

BROADBAND NETWORKS SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

Your fast, reliable internet connection connects you to the internet, bringing you a seemingly endless number of services. Whether you enjoy streaming entertainment, gaming, video calls and more, this essential service adapts to your needs.



Did you know, however, that same network may also underpin a range of other services essential to your community? While the specifics may vary from place to place, fast internet networks create a foundation for rural America.



PUBLIC SAFETY

The communications systems serving first responders often rely on broadband-speed internet.



EDUCATION

School systems send large amounts of data and offer classrooms access to online resources.



GOVERNMENT

From informational websites and apps to the computer networks and databases needed to operate, local governments require excellent connectivity.



HEALTH CARE

Whether transmitting medical records or for telehealth visits, medical providers increasingly rely on digital tools.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Fast broadband networks provide a community resource attractive to both businesses and homebuyers, creating a keystone for growth.

A Safe Place to Stay

Isaiah House provides comfort for foster children



Photo courtesy of Corey Paulson

Television host Mike Rowe, center, surprises Isaiah 117 House co-founder Ronda Paulson and her family for a taping of his Facebook show “Returning the Favor.”

Story by MELANIE JONES

When Ronda and Corey Paulson met their first foster child at the back door of the Carter County, Tennessee, Department of Children’s Services, he was wearing too-small pajamas. The clothes he was wearing when he was removed from his unsuitable home were filthy, and DCS was unable to provide any that fit him properly.

The 9-month-old was fortunate the couple could come get him quickly. Some foster children spend hours—if not days—at overwhelmed and understaffed DCS offices, sometimes sleeping on the floor.

That situation has begun to change, however, thanks to a far-reaching program the Paulsons were inspired to establish in 2018. Thanks to word of mouth and a 2020 feature by “Dirty Jobs” host Mike Rowe on his Facebook page, their effort is spreading nationwide.

When the couple took the baby boy, Isaiah, home they lavished him with love and everything else an infant could need. But the Paulsons couldn’t stop thinking about something they learned in their

foster-parenting classes—the DCS office is usually the only place for a child to go on removal day.

They thought of little Isaiah. And they started studying the Bible’s book of Isaiah, including part of one verse in particular, Isaiah 1:17, which calls on people to “take up the cause of the fatherless.”

Then they thought, “What if there was a home?” Corey says.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

So, that’s what they set out to create. Ronda put together a board and worked with the local DCS office to come up with a workable concept. They raised money, bought a house and renovated it to DCS specifications. They painted the door red, and they called it Isaiah 117 House.

The house provides space for DCS workers who now bring children there instead of an office building. Children and teens have access to baths and showers. They get brand-new clean clothes and

toys. They have beds to sleep in if the placement takes more than a few hours. Volunteers cook them nutritious meals and comfort food.

That was 2018, and it was supposed to be one and done. “Clearly, we’ve learned that God had other plans,” Corey says.

Word of mouth spread. Soon neighboring Tennessee counties wanted their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Then, in 2020, Ronda and the Isaiah 117 House were featured on Mike Rowe’s Facebook show “Returning the Favor.” Two million people saw that episode on March 9, 2020. Then the calls really started coming in. Corey says they heard from people in 41 states and four countries wanting to start their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Now about 30 are open and more are in the works across 12 states.

“On March 13, the world shut down,” Corey says of the COVID-19 pandemic. “But our mission kept growing. We say Mike Rowe and Jesus are building houses for children.” 📺

LEARN MORE

Interested in learning more about Isaiah 117 House or how to establish one in your area? Visit isaiah117house.com.

Fiber Broadband Is a Vital Resource for Local Communities

Our network continues to grow in 2025

Happy new year. I hope you had a wonderful holiday season and enjoyed your time with friends and family. The beginning of 2025 is an exciting moment because we have another opportunity to continue our mission to uplift the communities we support by providing vital communications services.



KEVIN BEYER
Chief Executive Officer

We offer a range of resources meant to connect businesses, homes, schools and so many others to the world. Or perhaps it's simply one neighbor chatting or sharing information with another neighbor. That's the power of our internet network in the modern digital world—it does multiple jobs to bring us together, make our local economy stronger and build lasting connections. We believe everyone should be included in this network, making access to these services critical. Every community deserves fast, reliable connections, and we're committed to making that happen for you and your neighbors.

You need to look no further than the pages of this magazine each month for examples that highlight ways businesses and community organizations connect. For instance, social media allows competitive dancers to share their successes, and it introduces the art to others who might be interested in participating. Similarly, the website of Gnetown Grounds allows the business to tout its coffee shop, lunch offerings and gift shop. That's only the beginning, though.

Online job opportunities and the expansion of local businesses allow our economies to thrive. A reliable internet is the bridge tying our current successes to future growth. But success isn't limited to the business sector. Our schools rely on a range of online tools and resources to create vibrant classrooms. Older students can connect to remote college classes, and those already in the workforce can use online resources to advance their careers.

For all these reasons and more, we've invested in bringing our powerful internet network to as many communities as possible as quickly as possible. Farmers Mutual and Federated Telephone now span about 3,300 square miles, serving 7,800 subscribers.

This year, we will extend the network another 90 square miles, significantly increasing the number of people with access to these critical digital resources. In particular, we are growing in Kandiyohi and Chippewa counties, growth that's vital to our success.

These communities are outside the area traditionally served by our co-op, and adding these new members provides a range of benefits. Not only will our network serve the residents of these communities, but it also creates benefits for all our members. Adding new internet subscribers reduces the per-member cost for everyone—the cost of maintaining our network is spread across more people. Additionally, this larger structure increases our purchasing power and ability to buy products and services at lower rates. Our overall business becomes stronger and better able to withstand any competition that might arise.

It's an exciting time, and we look forward to continuing to bring the services that make our communities better connected and stronger. May your 2025 be filled with happiness and prosperity. Thank you for letting us serve you. 📞

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On the Cover:



Whitney Masee, pictured, and Stephanie Ferrian each took great care to build their dance studios, Valley Dance District and Footnotes School of Dance, respectively.

Photo courtesy of Krista Jo

See stories Pages 8 and 9.



Partnering to promote furthering education

The Foundation for Rural Service along with Farmers Mutual and Federated Telephone Cooperative strongly support the continuing education of rural youth.

The FRS awards scholarships to rural graduating high school students for their first year of a 2-year or 4-year college or vocational school. In 2024, \$173,000 was awarded to 55 students across the country. The value of scholarships range from \$500-\$9,000, based on a variety of criteria. One application qualifies a student for all available FRS scholarships.

To be eligible, students must have at least one parent who is a member of Farmers Mutual or Federated Telephone Cooperative at the time they submit their application and attend college.

Full online application and requirements are available online at frs.org/programs/youth-programs/scholarships. Applications are due February 14, 2025.

MTA Foundation scholarships available

The Minnesota Telcom Alliance Foundation will award five \$2,000 scholarships to members of the Class of 2025 as well as the \$3,000 Jon Tollefson Technology Scholarship. Recipients must attend postsecondary education at either a university, college or technical college.

To be eligible, applicants must be Minnesota residents, and their families must subscribe to at least one service from either Farmers Mutual Telephone or Federated Telephone.

A panel will review and score each application based on grades, academic achievements and extracurricular activities. Scholarships are awarded after students' successful completion of the first year of college or technical school.

For more information and a scholarship application, go to mnta.org/page/scholarship or see your school guidance counselor. Application needs to be dropped off at our office for General Manager Kevin Beyer's signature. Application Deadline is February 14, 2025.



Farmers Mutual Telephone and Federated Telephone, in partnership with the Foundation for Rural Service, give an opportunity to two high school students—one from each of our cooperatives—to tour our nation's capital.

This year's Youth Tour of Washington, D.C., is June 2-6. The trip includes visits to the Lincoln Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, Vietnam and World War II memorials, the Kennedy Center, Smithsonian museums, the Federal Communications Commission and a meeting with congressional staff members.

Current students ages 15, 16 or 17 at the time of the tour, and whose parents or guardians are cooperative members in good standing, are eligible to apply. Students 18 or older are ineligible.

Each applicant must submit an essay, up to 500 words, explaining why they would like to attend and their interest in rural broadband. Find out more at frs.org/programs/youth-programs/youth-tour.

Submit essay in person, mail or email to farmers@farmerstel.net or emailftc@fedtel.net. Deadline to submit essay is Friday, January 31, 2025.

Simplify With SmartHub

Make convenience and efficiency priorities in 2025 by signing up for SmartHub. With SmartHub you can pay your bill online, manage your account and more.

To learn more, and to register for SmartHub, go to:

farmers.smarthub.coop/Login.html

fedtel.smarthub.coop/Login.html

Download the SmartHub app from your app store. Have your account number and most recent billing statement handy to register, or call our team for help.

Farmers Mutual office: 320-568-2105 | Federated office: 320-324-7111



Roll Out the Red Carpet

Fans play key role in film festivals' success

Story by KATHY DENES

The new year brings film fans front-row access to the latest—possibly greatest—in movie entertainment. Surprising plot twists, emotional turbulence, enlightenment, wild outdoor adventures, horror, invasions from space and even close encounters with celebrities are all in store. The 2025 film festivals are ready for their close-up.

“Festivals give filmmakers the opportunity to meet and see firsthand the impact their work has on real audiences,” says Cara Ogburn, artistic director for the Milwaukee Film Festival, set for April 24 to May 8. “Attendees of our festival are consistently praised for their

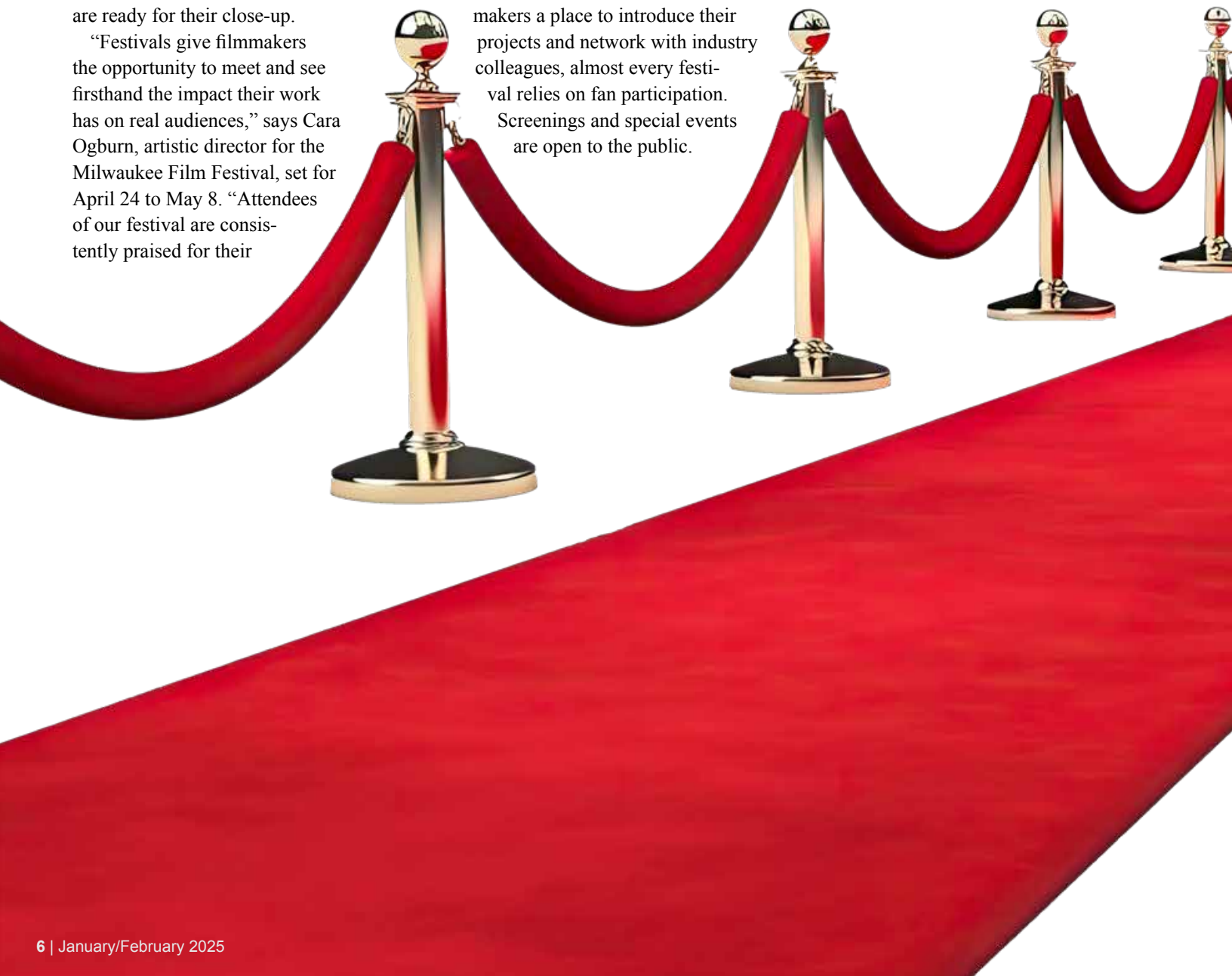
curiosity and receptiveness to a wide range of films, always asking thoughtful questions during Q&As and making the experience extra special for both audiences and visiting filmmakers alike.”

FAN FARE

While its primary focus is giving filmmakers a place to introduce their projects and network with industry colleagues, almost every festival relies on fan participation.

Screenings and special events are open to the public.

Fans at film festivals often rub elbows with industry insiders, filmmakers and actors as they get an inside look at the movies and topics that will shape the entertainment scene in the coming year. They also get to see impactful projects that may never make it to their neighborhood



REGIONAL FESTIVAL FARE

March: Fargo Film Festival 2025 will welcome Molly Ringwald for a Q&A following a special screening of "The Breakfast Club" at the Fargo Theatre, fargotheatre.org. The theater is also the venue for the Fargo Fantastic Film Festival starting Oct. 16, an offshoot of the annual ValleyCon science fiction/fantasy convention.

April: From April 2-13, the Minneapolis St. Paul International Film Festival celebrates its 44th year with more than 200 films and a host of events at The Main Cinema and other venues. Find information at mspfilm.org/mspiff44. The Milwaukee Film Festival offers such a range of genres that the films are divided into 15 programs, including the family-friendly Rated K: For Kids options. Learn more at mkefilm.org.

May: Young filmmakers from across the state will be in the spotlight at The Main Cinema for the EDU Film Festival. Since its 2007 debut, EDU has been Minnesota's premier festival for high school students, providing a place for them to showcase their work, connect with peers and build a professional network. The public is welcome, and admission is free. Get information at edufilmfest.org.

system that prioritizes previous buyers. Tickets usually are available for purchase during the festival, but there's a chance that popular screenings and events will involve a waitlist.

To ensure access, and save money, a great choice for the adventurous film buff is to sign up as a festival volunteer. Many festivals are completely staffed by volunteers, and even the largest fests rely heavily on volunteer workers. Duties range from greeting patrons and taking tickets to helping at evening parties. Volunteers often reap the rewards such as free admission and sometimes even access to industry professionals.

Another option is to become a member of the organization putting on a festival, which can bring year-round benefits. Some festivals also offer members the option of in-home streaming of films throughout the year, while others have affiliations that provide discounts at movie theaters throughout the country. 📺

theaters. But beyond that, fans meet people with similar interests, making the festivals social events involving much more than just cramming in as many screenings as possible.

Finding a great festival to attend is easy—they are plentiful. One great resource for starting your search is a visit to filmfreeway.com.

HIT THE MARK

Festival ticket sales often start well in advance, and popular festivals can sell out quickly. Some have a tiered ticketing



The Downer Theatre gets its marquee ready for Milwaukee Film Festival visitors.

Photo courtesy of Jolee Mallmann

Love of Dance

Inspiring generations at Footnotes

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

In September, 100 dancers walked through the doors of Footnotes Studio of Dance in Morris, ready to begin the monthslong journey that will be the studio's 21st season in operation.

Each season's dancers are a mix of newcomers and veterans, ages 2-18. They show up excited and ready to tackle one of the many forms of dance Footnotes teaches, from tap and jazz to ballet, lyrical, hip-hop, acro and contemporary. They will showcase what they learn at two recitals, one in winter and the second in spring.

But like owner Stephanie Ferrian—who started Footnotes prior to her senior year of college—most of the students participate simply for the love of dance.

"Twenty years later, we're still teaching dance," Stephanie says. "It's just been a huge part of my life, and I don't really know what I'd do without it."

TRENDS CHANGE, DANCE REMAINS

Stephanie always loved dancing. She started taking classes at a young age, and it quickly became "a passion, a love of my life," she says. She danced throughout her childhood and into college.

The studio has come a long way since then. Over the years, it's had three different locations and scads of students. Some of Stephanie's former pupils still perform in recitals today alongside their own children, now students at Footnotes.

"I think that the fun thing about dance is, historically, dance has maintained tradition while also finding a way to change with the times," Stephanie says.

Trends in dance have changed over the

Photo courtesy of IntDaisy Media



Photos courtesy of Grace Gallant



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Footnotes performance dancers take the stage at a spring 2024 competition. A kindergarten class combines introductory ballet, jazz and pop. A group of teen ballet dancers practice in pointe shoes.

years, too. One of the biggest changes Stephanie noticed is social media. Dancers connect with one another through social media, and that carries over into the classroom. Stephanie's students sometimes ask to learn specific things they've seen on social media platforms.

Technology has also affected the way Footnotes operates. Historically, dancers relied on pianists to accompany performances. Stephanie herself remembers cutting music onto cassette tapes and bringing them to competitions. Then, she started burning CDs. Then came flash drives, and today, music is played via Bluetooth speaker.

A DANCE FAMILY

Over time dance styles evolve and fluctuate in popularity, but one thing remains constant—dancers become family. Several of Stephanie's former dancers have become instructors at Footnotes.

"These dancers really do become a part of my family and a part of who I am as

a person because they've come into my life," Stephanie says. "And part of that, too, is that we're in a small community. It's really been fun to watch the dancers grow in dance and outside the studio."

Footnotes is primarily a recreational studio, but Stephanie does take dancers to several competitions each year.

She's also brainstorming what will come next. Technology has made it easy to see what other dancers are up to, providing plenty of inspiration to keep her students motivated and engaged.

And she's considering offering classes for adults. "It's about finding the right time and the right style that folks are interested in," Stephanie says. 🗨️

FOOTNOTES STUDIO OF DANCE

506 California Ave., Morris
320-585-5707

Find the dance studio on Facebook and Instagram as Footnotes Studio.



Balancing Act

Valley Dance District turns out well-rounded dancers

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

Dance competitions aren't just a flash in the pan.

Whitney Masee, director of Valley Dance District in Appleton, says most competitions are three-day events showcasing skills developed by countless hours of effort. Dancers approach these events with months of practice under their belts. The choreography is set in August, and then the 10-month season begins. They hone their routines every week starting in September.

This year, Valley Dance District dancers will take part in three regional competitions and will make another appearance at a national competition. Dancers are scheduled based on age and style, then group size.

"It's a long weekend," Whitney says, "but a lot of fun."

By day, Whitney is a kindergarten teacher at Appleton-Milan Elementary School. Her career in education started 15 years ago, after she graduated from Concordia College in Moorhead.

DANCE FOR ALL

Competition dancers learn under Valley Dance District's "company lines" branch of the studio, Whitney says. Valley Dance District also offers an eight-month "studio lines" session each year, the recreational

branch for students who love to dance but are more interested in learning and enjoying the experience than in competing.

This year, the studio is home to 130 dancers. It's grown steadily over the years, instructing 2- to 18-year-olds in a variety of styles from tap to jazz, ballet, pointe, acro, lyrical, contemporary and hip-hop.

Whitney trained at Music General Dance in Brainerd from a young age. After 15 years of studio dancing, though, she didn't think she'd stick with it. "But after I went to college, I realized I was kind of missing something," she says.

She started teaching at a studio in Fargo while in college, then moved to the Appleton area after marrying Eddie Masee. That's when she met Shelly Schirm. Shelly asked Whitney for help with the Lac qui Parle community education dance program, Rising Star Dance, looking long-term for someone to take over. Whitney taught the program for several years, changing the name to Valley Dance District as things took off.

WELL-ROUNDED DANCERS

Whitney is particularly proud of the fact that most of the studio's seventh through



Photos courtesy of Krista Jo

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Whitney Masee runs the team through a competition routine. Oliver Langford sings his part during the spring recital performance. The Elite Hip-Hop team performs at the annual Company Line Show.

12th grade dancers are also multi-sport athletes. They train with Valley Dance District for three-plus hours each week, participate in other sports and are often involved in other extracurricular activities.

"I feel like every year we are presented with a new challenge for scheduling and what these kids sign up for, but my staff and I fully support them doing things outside of the studio," Whitney says. "Every year we're making changes and adjusting to what the kids show interest in."

Indeed, she thinks that flexibility has led to Valley Dance District's consistent growth over the years. "I think the Valley Dance program has continued to grow because we really cater to the needs of what our dancers have wanted," Whitney says.

VALLEY DANCE DISTRICT

23 S. Miles St., Appleton

218-232-8543

valleydancedistrict.com

Follow Valley Dance District on Facebook and Instagram.

A SMOLDERING SITUATION

Volunteer fire departments face dwindling numbers, aging workforce



Illustration by Adobe Stock

Story by MELANIE JONES

In times of crisis in rural communities, the first people to arrive on the scene are often friends and neighbors who sacrifice their time because they want to help, not draw a paycheck. They put out the fires. They drive the ambulances. They save lives.

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, nearly 19,000 of the nation's 29,452 fire departments are all-volunteer, and the number of those volunteers has been shrinking. In 2020, the number of volunteer firefighters reached a record low. On top of that, more than half of those volunteer firefighters in smaller departments are aged 40 or older, and 34% are over 50.

That doesn't mean older firefighters can't get the job done, says Steve Hirsch, NVFC chairman. At 62, Steve is the training officer of the fire department in Sheridan County, Kansas. He recalls a man once asking him the age of the oldest firefighter in his department. He told the man 93. The man laughed and said, "No, I mean the age of your oldest firefighter that's still responding to calls." The man was shocked when Steve again replied, "93."

"But you know, that was out of a station that might get one or two calls a year," Steve says. "He'd grown up in that area his entire life. He knew where every hole and every gate was in his neighborhood. He wasn't out there pulling hose or doing entry, but he was able to drive a pickup. It worked out nice."

A HEALTHY MIX

While Steve doesn't believe older firefighters are a bad thing, he appreciates the importance of having a wide range of ages active in the department.

"We can't let the fire department get all old," he says. "Nothing wrong with a good mix. That's pretty important. But we still have to have young people to get out there and do the work. Is there a safety factor in having everybody that's older? Probably, because

the older we get, the more likely we are to have heart attacks and other health issues."

Depending on the state, county or even the fire district, firefighters may not have to meet physical requirements to battle blazes. "A lot of places, they're hard up enough for people that if you've got a pulse, you're probably qualified," Steve says.

Steve has done fire training in Kansas for 25 years through the state association. "The departments I go into that are really good departments have a nice mix of older and younger people," he says. "The older people keep the younger ones from making the mistakes that we've all made, and the younger ones have the stamina to get stuff done."

While the national statistics say volunteer firefighters are trending older, Steve doesn't see that in his own department. "Right now, I've got more people than I've ever had in my department, and I have tons of younger people," he says.

He encourages departments to use the Explorer program, as his has, which trains teenagers to fight fires. "Our whole goal is to get young men and women excited about the fire service at an early age because it's kind of like fishing. If you set the hook, it's hard for them to get loose."

PUTTING OUT THE CALL

It's vital for fire departments to recruit new members to keep replenishing the number of volunteers, but there are many factors that limit recruitment. For one thing, some of these communities are tiny, with only 70 or 80 residents. "Your pool is pretty thin," Steve says.

There are more activities competing for people's time and attention these days, and some people just don't understand that the departments are all-volunteer. They don't realize they're needed.

“A lot of places, they’re hard up enough for people that if you’ve got a pulse, you’re probably qualified.”

—Steve Hirsch, chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council

Photo courtesy of Steve Hirsch



National Volunteer Fire Council Chairman Steve Hirsch has been training firefighters for 25 years.

Photo by Adobe Stock/Teerapong23

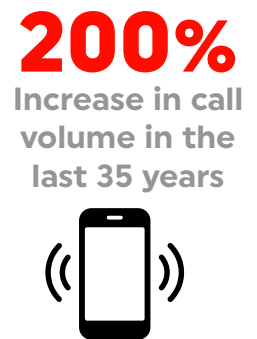
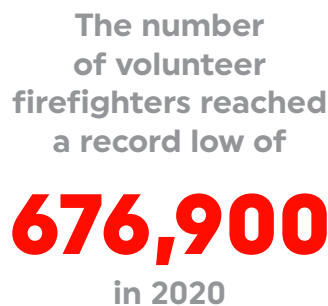


Steve says his best recruitment tool is his existing firefighters. He also says his department is probably the only one in a multicounty region that has an aerial ladder. Park that on the street, and people start coming in. Being active on social media is a good way to recruit younger people, he says. But having a good attitude is a big part of it.

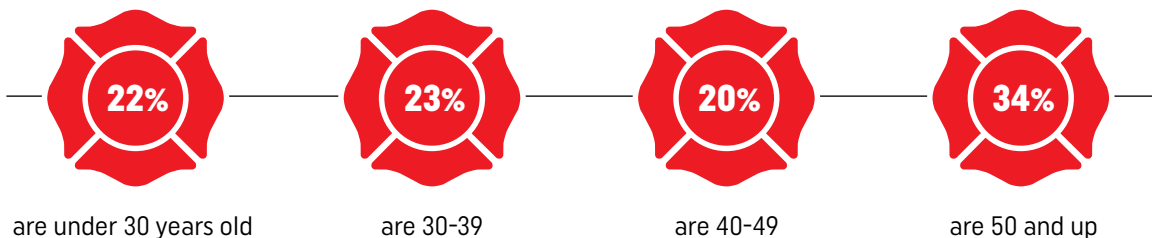
He hears a lot of negative comments about the younger generation, especially about how they’re always on their phones. “What I find is, most of the time, they’re checking to make sure that I know what I’m talking about, and that’s OK,” Steve says.

It’s important to keep recruiting, he says, because fire departments are vital to a community’s safety and firehouses are often a hub for gatherings and activities.

“What is a community going to do when they don’t have a fire department?” he says. “That’s probably the newest, biggest building in that town of 80-some people. People use that fire station for all sorts of events in the community. A lot of our small towns have lost their school, they’ve lost their grocery store. A lot of them have lost their banks. Some of them don’t have cafes anymore. So that fire department becomes the glue that binds that community together. And, you know, you lose one more glob of glue, and pretty soon, things just fall apart.” 📱



The volunteer fire service is an aging population. In communities under 2,500:



Source: National Volunteer Fire Council

MORNING GRIND

Dawson coffee shop proves there's no place like gnome

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Emma Weber had no choice other than to be serious about coffee while she was training as a barista in Australia. But when it came to opening her own business back in her hometown of Dawson, she chose to couple that Aussie coffee culture with a little bit of whimsy.

Gnometown Grounds, a coffee shop, lunch spot and gift shop, served its first cup in October 2023.

"I was looking for a name for the coffee shop, and I like the idea of it being like stomping grounds—like it's our place," Emma says. "So, we went with Gnometown Grounds because Gnometown is ours, too."

Dawson has been dubbed "Gnometown, USA" by its own residents, and the city continues to have a growing gnome population because of the nickname—and because Emma continues to sell them.

"People here are kind of obsessed with gnomes," Emma says with a laugh. "In fact, when we go to market, they're always like, 'Don't buy so many gnomes,' but I always do."

That's the whimsical side, but Emma has also brought part of a more serious coffee culture to downtown Dawson.



ABOVE: Owner Emma Weber uses a Wi-Fi-enabled point-of-sale system to track customer purchases.

RIGHT: Emma grabs a cup of coffee after the morning rush.



Emma and her staff serve up coffees, teas and other drinks, including some original recipes like Blackjack Lotus Lemonade, named for the Dawson-Boyd High School Blackjacks.

A GATHERING PLACE

Emma originally traveled to Australia and Southeast Asia as part of a mission journey, but she says coming back home to Dawson was always part of the plan. Her first year in business, though challenging, proves she made the right move.

"I love the way that our community always supports one another, whether it's through sickness or through state champion football teams or through business," Emma says. "They've always kind of looked out for each other and had each other's back. After spending three years on the other side of the world from my family, I was ready to be within an hour or so of most of them."

She came home and opened Gnometown Grounds in the same building where she worked as a teenager. Earlier this year, she closed the cafe and coffee shop for renova-

tions, but the community still supported the gift shop. By summer, Emma's entire vision for Gnometown Grounds was realized when the cafe and coffee shop reopened.

People from Dawson and beyond come in for breakfast, lunch, coffee and other drinks. They can wander into the gift shop where they, of course, can always find a gnome and a place to gather.

"I had a lot of coffee training, which helped shape what I wanted to do now, and I saw how they used their space in Australia as an outreach point to their community and a place where their community could just come and be and gather," she says. "It showed me all the opportunities and blessings that I have and how I would like to bless others and give them opportunities." ☺

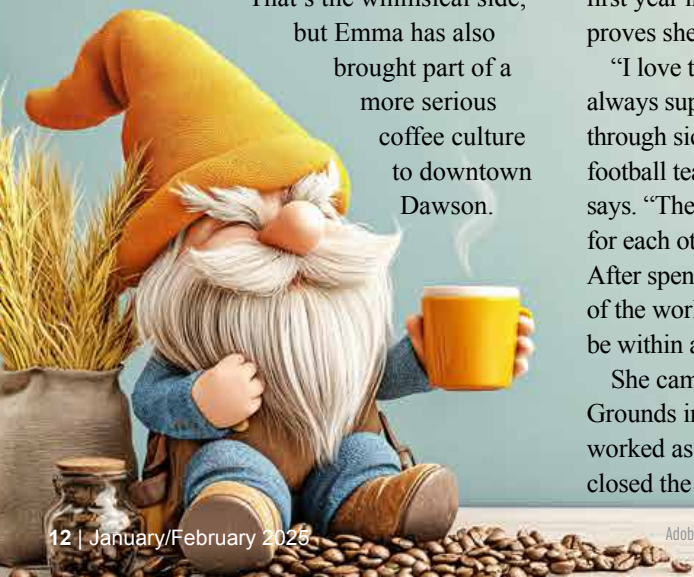
Gnometown Grounds

767 6th St., Dawson

320-312-2444

gnometowngrounds.com

Find Gnometown Grounds on
Instagram and Facebook





Adobe Stock photo by sdecret

Browser Power-Ups

Polish your online experience

While computers and mobile devices increasingly rely on dedicated apps to connect to online resources, one software tool is still essential decades after its introduction—the web browser. And today’s browsers are more powerful, and customizable, than ever.

Google’s Chrome is the most popular, but there are plenty of other options, including Apple’s Safari and Microsoft’s Edge. Additionally, the Firefox browser is a project of the independent Mozilla Foundation. All are free.

CUSTOMIZE

From arranging the toolbars to custom themes, most browsers allow users to tailor the settings to use the software in a way that best suits their needs and preferences. For example, most include a dark mode for those who prefer a browsing experience with greater contrast between the text and background.

CHOOSE YOUR EXTENSIONS

Extensions allow your browser to connect directly to other services or online resources. If you often work from home,

extensions might allow you to connect to online office resources or note-taking tools. Similarly, a common extension gives one-click access to a password manager, making that vital security tool more convenient.

ENJOY EASY READING

Most browsers now offer a reading mode. With one click—usually a button found in or near the address bar of the browser—the ads and other graphics are stripped away to leave minimally formatted text. It’s a great option to activate when reading longer articles.

SYNC ACROSS DEVICES

If you use the same browser on multiple devices, try the sync feature so your bookmarks, history, passwords and settings are mirrored across your devices. If you wish, you might be able to start reading an article on your laptop and seamlessly continue it on your phone.

MANAGE YOUR PRIVACY AND SECURITY

Online privacy and security are more important than ever. Browsers typically

offer a range of options so users can make choices about the data shared with various websites, social media apps and more. Good security and privacy practices evolve, so frequently check the help section of your browser of choice to review the available options.

UPDATE REGULARLY

The online world changes fast, and browsers must adapt just as quickly. So, make sure to keep your favorite browser up to date. Consider choosing to update your browser automatically, which is generally safe and reliable. If you prefer more control, make a point of regularly checking your browser’s settings for available updates.

BOOKMARK YOUR FAVORITES

One of the oldest browser features is still one of the most useful—bookmarks. These are quick links to sites and tools you use often. Not only can they be kept in their own section of the browser, they can also typically be added to the prominent toolbar so they’re even more handy. ☒

All the Comforts of Home

Classic trio's widespread appeal endures

The definition of comfort food depends on your region. In the Midwest, it might be a bubbly hot dish just pulled from the oven. In the Southwest, comfort may come in the form of a steaming bowl of chili, while Southerners might look toward biscuits and gravy with a side of grits.

Three simple dishes, however, bring together the entire culinary country—tomato soup, a gooey grilled cheese sandwich and a warm slice of apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.



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CREAMY TOMATO SOUP

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 3 cups yellow onions, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 (28-ounce) cans tomatoes
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil or
1 1/2 tablespoons dried basil, plus
more to serve
- 1 tablespoon sugar, or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black
pepper, or to taste
- Dash of Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Heat a nonreactive pot or enameled Dutch oven over medium heat. Add butter, then add chopped onions. Saute

10-12 minutes, stirring occasionally, until softened and golden. Add minced garlic, and saute 1 minute until fragrant.

Add crushed tomatoes with their juice, chicken stock, chopped basil, sugar, pepper and a dash of Worcestershire. Stir and bring to a boil then reduce heat, partially cover with lid and simmer 10 minutes.

Use an immersion blender to blend the soup in the pot or transfer to a blender in batches and blend until smooth—being careful not to overfill the blender with hot liquid—then return soup to the pot over medium heat.

Add heavy cream and grated parmesan cheese and return to a simmer. Season to taste with salt and pepper, if needed, and turn off the heat.

Ladle into warm bowls, and top with more parmesan and a sprinkle of basil.



GROWN-UP GRILLED CHEESE

Makes 4 sandwiches

- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 yellow onions, diced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme or 1/4 teaspoon dried
- 2 teaspoons fresh rosemary or 3/4 teaspoon dried, divided
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar
- 8 slices artisan sourdough bread
- Mayonnaise
- 12 ounces Gruyere cheese, grated at room temperature
- 6 ounces sharp white cheddar cheese, grated at room temperature
- 4 thin slices Muenster cheese, at room temperature

Add 1 1/2 tablespoons butter and olive oil to a skillet and heat over medium-low heat. Add diced onions, salt, pepper, fresh thyme and 1 teaspoon of fresh rosemary to the hot skillet and saute about 10 minutes, stirring often, until onions are soft and

starting to brown. Stir brown sugar into the onions and cook another minute. Transfer onions to a plate.

For each sandwich: Spread one side of two pieces of bread with a little bit of mayonnaise.

To the same skillet, add remaining butter and rosemary and heat over medium heat. Add both pieces of mayonnaise-coated bread, mayonnaise side down, and cook until bread is golden brown and crunchy, 2-3 minutes.

As soon as you add the bread to the skillet, add a bit of cheese to the top of each piece. Once it starts to melt a little, sprinkle a couple tablespoons of the caramelized onions over the top of one of the pieces of bread.

When the bread is golden brown, sandwich the pieces of bread together and cook on low heat until the cheese is fully melted. Transfer to a plate and repeat with remaining slices of bread and ingredients.

GRANDMA'S SIMPLE APPLE PIE

- 1 double-crust pie pastry
 - 1 large egg, beaten
- Filling:**
- 6-7 cups apples, about 2 pounds
 - 1 tablespoon lemon juice

- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg



Preheat the oven to 425 F. Peel the apples and cut them into quarters. Remove the core and slice the apples 1/4-inch thick.


In a large bowl, combine the apple slices with lemon juice, sugar, flour, cinnamon and nutmeg. Toss apple mixture well and set aside.

Roll out half of the pastry dough into a 12-inch circle. Line a 9-inch pie plate with the dough and fill it with the apple mixture.

Roll out the remaining dough and cover the apple filling. Pinch the edges to seal, trimming any excess. Style the edges as desired by crimping or pressing with a fork.

Cut four to five slits on top of the crust to allow the steam to release. Whisk the egg with 2 teaspoons of water or milk and brush over the crust.

Bake at 425 F for 15 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 375 F and continue baking for another 35-40 minutes or until the crust is golden and the apples are tender.

Remove from the oven and let rest for at least 30 minutes before serving. Serve with vanilla ice cream, if desired. 

Bling in the New Year!

Make 2025 sparkle with fast,
reliable internet service!

2025

