

HCTC

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2025

CONNECTION



Texas Twang

Savory satisfaction at
Black Board Bar B Q

VETERANS
CENTER

FOLK
ARTISTS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Professionally Secure

NTCA members are committed to your safety

As we enter the holiday season, it is an opportunity to acknowledge a group of professionals you may not realize is working diligently behind the scenes to make this season—as well as every month of the year—enjoyable and safe.

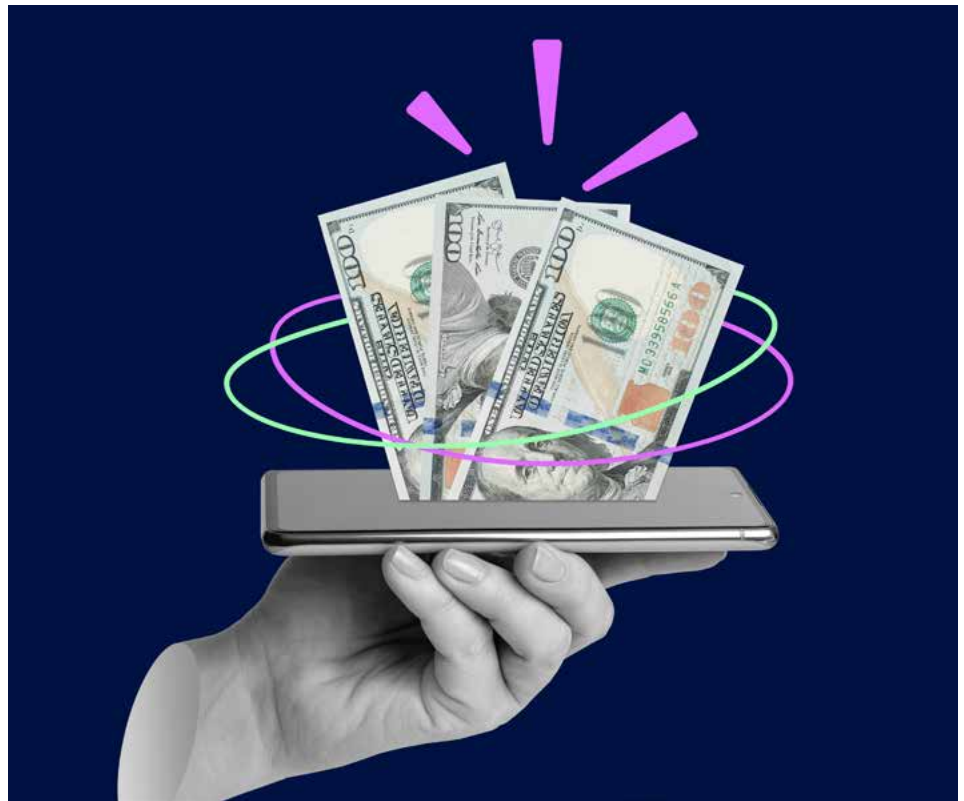
Many of you stream movies, music, short videos or interactive games, and there's always online shopping. NTCA members provide rural communities with the networks vital for all of this and so much more, from banking to education, telehealth and beyond.

Unfortunately, online risks do exist. Scammers may try to capture your personal information, or malicious websites might lead to insecure transactions. There are even attempts to disrupt the infrastructure itself.

Monitoring threats and vigilantly updating everything from software to security strategies is central to the day-to-day job of rural broadband providers. To help with this, NTCA created CyberShare: The Small Broadband Provider ISAC, an information-sharing network that allows participating providers to collaborate and share critical information. Whether it's learning about vulnerable equipment, software exploits, recent cyberattack attempts or mitigation strategies, this information sharing helps members proactively strengthen their defenses to keep you and your family safe online.

You play a role, too. When you're shopping online, make smart choices, such as relying on websites with addresses that begin with https, shop on well-established sites and lean on strong, secure passwords.

Together we can enjoy happy, safe holidays. 📱



Adobe Stock image by LarriBat

Use Caution With Cash Apps

While mobile payment apps like PayPal or Venmo make it easy to send and receive money online or through an app on a phone, scammers are also waiting to take advantage.

This service becomes an intermediary between your money and whoever is on the other end of a transaction, which can create an added layer of security.

But if a scammer tricks you into sending money, it's hard to get it back. The Federal Trade Commission notes the risks and offers tips for staying safe.

- Don't send a payment to claim a prize or collect sweepstakes winnings.
- Never give your account credentials to anyone who contacts you.
- Protect your account with multifactor authentication or a personal identification number.
- Before paying, double-check the recipient's information to make sure you're sending money to the right person.
- If you get an unexpected request for money from someone you do recognize, speak with that person directly to make sure the request really is valid, not a scam by a hacker who got access to their account.

If you find unauthorized payments or think you paid a scammer, immediately report the transaction to the service providing the payment app. Instructions should be available on the service's website. Also, report the scam to reportfraud.ftc.gov. 📱

Outside the Box

Personalized presents extend gift-giving beyond holidays

Looking for that gift that keeps on giving long after they've tossed the wrapping paper and bows? With a little online exploration, a nontraditional gift is out there for just about everyone on your list.

GAMING SUBSCRIPTIONS

Just like movie and music services, game subscriptions offer unlimited access to huge catalogs of titles for players who would rather not put up the \$70-\$80 average price for each individual game. Paying a part of the most popular subscriptions—Xbox Game Pass at \$9.99-\$19.99 per month, PlayStation Plus at \$17.99 or Apple Arcade at \$6.99—is a great way to show your gamers some love.

WATCH 'EM PLAY

Video game streaming involves broadcasting live gameplay over the internet, allowing viewers to engage with and watch other players in real time. Like livestreaming on Facebook and TikTok, game streamers provide content for viewers worldwide, playing video games and offering commentary.

Twitch is by far the most popular service, with more than 240 million monthly subscribers who play, watch, create content and follow other gamers. Three subscription tiers with different levels of perks range from \$4.99 to \$24.99 per month. Steam is also huge. Discord, Kick, Caffeine and DLive are other popular choices for gifting your interactive gamers, just confirm the platform they prefer so you're sure to get them a gift they can use.

'OF THE MONTH' CLUBS

With a quick internet search, you can set

up a monthly delivery of everything from pickles to pet chews to bath gels, bacon and beyond. Look at sites like Amazing Clubs or Month Club Store to find multiple choices in one spot.

A monthly themed box or crate can satisfy all ages, from educational toys at Crunchlabs and a monthly Lego set through Brick Loot to a spa-in-a-box from Therabox. Visit Cratejoy for a wide selection.

Consider a gift subscription to Dear Holmes, which mails weekly clues on fancy stationery for solving a Victorian-era crime. For \$50, six months' worth of mysteries will turn your person into a solo Sherlock or the leader of a team of Watsons who share stories on YouTube.

GIFT CARDS

You've no doubt noticed the columns of gift cards at your supermarket or drugstore. They look like colorful credit cards, and that's exactly what they are. These pieces of plastic can be applied toward almost anything from cash to food delivery services. The easiest way to give something everyone wants and by far the simplest to ship, gift cards are expected to generate \$447.1 billion in revenue this year.

You can grab gift cards toward recurring subscriptions, like a movie or music streaming service. You're sure to earn points by gifting a part of the monthly Netflix or Hulu charges. Or find a Spotify, Apple Music or SiriusXM gift card and keep the happy tunes flowing all year. 🎁

GIFT CARD SMARTS

Stick to stores you know and trust. Avoid buying online where shady sellers may promote fake or stolen gift cards.

Avoid cards with signs of tampering.

Pay with a credit card if possible. If you run into problems and have to file a chargeback, your credit card company will investigate.

Keep copies. If the gift card doesn't work, the number on the card and store receipt will help you file a report with the Federal Trade Commission at reportfraud.ftc.gov.

Source: Federal Trade Commission



Happy Holidays!

Let's thrive and celebrate together

The final two months of 2025 will bring turkey dinners, bright lights, festive gatherings and so much more.

I always enjoy this time of year, when shared values and community spirit tie us together. At HCTC, we're happy to play our part, too.



CRAIG COOK
Chief Executive Officer

We proudly support the local businesses that make our economy strong during this busiest of shopping seasons. Generosity and gift-giving fuel much of that success for businesses of all sizes.

For some companies, the gains made from Black Friday and similar sales events are the difference between a profitable year and lean results.

By providing quality communications services, we strive to help them connect not only to you but also to the online tools and resources—even the online shoppers—that create success. A study last year supported in part by NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association found rural economies with strong broadband usage grew at a rate 200% higher than similar areas with low broadband usage. Simply put, in places lacking reliable internet, businesses close at a faster rate.

At HCTC, though, we don't need national studies to tell us how we're doing. We talk to the local business owners to better serve them. We lend a hand when a new company opens. And we know our fast, reliable internet network is considered essential infrastructure for many employers looking for a storefront or office location.

But shopping and income are only two parts of the equation during the holiday season.

There's time for pure fun, too. Though many people do find plenty of enjoyment in shopping, many families will turn to their broadband connection to unlock a treasure trove of digital experiences.

Music, movies, gaming, social media and far more are a few clicks away. You'll even find an article in this magazine noting several possible digital gifts, perfect for the times when you need a creative solution.

As we give thanks during this holiday season, however, it's important to remember more than fun and opportunity. That's the other side of our mission. Yes, we focus on providing essential services, but we also believe in giving back, both as a company and as individuals.

Not everyone's fortunes are equal. It's often particularly trying during the holidays. If you can help, consider contributing monetarily to a charity, finding a few spare hours to volunteer or donating food or other goods.

Please visit area shops. Check out a local artist. Find a one-of-a-kind gift from an equally unique business. And if you're able, help as you can. Together, we make this community a wonderful home where we can all thrive.

Thank you for letting HCTC serve you. Have a happy Thanksgiving and a very Merry Christmas. 📧

HCTC CONNECTION

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2025

VOL. 9, NO. 6

The HCTC Connection is a bimonthly magazine published by Hill Country Telephone Cooperative © 2025. It is distributed without charge to all member/owners of the cooperative.

HCTC

HCTC is more than a provider of state-of-the-art telecommunications products and services. We are a member-owned cooperative with an elected board of directors who govern our organization using our bylaws, member input and business and industry conditions to guide their decisions. We are proud residents of the communities we serve, and we're dedicated to not only providing the best services possible, but doing so in a way that is ethical, safe and productive for our friends and neighbors. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Mission Statement: To be the premier provider of modern telecommunications and broadband services throughout our region.

Send address corrections to:

HCTC
P.O. Box 768 • 220 Carolyn
Ingram, TX 78025
Telephone: 830-367-5333

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Robert (Bob) Trees – District 1A Ingram
Kari Short – District 1B Ingram
Willard R. (Randy) Bass – District 2 Hunt
James E. (Jim) Haynie – District 3
Mountain Home/Garven Store
Vice President
Stephen (Steve) Stengel – District 4 Doss
Dorrie Cooper – District 5 Fredonia, Katemcoy,
Pontotoc and Streeter
Kathleen (Kathy) Bohn – District 6A
Comfort/Sisterdale
Secretary-Treasurer
Anthony C. Bohnert – District 6B
Comfort/Sisterdale
Kari Potter – District 7 Center Point
President
Tracy Castillo – District 8 Medina/Tarpley
Linda Reager – District 9 Frio Canyon (includes
Concan, Leakey, Reagan Wells & Rio Frio)

Produced for HCTC by:

Pioneer
UTILITY RESOURCES

On the Cover:



In 2022, Melissa Garza and Joe Rodriguez moved from Marathon to Sisterdale to purchase Black Board Bar B Q. See story Page 8.

Photo courtesy of
Ben Yanto

SHARING THE SPIRIT

The holiday season is a blend of cherished traditions. HCTC's fast and reliable internet service can help your family keep those traditions going strong even when loved ones are miles away. With a little creative thinking, you can even create some new ones.

Digital greetings

Use a free online design platform to collaboratively design a digital Christmas card from the entire family.

Holiday playlists

Put together a family playlist on Spotify or YouTube Music so everyone gets to hear their favorite holiday hits.

Karaoke party

Use an app like Smule or simply find instrumental versions of holiday songs on YouTube. Each person can take a turn belting out a favorite carol.

Movie night classics

Schedule a movie night and pick a holiday film everyone likes. Using a service like Teleparty, your family members can watch at the same time no matter where they are and use the chat feature to share commentary, reactions and favorite lines. It's also great for trash talking during football games.



HOLIDAY OFFICE CLOSURES

May your holidays be filled with love, laughter and all the connections that matter most.

To allow our employees to spend the holidays with their families, HCTC's offices will be closed on the following dates:

Thanksgiving: Thursday, Nov. 27, and Friday, Nov. 28

Christmas: Wednesday, Dec. 24, and Thursday, Dec. 25

New Year's Eve: We close at noon, Wednesday, Dec. 31

New Year's Day: Thursday, Jan. 1

Wishing you a holiday season as bright as our fiber optic network.



SAVVY STREAMING

After that second helping of turkey, many holiday shoppers will hit their devices to get a jump on their gift lists. While bargain hunting, don't forget to check streaming services for seasonal discounts.

The mybundle.tv website is your streaming entertainment resource, listing all the holiday deals from platforms like Hulu, YouTube TV and even SiriusXM.

Go to mybundle.tv or get the app to check out this season's savings.

- Plug in your favorite channels and ZIP code.
- Compare the value of available options and Black Friday deals.
- Browse trending movies and series on each platform.

FOLK Art Celebrates Community and Creativity

Artisans share homegrown skills rooted in life

Story by KATHY DENES

Texas runs deep in the hearts of its artists, particularly those whose work reflects Lone Star culture, past and present.

Many of their artistic endeavors can be classified as folk art—a category which includes ceramics, sculptures, paintings, quilts, jewelry, photography, pottery, glass, furniture, musical instruments and more, created by artisans with little or no formal training.

These artists welcome the chance to share their homegrown skills at folk art workshops, classes and communities across the state. The Chicken Farm Art Center in San Angelo offers all these experiences in a single place.

The Chicken Farm Art Center Gallery showcases works by the studio's artists and is filled with creative gifts.

The folk arts scene in this city of about 100,000 residents is a big draw for locals and visitors alike. The genre is so popular that the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts presented a two-part exhibit named True Texas: Folk Traditional Arts of the Concho Valley starting in 2020.

One of the artists featured in the first True Texas exhibit is weaver Audrey Legatowicz, who set up her loom in Chicken Farm Art Center's Studio 2—one of its 17 artist's areas, also known as coops.

Audrey took her first weaving class in Illinois when her children were young. "It was nice to develop a hobby," she says. She learned to sew and crochet as a child from her grandmothers, both seamstresses

by trade. But weaving drew her in as an adult, and she learned all she could from books. Then she joined a weavers' guild, which offered access to workshops and monthly meetings where other weavers would "share their information and little tips along the way that I enjoy passing on to others," Audrey says.

When she moved to Dallas in 1981, weaving became her main vocation, first at a retail shop, then in a private gallery and





Colorful outdoor areas provide an inspiring canvas for art center guests and studio artists.

a series of consignment shops. Teaching opportunities followed at the city’s craft guild and in school systems, where she started a textiles study program. But after 30 years in Dallas—the last 10 of those commuting for twice-yearly stints at a Chicken Farm Art Center coop—Audrey made the move to San Angelo.

Visitors to the eclectic Chicken Farm arts community can take classes and workshops there, but they can also enjoy what the farm describes as “a peaceful oasis that allows your soul to breathe.”

THE COOP SCOOP

The Chicken Farm Art Center opened in 1971, when the late Roger Allen quit his job as the Central High School art teacher and partnered with two buddies to create an artists’ haven. They bought a vacant set of buildings that had been a 1940s chicken farm and, over time, converted the spaces

into studios and apartments where artists could live as a community. Other property partners came aboard in 1999 and gave some old coops new life as The Inn at the Art Center with four single bedrooms and a couple of two-bedroom suites. They also converted a grain silo building into a restaurant called, fittingly, The Silo.



Painting is just one of the many areas of study artists teach at the Chicken Farm Art Center studio, where they also sell their works.

Besides the chance to learn from talented artisans or simply enjoy a break in a relaxing atmosphere, the Chicken Farm Art Center offers a vibrant art shop and gallery. Also, the first Saturday of every month except January brings a pop-up vendor market, open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., where Texas artists, many of them local to San Angelo, sell their artworks, crafts and goods. When the weather permits, a group of local musicians called the Chicken Pickers is on hand to jam.

The farm hosts a range of events throughout the year. These include a two-day Holiday Art Market & Open House set for Friday, Nov. 28, and Saturday, Nov. 29, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Updates on events and classes can be found on the farm’s website, chickenfarmartcenter.com, and on its Facebook page. 

AUSTIN FOLK ART EXHIBIT

The folk art of Texas, and classes to learn how to create it, can be found across the state. Many galleries also offer another way to enjoy folk art, including one in Austin that’s displaying artifacts crafted by Latin American artists. The works are on loan from the permanent collection of Austin Friends of Folk Art, a nonprofit organized in 1987 to support and promote the genre.

The exhibit, which opened in September to commemorate Hispanic Heritage Month, runs through Dec. 17 at Toby Shor JGallery in the Dell Jewish Community Center. People who are not members of the JCC can request admission to the exhibit online at shalomaustin.org/jgallery-visitor-form.



MEAT UP IN Sisterdale

Black Board Bar B Q's recipes get foodies fired up

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

You can almost smell the aromas coming from the smoker and kitchen as Melissa Garza describes menu selections at Black Board Bar B Q.

She says she and her family want a visit to Black Board to “feel like a warm hug.” “We try to deliver the full package,” Melissa says. “So many places you go you find the food is on point, but the staff isn’t. Or the staff is great, but the food is mediocre, and the ambiance falls short. So, we want to deliver all the things that go into creating an amazing guest experience.”

Melissa runs Black Board along with her husband and pitmaster, Joe

Rodriguez, and her parents, Martin and Connie Garza.

Martin bought the Sisterdale restaurant three years ago in an effort to lure Melissa, Joe and their daughter back to the Texas Hill Country. Joe was working as the chef at The Gage Hotel near Big Bend National Park about 5 1/2 hours away.

His plan worked.

The couple arrived from secluded West Texas ready to tackle a new family venture and rebuild the Black Board Bar B Q brand.

“We’re surrounded by small towns—we have Comfort to our west, Kendalia to the east. We have Fredericksburg north of us

and Boerne to the south. So, we’re here in the middle of Hill Country,” Melissa says. “People have to want to come to Black Board, and we realized that the only way we’re going to do that is by providing a consistent experience for them in the food and service areas.”

APPETIZING FUTURE

Joe and Melissa both have more than two decades of experience in the service industry, but owning and operating a barbecue restaurant in a state filled with them provides some challenges the entire family and staff work to meet head-on.

“It all comes down to mindset,” Melissa

LEFT: Pitmaster Joe Rodriguez checks the progress of meats, which he buys from Goodstock, a meat market owned by baseball legend Nolan Ryan. BELOW: A converted house makes for a great place to prepare and serve homestyle recipes.



Photos courtesy of Ben Yanto

says. “It hasn’t been easy by any means, but it has been exciting. It’s been a great opportunity to learn and grow with our team. We were like, ‘We don’t know what all the rules are. We’ve never done this, but we’re learning alongside you.’ We’ve been learning and growing over the past three years, and we’ve gotten better and better every single year.”

With barbecue a matter of personal and professional pride among pitmasters all over Texas, Melissa says success starts at the smoker with Joe, who brings passion to Black Board to go with his expertise.

“He is a trained chef, which gets thrown around a lot, but aside from that he has the highest attention to detail and the hardest work ethic that I’ve ever experienced in a chef,” she says. “Everybody has the recipe for the perfect brisket, but it comes down to whether or not they’re going to execute it consistently, because it’s a lot of work. To operate at a high level is physically strenuous week after week. It’s not something you can take and cut corners on.”

Black Board’s meats come from Goodstock, a Round Rock meat market owned by Major League Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher and Texas legend Nolan Ryan.

The restaurant’s weekly specials include family-style Sunday lunches. Each Thursday is Burger Night, and Joe is becoming famous among mac and cheese fans. In

addition to the food, Black Board hosts an open mic night on Thursdays, to go along with burger night, for those who’d like a little music with their meals.

Susie LaFredo, a restaurant reviewer, gave Black Board a glowing review after her visit to Sisterdale. “We had the most perfect, melt in your mouth, burnt ends—you haven’t lived until you’ve had these,” she wrote. “We also had the truffle fries, fried in beef tallow and topped with shaved Parmesan. You cannot go to Black Board and not get these.”

The family’s recipe for Black Board Bar B Q has worked well.

“Every weekend we have new experiences that teach us we can always do better, and eventually all those changes are going to come together and create something real special,” Melissa says.

The family would like to see the restaurant continue to grow in Sisterdale and beyond, becoming a Hill Country fixture.

“We know it’s not going to happen tomorrow, but maybe in five to 10 years, it’d be really nice to have Black Board in Sisterdale as the flagship and then possibly have smaller satellite quick-service spots,” Melissa says. “It’d be cool to maybe build a dance hall on this property and have a venue or even a boutique hotel or some sort of bed-and-brisket—something that just creates happy memories for folks.” 📱



Photo courtesy of Black Board Bar B Q

The hospitality community rallied to support the Hill Country after the July flood. Black Board Bar B Q hosted restaurant workers from Austin, Lockhart and West Texas, who brought their skills to the region to feed flood victims and volunteers as recovery began.



BLACK BOARD BAR B Q

1123 Sisterdale Road, Sisterdale

830-324-6858

blackboardbarbq.com

Find Black Board Bar B Q on Facebook and Instagram.



LEFT: Black Board prides itself on the Texas trio of barbecue brilliance, chicken, ribs and brisket. BELOW: Chicken and waffles get a dose of heat with a pepper-flake sauce.



Melissa Garza runs Black Board Bar B Q with her husband, pitmaster Joe Rodriguez.



HEALING BONDS

Pets for Vets makes the perfect match

Story by JEN CALHOUN

When Clarissa Black first took Bear, her husky-malamute, to visit patients at a Veterans Administration medical center, she had no idea he was about to change hundreds of lives.

Of course, she knew Bear was special. He had a way about him. When someone needed quiet company, Bear could lie perfectly still for hours. If someone was working on mobility, Bear would position himself at the perfect distance, paws up, as if to offer encouragement. And when people looked into the dog's eyes and spoke to him, he'd cock his head and let out one of his husky "woos" right on cue.

"People really felt like he was talking to them," says Clarissa, whose background in animal science and anthrozoology gave her a deeper insight into the interactions. "They felt seen, and they felt heard."

Clarissa's experience with Bear at the VA hospital sparked the idea for Pets for Vets, a nonprofit organization that matches veterans with specially trained companion animals. Since she founded it more than 15 years ago, the organization has matched more than 800 animals with veterans.

WANT TO HELP?

Pets for Vets is a four-star rated, not-for-profit organization that relies on donations to provide free services to veterans. There are several ways to donate.

Donate online: Visit petsforvets.com/donate to make a secure online donation.

Donate by mail: Pets for Vets Inc., P.O. Box 10860, Wilmington, NC 28404.

Other ways to give: The organization also accepts cryptocurrency and vehicle donations that include cars, trucks, boats and motorcycles.

Volunteer: Fill out the volunteer form at petsforvets.com to offer your time and expertise.

For more information about the program, or to apply for a companion animal, visit petsforvets.com or send an email to contactus@petsforvets.com.



LEFT: Spyder's tendency to jump in laps and lick faces helped calm and center Leif Mesinger when he became frustrated.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Clarissa Black, founder and executive director of Pets for Vets, with her late dog, Bear, who sparked the idea for the not-for-profit organization.

We're looking for that reciprocal match where both are getting exactly what they want."

MAKING A MATCH

Once the group approves a veteran's application for a companion animal, the search gets underway. Clarissa's experience as a marine mammal trainer taught her the most powerful relationships happen when both parties get exactly what they need. The process isn't about finding a good dog. It's about finding exactly the right dog.

The matching process is not only thorough, it's personal. Veterans work closely with trainers to identify their needs and prepare for pet ownership. "We spend a lot of time getting to know our veterans, finding out what it is they need, what they're looking for and what would be a good fit for them," she says.

Meanwhile, trainers visit shelters and rescue groups to conduct one-on-one "interviews" with potential animal companions, which can include cats, rabbits and other species, as well. If a veteran enjoys outdoor activities, for example, the trainer might look for a more active dog that loves to fetch and hike. On

SECOND CHANCES

After Leif Mesinger returned home from Iraq, the world felt different. It was harder to navigate and harder to understand. The Army infantryman and gunner suffered a traumatic brain injury from an improvised explosive device blast, and it changed everything.

"My mind was racing, and I struggled to communicate," Leif says in a Pets for Vets testimonial video. "I felt disconnected from everything I used to know."

But help arrived in the form of a tiny, hairless waif of a dog named Spyder. Clarissa Black, founder of Pets for Vets, discovered the dog after meeting with Leif and finding out what he needed in a companion animal.

Spyder's superpower was that he loved to jump into people's laps and lick them. It was a trait Clarissa intentionally honed in Spyder before presenting him to Leif. She knew that kind of gentle, rhythmic contact could ground a person dealing with anxiety.

In time, Spyder's constant presence gave Leif a growing sense of purpose and a deepening bond. Thanks to his more than 15 years with Spyder, Leif's communication with others has improved and his life is more fulfilling than ever. "Spyder was kind of like that saving grace that centered me again and brought me back," he says.

SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED

The program generally serves veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries, but the organization is open to helping any vet who could benefit from a deep connection with a pet. And while the service is completely free to the veterans, it relies on donations from the public and a network of more than 100 volunteer animal trainers across the country.

It's important to note that Pets for Vets animals aren't service dogs that have been highly trained to assist people with disabilities. Still, the organization works hard to meet the veterans' needs as well as the animals'.

"We're not just asking what the dog gives the veteran," Clarissa says. "We want to know what the veteran gives the dog.

the other hand, a more sedentary vet might need a peaceful pooch or calm cat.

From there, each animal undergoes foundation training customized for its future human. During this time, which often takes place in a foster situation, trainers enhance what Clarissa calls the animal's "superpowers," or the natural behaviors that made them perfect for their veteran in the first place.

"We're really trying to make this connection where both are getting exactly what they want," she says. "Ultimately, that connection is what's going to fulfill them and maybe even heal them. There's some research out there that suggests that it's not just any dog, it's the right dog—the dog that people feel connected to—that can help mitigate anxiety and depression." 🐾

Serving Those Who Served

Family legacy lives on at Kerrville's Hill Country Veterans Center

Story by LAZ DENES

The spirit of service runs deep at the Hill Country Veterans Center in Kerrville. For Executive Director Sarah Hill Kocurek, the mission is personal—it's about continuing the vision of her late father, Alan Hill.

Alan and two fellow veterans bought the 11,000-square-foot former National Guard Armory building on Meadow View Lane in 2013. Their plan was to transform it into a hub for services, camaraderie and hope for veterans and their families with the help of an all-volunteer staff and financial backing from donations, grants, fundraisers and facility rentals.

"From day one, I was there, helping with paperwork, cleanup, whatever needed to be done," says Sarah, who became executive director after her father's death in 2022. "I knew I couldn't let his work disappear."

Among the center's array of programs is accredited Veterans Service Officer assistance navigating the complexities of Veterans Administration benefits. There's also a weekly food bank, as well as a medical equipment donation program for veterans in need.

Community organizations also call the center home, including Endeavors, Together with Hill Country Veterans, Veterans Assistance Dogs of Texas and the Hill Country Honor Guard. Others

use the space for meetings, from life skills programs to Rotary Club-sponsored breakfasts.

FOOD FOR THE SOUL

One of the center's most vital lifelines is the food pantry, headed by Sarah's mother, Shirley Hill, who met and married Alan while both were serving in the Army. Each Wednesday from 1-4 p.m., the pantry allows veterans to pick and choose easy-to-prepare items, including meat. The pantry also has non-traditional food bank offerings like pet food, clothing and free haircuts. "I'll even help them figure out meals," Shirley says. "I look at some of the older veterans like they're my uncles. It feels like taking care of family."

That family spirit radiates throughout the volunteer staff, including U.S. Marine Corps veteran Emilio Valdez, the center's handyman. "It's my ministry," he says. "It means a lot to help other veterans, fellowshiping with those looking for help mentally, physically, spiritually."

Army veteran and Hill Country Honor Guard member Jerry Eastman became the center's receptionist in January and helps with security during special events. His work at the center helped him out of a dark period following the death of his wife. "I began hiding, staying away from people, not doing a lot," he says. "I finally got involved with the center, and it's been a good thing for me."

As the center continues to grow on the foundation of compassion and commitment laid by Alan and his fellow founders, for Sarah, the feeling of fulfillment is never-ending. "When a family comes in frustrated and leaves with a smile and a plan, that's when I know we're doing exactly what Dad intended," she says. [📞](#)



ABOVE: Sarah Hill Kocurek, second from left, and her mother, Shirley Hill, accept a donation from Mike and Jan Pieraccini from Gunny's Warriors.

RIGHT: Area veterans enjoy a performance by traditional Texas dancehall band MT Bain during a Veterans Day gathering.



Photos courtesy of Hill Country Veterans Center

HILL COUNTRY VETERANS CENTER

411 Meadow View Lane, Kerrville
830-315-3100
sarah@hcvetcenter.org

Mondays and Fridays: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Wednesdays: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Wednesday Food Pantry: 1-4 p.m.

Follow Hill Country Veterans Center on Facebook.

SAVVY CYBERSHOPPING

A sharp eye can protect your data and save money

Fast, easy and filled with seemingly endless possibilities, online shopping can be a holiday go-to that's not only productive but often fun. A little care and thoughtful caution, though, can make the experience even better.

CHECK REVIEWS

Before you buy anything, read about not only the product, but also the seller. Look at reviews on multiple sites, not just one. Also, don't depend solely on star ratings. Bad companies sometimes write fake positive reviews. Meanwhile, competitors might write fake bad reviews.

Also, search for the company name plus words like "complaint" or "scam." Then, look for expert reviews from websites you trust. These give you better information than random customer reviews.

COMPARE AND READ THE FINE PRINT

Don't buy the first thing you see. Write down details like the model number, size and color. Then compare prices on several websites. Know the total cost, including shipping and taxes, before hitting the buy button.

Remember, words like "refurbished" or "vintage" mean the item might not be perfect. Or seemingly expensive brand-name items that cost very little might be fake or stolen.

UNDERSTAND SHIPPING AND RETURN POLICIES

Before you buy, verify the shipping and return rules. Sellers must ship within 30 days unless they promise a different time frame, and many websites let you track your package.

Then, consider if you get your money back with a return. Who pays for return shipping? How long do you have? Sale items often have different return rules, so check twice.

PAY WITH A CREDIT CARD

Credit cards provide protection for your online shopping. If something goes wrong, your credit card company can help you dispute the charge. Never pay with gift cards, wire transfers, payment apps or cryptocurrency. Scammers love these payment methods because it's hard to get your money back.

When you enter your credit card info, make sure the website address starts with "https." That "s" at the end means it's secure. However, scam websites can also be secure, so still take care.

KEEP RECORDS AND PROTECT YOUR INFORMATION

Save all your shopping information. Keep the company name, what you bought, when you bought it and how much you paid. Save emails and messages from the seller, too. Keep your credit card statements that show the payment.

Be careful about what personal information you share. Websites and apps collect lots of data about you and might sell it to other companies. Check their privacy policy to see how they use your information. Turn off location tracking if you don't want apps to know where you are.

If you have problems with an online purchase, try to work it out with the seller first. If that doesn't work, you can report the problem to the Federal Trade Commission at reportfraud.ftc.gov.

Happy and safe shopping! 🛒



Adobe Stock images by apiniani, ST.art

Share a Pizza

Share Your Heart

Start a new holiday meal tradition

Turkey, ham, lamb—tradition gives them all a place on the holiday table. But gather the family together for a pizza party, and you can roll out a whole new tradition.

Make your own pizza dough with just a handful of ingredients, and you'll know that there are no preservatives and other unhealthy additives. For a family affair and fun for the kids, create a bar with pizza toppings—pepperoni, sausage, onions, peppers, cheese and the like—and let them make their own.

A preheated pizza stone will crisp the crust, but a cookie sheet also works.

A pizza salad with Italian herbs and a creamy vinaigrette dressing is the perfect pairing.

A dessert pizza with fresh berries and other fruits available year-round delivers a refreshing finish. Make the crust the day before and layer on the cream cheese spread. But wait until shortly before serving to add the fruits so they will stay colorful and fresh.



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

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



FAMILY NIGHT PIZZA

- 1 cup warm water (105 F)
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon active dry yeast
- 1 tablespoon olive or avocado oil
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 2 to 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

Preheat oven to 500 F. Put a pizza stone or cookie sheet in the oven while it preheats, and let it warm for at least 10 minutes.

MAKE THE DOUGH

In a large mixing bowl, stir water, yeast and sugar to combine. Let mixture sit for 5 minutes or until it becomes frothy and bubbles form. Gently stir in olive oil.

Add 2 cups of flour and salt and mix with a spatula until a ball begins to form. The

dough will still be slightly sticky. Add more flour as needed to form a dough ball.

Transfer to a floured surface and knead into a smooth dough, adding up to 1/2 cup extra flour if needed.

Cover the bowl with a damp tea towel, and let it rise for 10 minutes or up to 1 hour.

ASSEMBLE THE PIZZA

Roll the dough into your desired shape and put it on a piece of parchment paper. Add pizza sauce, cheese and toppings of choice. Transfer the pizza to the preheated pizza stone or cookie sheet in the oven.

Bake for 12-15 minutes or until the bottom of the crust is golden brown. Remove the pizza from the oven, and let it cool for 5-10 minutes before serving.

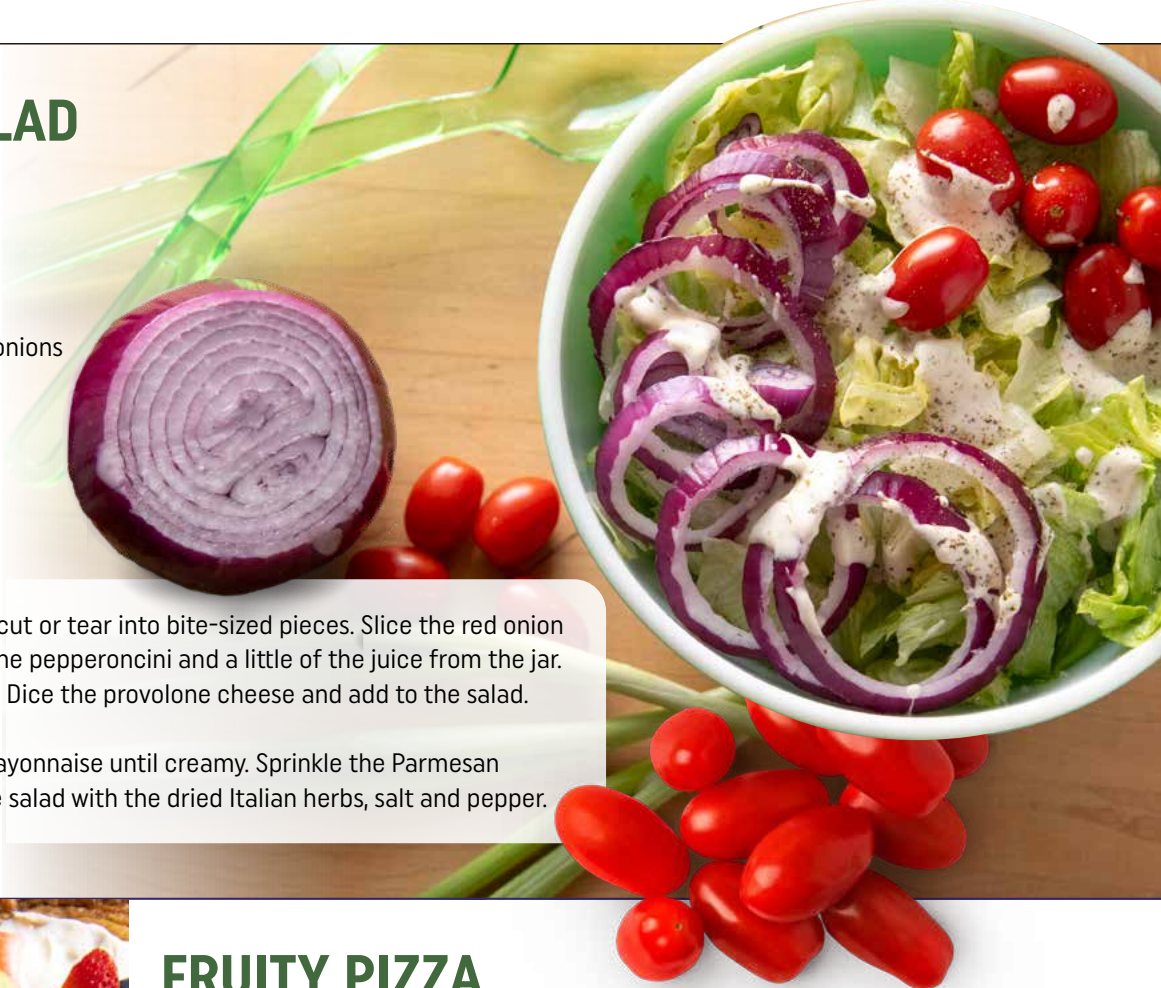
PIZZA NIGHT SALAD

- 1 head iceberg lettuce
- 1 medium red onion
- 6-8 pepperoncini peppers
- Chopped tomatoes to taste
- 8 slices provolone cheese
- 1 bunch fresh chives or green onions
- 1 1/3 cup favorite vinaigrette
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- 1 1/2 cup Parmesan cheese
- 1 tablespoon or more dried Italian herbs
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Wash and air dry the lettuce and cut or tear into bite-sized pieces. Slice the red onion and add to the lettuce, along with the pepperoncini and a little of the juice from the jar.

Toss the tomatoes over the salad. Dice the provolone cheese and add to the salad. Sprinkle the salad with the chives.

Mix the salad dressing and the mayonnaise until creamy. Sprinkle the Parmesan cheese over the top and season the salad with the dried Italian herbs, salt and pepper.



FRUITY PIZZA

FOR THE CRUST

- 1 1/3 cups unsalted butter, softened
- 1 1/2 cups sugar
- 1 teaspoon orange zest
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 eggs, room temperature
- 2 tablespoons whole milk, room temperature
- 4 cups flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

FOR THE FROSTING

- 2 7-ounce jars marshmallow creme
- 2 8-ounce packages cream cheese

SUGGESTED TOPPINGS

- Kiwi, sliced
- Blueberries
- Raspberries
- Pears, cored and sliced
- Mango, peeled and cubed
- Strawberries, sliced

Preheat the oven to 350 F.

For the cookie crust: In a large bowl, cream the butter, sugar, orange zest and vanilla thoroughly. Add the eggs and beat until light and fluffy. Add the milk and mix.

In a medium bowl, sift together the flour, baking powder and salt, then blend this into the butter mixture. Divide the dough into two disks and lightly flatten each disk between two sheets of parchment paper. If baking one large pizza, do not divide the dough. Refrigerate for 1 hour or freeze for 20 minutes.

Roll each dough half into an 11-inch round, then transfer to pizza pans. Or, press the dough into a large sheet cake pan.

Bake until the cookie dough is cooked and golden brown, but not overly crisp, 15-18 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool completely.

For the frosting: In a mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, whip together the marshmallow creme and cream cheese until light in texture. Spread onto each cooled crust.

To decorate: Top the pizza with prepared sliced fruit, as desired. Slice into squares or wedges and serve. 🍷



HCTC

P.O. Box 768
Ingram, TX 78025

PRSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
HILLSBORO, OR
PERMIT No. 66

REFERRAL PROGRAM

it's a
WIN-WIN
for you and a friend

\$50
EACH

- SHARE
- EARN**
- ENJOY
- REPEAT

SCAN ME
to see new rates



**Where sharing is
winning for everyone!**

**Both you and your friend
earn a \$50 credit** when
they sign-up for HCTC
residential service.

HCTC

HCTC.NET | (800) 292-5457