

CONNECTION

BROADBAND:
GAMING EDITION



BELIEVING

Santa and Mrs. Claus
bring joy to children

THE DREAM TEAM

Customer service you
can count on

READY, SET, PLAY

Broadband gives gamers
a competitive edge



BY SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

We need better mapping data

Several states have adopted loan and grant programs to help extend service to those areas of rural America still lacking a reliable broadband connection. Beyond its traditional programs, the federal government continues looking for ways to invest in this critical infrastructure.

A challenge associated with deciding where to invest these dollars is identifying where service is or is not already available. The FCC's broadband maps are the determining resource.

The FCC issued an order over the summer that will move away from the overly broad use of census blocks for reporting broadband coverage, instead requiring providers to submit "shapefiles" showing where they actually offer broadband service.

I had the opportunity to appear before a Congressional committee in September, where I shared a few key steps to move us toward more accurate mapping.

First, we need standardized reporting. It is also important to have a back-end validation process.

Finally, a robust challenge process is needed to allow providers and policy-makers to do one last "sanity check" on the accuracy of the maps before decisions are reached.

Providers like yours are making great progress in connecting rural America. But if we hope for a future where everyone has broadband access, we must have better mapping data. 📶



Celebrate rural health on Nov. 21

Despite the challenges of serving rural America, health care professionals are delivering quality care, embracing technology and finding creative ways to encourage wellness among their rural patients. On Nov. 21, rural health offices will honor these providers — along with the partners and communities who support them — by sponsoring National Rural Health Day.

How can you celebrate National Rural Health Day?

Find free, downloadable resources for many of the activities below by visiting www.powerofrural.org/nrhd-toolkit.



PARENTS: Prepare a healthy meal for dinner, and talk with your kids about the blessings — and the challenges — of living in rural America. Mention the health care providers who service your rural community.



PATIENTS: Write a note to your health care team, thanking them for their help and their commitment to serving a rural population.



PHYSICIANS: Display National Rural Health Day posters in your office. Provide a staff appreciation lunch. Visit www.WalkWithADoc.org and consider starting this fun, active outreach in your community.



FACEBOOK USERS: Share a story about your doctor, a nurse or other health care provider who has made a positive impact on your life.



TEACHERS: Give your students coloring book pages. Sponsor a rural health-themed poster contest. Invite physicians or nurses from local hospitals and clinics to speak to students.



BROADBAND USERS: Search for health information over your broadband connection. Ask your physician if there are telehealth resources that could help you maintain or improve your health.



SMALL BUSINESSES: Show appreciation to your local rural health professionals by providing them with discounts or special offers.



YOU!: Make healthy eating choices. Take a walk. Avoid tobacco products. Schedule an appointment to have your cholesterol and blood pressure checked.

Share your experiences across social media using the hashtags **#powerofrural** and **#nationalruralhealthday**.

Gaming generation

Millennials — the first lifelong gamers

The U.S. launch of the Nintendo Entertainment System in late 1985 helped create an entertainment revolution. The oldest millennials at the time were about 4 years old, and that generation would be the first to make gaming a common pastime.

Members of this group, also known as Generation Y, are closely tracked by experts such as The Nielsen Company to monitor entertainment and technology trends, because the habits of millennials shape those industries.

Today, millennial gamers are finding new ways to play. There are mobile games and online, community-based games. Some people compete, and others enjoy the movielike experiences of modern games. And for millennial gamers, the male-to-female ratio is roughly even.

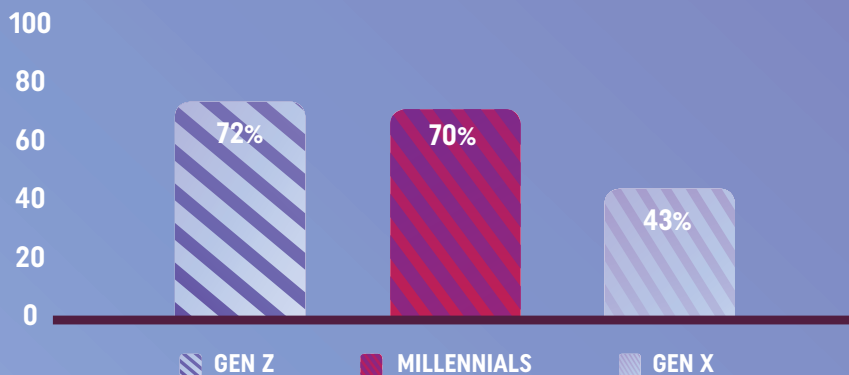
Thanks to games that emphasize social features, about 70% of millennial gamers and the generation following, often known as Gen Z, turn to multiplayer gaming for the social component.

Also, the pastime remains a critical entertainment choice even when the competition ends. About 70% of gamers turn to YouTube or Twitch to watch online videos about gaming. On average, this form of viewing totals nearly six hours weekly. Millennial gamers are willing to pay those who create the content they enjoy, either through subscriptions or by donating directly.

A Nielsen report concluded that millennials will not quickly outgrow this form of entertainment, and they will become the first generation of lifelong gamers. 🎮

Games have become a social activity for millennials

Thanks to social features that let connected gamers chat and play with each other, a large share of millennials and Gen Zers play multiplayer games to virtually hang out with their friends and families. Members of Gen X and up are, in contrast, far less likely to play multiplayer titles.



Millennial gamers are a wide-ranging demographic group

54% with full-time employment	76% pay for a movie/TV streaming service
43% with a bachelor's degree or higher	38% pay for a music streaming service
46% with children	\$58,000 average household income

Like Nintendo, we go beyond technology

At first glance, Foothills Communications and Nintendo don't have a lot in common. Nintendo is a video game giant based in Japan, and we are a small broadband provider in rural Kentucky.



RUTH CONLEY
Chief Executive Officer

But a quote I ran across recently made me realize we may have more in common than you'd think.

In the pages of this issue, you'll see a focus on gamers. And though I'm not much of a gamer myself, I know there are hundreds or even thousands of our members who enjoy playing video games on our network. As I hope you'll read, gaming has certainly become mainstream — to the point where there are college scholarships for team gamers.

For decades now, one brand has been synonymous with gaming: Nintendo. It's a company with an interesting history. Like Foothills Communications, it evolved over the years to meet customer demand. In fact, many people don't know that Nintendo started

off in 1889 as a small manufacturer of playing cards. Nearly a century and a half later, it's changed the world with its electronic gaming systems, handhelds and characters like Mario.

Similar to the way Nintendo developed, we've evolved from party line phone systems to lightning-fast broadband. But a quote from former Nintendo President Satoru Iwata drove home another similarity our two companies share.

In discussing his company's success, the late Mr. Iwata stated that in order to be successful, Nintendo had to look beyond the hardware and software it developed. "Please understand, I am not saying that technology is unimportant," he told an interviewer. "But if we are just focusing on technology ... we will not succeed."

In order to succeed, Nintendo had to focus not on the processors, electronics and equipment driving its games but instead on what the games did for people. Similarly at Foothills Communications, we constantly remind ourselves that the technology our business provides is only part of the equation. What matters most is how our members use that technology and the ways their lives are improved because of it.

Maybe it's when a young adult can enroll in distance learning classes because of our network. Maybe it's when an entrepreneur connects to markets around the world through our services. Or maybe it's simply when a customer gets to play a video game online with friends.

Just like with Nintendo, the bits and bytes of our business are secondary. Our primary focus is on the difference that technology can make for you. 📺

As we come to this special time of the year, I'd like to personally wish you and yours a wonderful holiday season. Whether you're traveling, hosting family, or having a peaceful time at home, I sincerely hope you make magical memories however you celebrate. May each of you have a Merry Christmas and a Blessed New Year. On behalf of Foothills Communications, we look forward to serving you in 2020!



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Foothills is a member-owned cooperative that has been serving residents and businesses in eastern Kentucky since 1951. In the early days, we only offered telephone service over copper wires. Over the years, we have expanded our network and now provide broadband internet and cable TV services over fiber optic facilities to much of our service area, which includes Magoffin County and portions of Johnson County and Lawrence County. We love being part of the communities we serve. Our customers are our families, friends and neighbors.

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Foothills Mission Statement

"To provide the latest in communications at affordable prices with exceptional service."

Produced for Foothills Communications by:

WORDSOUTH
— A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY —

On the Cover:



Oil Spring residents Lee and Linda Weddington make personal appearances as Santa and Mrs. Claus each year.
See story Page 12.

Photo courtesy of Angela Goodman Photography



FOOTHILLS COMMUNICATIONS ANNUAL TOY DRIVE

1621 Kentucky Route 40 W., Staffordsville | 606-297-3501

'Tis the season for giving! Bring a new, unwrapped toy for a child or teen to Foothills Communications by Friday, Dec. 13. You will be entered for a chance to win a \$250 Visa gift card.

www.foothills.net

Holiday closings

Foothills will be closed for the following holidays:

Thanksgiving — Thursday, Nov. 28, and Friday, Nov. 29

Christmas — Tuesday, Dec. 24 (close at noon), and
Wednesday, Dec. 25

New Year's Day — Wednesday, Jan. 1

*We wish you a very merry Christmas
and a blessed new year!*



ENJOY AN EARLY CHRISTMAS PRESENT!

FREE activation and upgrades
beginning Thanksgiving Day
through Jan. 31!

Foothills is offering FREE activation
for all customers who upgrade
service, who add special calling
features or who add a premium
movie package.



DON'T MISS THESE GIVEAWAYS!

Sign up for select services
before Dec. 31 and you'll be
entered to win a special prize.*

TV prize — Big-screen TV

Internet prize — Nintendo
Switch

Platinum customer prize —
iRobot Roomba

*Winners must claim prize within two
weeks of being notified.

Free movies* THANKSGIVING-NEW YEAR'S DAY!

Nov. 28-Dec. 1: Showtime

Dec. 7-8: HBO

Dec. 14-15: Cinemax

Dec. 21-22: STARZ/STARZENCORE

Dec. 24-Jan. 1: Enjoy all of the
premium movie channels!

*A set-top box is required for viewing. Parental
control is available.

History comes alive

NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM HONORS SOLDIERS THROUGH THE YEARS

The birth of the U.S. Army Airborne units came about in 1940 with the aid of a batch of borrowed Riddell football helmets from the United States Military Academy at West Point. The helmets, which were used to protect the heads of aspiring paratroopers, came with instructions, however. The team needed them back when football season returned.

With that bit of information, visitors can enter the Airborne & Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Situated just a few miles from Fort Bragg, the museum honors the sacrifices of all airborne and special operations units with an extensive collection of memorabilia and military equipment dating from World War II to the present day.

WHY FAYETTEVILLE?

Now-retired Gen. James Lindsay led a push for the museum. He served as the first commander of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, which is located on

Fort Bragg and oversees various unconventional warfare units. The Army post also serves as headquarters for the XVIII Airborne Corps, which has long presided over some of the most storied Army units in the nation's history, including the 101st Airborne and the 82nd Airborne All American Division, which is still located on Fort Bragg. "But our museum represents more than the 82nd," says Jim Bartlinski, museum director. "We represent all U.S. Army Airborne troops and Special Operations. So we tell those histories here."

FROM PAST TO PRESENT

The exterior design of the museum features soaring metal beams that play on the looks of the jump towers paratroopers use to practice. An imposing Iron Mike statue greets entering visitors. Various monuments commemorating American soldiers bear the nickname. This Iron Mike details the look of a World War II-era paratrooper, but it represents all paratroopers and special operations soldiers, Bartlinski says.

Inside the museum, visitors get a chronological look at the world of paratroopers and special forces soldiers — from their first test jump in Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1940 to today's missions in Afghanistan.



There is a special emphasis on World War II, which saw not only the beginning of the Airborne but also the most concentrated use of airborne operations. During that time, paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines to work with groups resisting the Nazi invasion of their countries. They also landed in Normandy just before the D-Day invasion of Europe.

Displays include artifacts, true-to-life dioramas, the various types of aircraft used for missions, specialized Jeeps and other equipment used for airborne drops and specialized missions behind enemy lines. One glass-encased display shows a card with an early version of the special forces' red arrowhead insignia. The cards sometimes turned up conspicuously on the uniforms of dead Nazis as a chilling warning.



One of the Vietnam War-era museum displays re-creates soldiers on a rescue mission jumping out of a helicopter.

Hooah!

The Airborne & Special Operations Museum is at 100 Bragg Blvd., about 8 miles from Fort Bragg, in the heart of historic downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina. It is within walking distance of the North Carolina Veterans Park, a variety of local shops and restaurants, and the new baseball stadium of the Houston Astros' minor league farm team, the Fayetteville Woodpeckers. For more information, including hours of operation, visit the museum's website at asomf.org or its Facebook page.



Interactive displays are also scattered throughout the museum, including one that gives visitors a chance to sit in the hard, metal seats of a C-47 fuselage and then experience a simulation of jumping out of the cargo carrier. In addition, the museum's theater shows movies several times a day, and a 25-seat simulator room offers virtual reality experiences that mimic those of paratroopers.

The museum offers visitors a chance to refresh their history knowledge and see it in the context of the ongoing military operations of the times. But it also gives them a chance to better understand history from the eyes of a soldier, Bartlinski says. "What we do here commemorates the service of all these paratroopers," he says. "It points out all their sacrifices in the past and the ways they've continued to make sacrifices. It's important to remember that our troops are still out there in harm's way." 📱

VISIT A MILITARY MUSEUM THIS VETERANS DAY

Military museums continue to fill visitors with respect and appreciation for the men and women of the U.S. armed forces. But today's military museums feature dazzling interactive activities, exciting simulations and realistic visual displays that bring history to life and educate visitors about the people who fought. Looking for an inspiring military museum in the Southeast? **Here are just a few of the greats:**

NATIONAL NAVAL AVIATION MUSEUM

Pensacola, Florida

The National Naval Aviation Museum is the world's largest Naval aviation museum. It explores the rich history of Naval aviation with more than 150 beautifully restored aircraft representing Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard aviation. These historic and one-of-a-kind aircraft are displayed both inside the museum's nearly 350,000 square feet of exhibit space and outside on its 37-acre grounds. For more information, visit navalaviationmuseum.org.

NATIONAL INFANTRY MUSEUM & SOLDIER CENTER

Fort Benning, Georgia

With thousands of artifacts, monuments, interactive exhibits and video presentations on display, the National Infantry Museum is one of the nation's leading military history destinations. Visitors of all ages can experience firsthand the American infantryman's journey to defeat tyranny around the globe. For more information, visit nationalinfantrymuseum.org.

U.S. ARMY AVIATION MUSEUM

Fort Rucker, Alabama

Life-sized dioramas of aircraft and personnel capture the rich heritage of Army aviation, which started during the U.S. Civil War with hydrogen-filled balloons that directed artillery fire. About 50 different aircraft fill this cavernous museum and tell the wild and uplifting stories of U.S. Army pilots. For more information, visit armyaviationmuseum.org.

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Cutting-edge technology plus local service set Foothills apart

BY JEN CALHOUN

When Melissa Patrick started working at Foothills Communications back in 1995, everything was different. Caller ID was the latest and greatest offering from the cooperative, and it could take up to three days to install.

"People weren't surprised of the wait times, either," says Patrick, one of nine customer service representatives at the company. "They were just excited to get it. But now, adding something like that takes about two seconds instead of three days." At one point, even dial-up internet service wasn't available to Foothills customers. In fact, fewer than 15 % of households in the entire U.S. in 1995 actually accessed the internet from their homes at all, according to a study released by the Pew Research Center.



Foothills Communications' customer service team is here to help. Bottom row, from left, are Amy Lemaster, Kim Stambaugh and Alena Hughes. Middle row are Melissa Patrick, Beth Castle, Tina Pyles and Christy Felber. Top row are Leah Castle, Jarrod Hardin, Andrea Ferguson and Michelle Connelley.

FAST FORWARD

Since then, Foothills' technology has grown to include internet and video services with faster speeds and more reliable connections than many of the giant, profit-driven telecommunication companies that serve bigger cities. But while those companies rely on far-flung call centers, Foothills continues to keep its service local during its hours of operation. When Patrick and the other CSRs pick up the phone to help someone, it could well be a neighbor or a friend. And that makes all the difference, says Customer Service Manager Kim Stambaugh.

"I think one of the things that sets us apart from all those other companies is our Customer Service Department," Stambaugh says. "We're willing to help. We're willing to listen. And you can actually speak to a representative." The CSRs at Foothills also know the community, she says. They know, for example, what the loss of jobs in the coal industry has meant for their own family, friends and neighbors. They understand the struggles in the region, and they understand their customers.

"A lot of people call us and ask us how they can save money on their bill," Stambaugh says. "I love being able to help them figure things out and find out what works for them."

CSR Beth Castle agrees. As the newest

hire on the customer service team, Castle says Foothills' commitment to service made her feel good about her job. "It's so personal here," she says. "When you call here, you don't just get a machine. You get a person, and sometimes, it's someone you know."

Working in the front office, Castle says she meets her customers every day. "I work with people face to face," she says. "I like helping people, and I like to know that I'm helping people in the community here."

FRIENDLY CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Local helpers mean faster, better service, too, says Jarrod Hardin, director of customer relations. "When people call us, they're not getting someone from another country," Hardin says. "Lots of times, they may actually know the person. That's a nice thing for people to have, and it keeps us accountable. In many instances, we can take care of any problems people have on the same day they call. That's pretty unusual in our business."

Most calls can be handled over the phone in the span of just minutes, Stambaugh says. "We can add or remove features to your phone, cable or internet service, answer billing questions, take payments, troubleshoot problems and answer any questions you have," she says.

CSRs also fix problems through automated systems. “With the technology we have, customers seldom have to wait on a repairman to come to their home. Also, the CSRs are trained to walk customers through a lot of different issues. Sometimes it’s as simple as someone accidentally pushing a button on their remote,” Stambaugh says.

The customer service department currently receives an average of 330 calls each day, Stambaugh says. Those numbers can rise when a utility pole is broken or weather-related problems occur. But those days are the exceptions, says Patrick, who believes customers have come to expect Foothills’ quick and dependable service.

“They’re pleased when we can fix things remotely while they’re on the phone,” she says. “They love that convenience, and I love being able to help them. Foothills is really advanced in what we’re doing, and I think they see that.” ☎

CALL, COME BY, CONNECT

Foothills takes pride in providing the best service to our customers through its team of nine CSRs: Melissa Patrick, Christy Felber, Amy Lemaster, Leah Castle, Michelle Connelley, Andrea Ferguson, Tina Pyles, Alena Hughes and Beth Castle, Customer Service Manager Kim Stambaugh and Director of Customer Relations Jarrod Hardin. Combined the team offers nearly 150 years of experience.

Foothills Communications:

1621 Kentucky Route 40 W., Staffordsville, KY 41256

Hours: 7:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Phone: 606-297-3501

Web: www.foothills.net

Email: frtcc@foothills.net



NEED HELP?

Customer service representatives at Foothills Communications can help with just about any issue you're experiencing with phone, cable or internet. Whether you want to add new services, find ways to reduce your bill or just figure out what's gone wrong, CSRs can do it without the long wait times usually associated with customer service calls.

Our Foothills CSRs can handle these things and more:

- ▶ Place installation orders for phone, cable or internet
- ▶ Add new services or change existing services
- ▶ Take payments or resolve billing questions
- ▶ Troubleshoot problems with phone, cable or internet services

Beth Castle is the newest customer service representative to join the Foothills team.



Customer Service Representative Melissa Patrick helps her team answer over 300 calls on a typical day of work, sometimes more.



Esports go mainstream

High-speed connections create winners

BY JOHN CLAYTON

A dozen gaming computers provide an ethereal green glow along the stage at Lander University's Abney Cultural Center in Greenwood, South Carolina, as esports competitors prepare for an early round at the 2019 Peach Belt Conference League of Legends Championship tournament.

In traditional sports, the PBC is a member of NCAA Division II and composed of small colleges and universities in the Carolinas and Georgia. But as esports begins to find a larger niche, this is something different and new. While the video game industry has been around for decades, esports continues to evolve with college and professional teams, increasingly stunning games and graphics, and more platforms on which to play.

"I grew up playing stick-and-ball sports, and I never saw the difference in intensity between those sports and esports," says J.T. Vandebree, associate college esports manager at Riot Games, the creator and distributor of the battle arena game League of Legends. "In esports, all the competitors play the same games, and they all have the same experiences. And they all get to chase the same dream."

Vandebree spoke during a forum on esports hosted by Lander University during the 2019 PBC tournament. Members of the forum's panel agreed that esports and video gaming are expected to continue to broaden their reach and market shares.

Georgia high schools are now involved in sanctioned esports leagues. Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones bought a stake



Lander University esports competitors prepare for the Peach Belt Conference League of Legends tournament.

in professional esports team Complexity Gaming in 2017 and moved its training center to the Cowboys complex in Frisco, Texas. In 2017, 240 colleges and universities competed in esports. That number grew to 357 in 2019, and many of those schools offer scholarships to promising video gamers.

Despite the growing popularity of esports on college campuses and beyond, the NCAA has not sanctioned esports. Instead, the National Association of College Esports serves as its primary governing body, and the NCSA — Next College Student Athlete recruiting service — has added esports to its portfolio.

ESPN signed on as sponsor of the Collegiate Esports Championship and plans to

continue its support of the genre across its platforms, John Lasker, ESPN's vice president of digital programming, told Cheddar Esports during a regular show dedicated to gaming and esports.

"The conversion is happening right before our eyes," Lasker says. "Sports teams and franchises are evolving into esports franchises and esports teams. As that continues to happen, ESPN expects to continue to be there as we have been in other sports."

THE NEXT BIG THING

Gaming consoles such as Xbox and PlayStation have long incorporated internet connectivity into its gameplay, but Google is taking gaming one huge

Gaming old school in new ways



The Peach Belt Conference League of Legends Tournament took the big screen at Lander University's Abney Cultural Center.

step outside of the console.

Google was to introduce its much-anticipated Stadia online gaming platform — described as a sort of Netflix for gamers — in November. With the cloud-based Stadia, gamers will not even need a gaming console or PC to play. The cost is \$9.99 per month in the U.S.

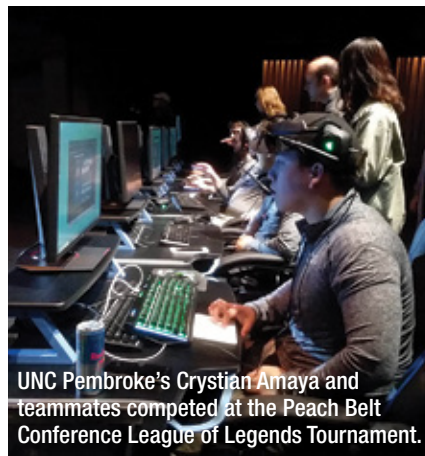
“Google may have just unveiled the future of gaming,” wrote Tom Warren, a senior editor for TheVerge.com, following Google’s introduction of Stadia’s beta version at the Game Developers Conference in March.

The cloud-based technology, which relies on fast internet speeds, an array of servers placed around the world and special game controllers that relay commands quickly to the servers, puts more pressure on internet companies and cooperatives to deliver.

High-speed internet connections make it possible for gamers to compete, and the expansion of broadband services into rural areas makes it possible for more people to enjoy the games and to take advantage of the potential opportunities they offer.

In Kerrville, Texas, first-year Schreiner University esports coach Ryan Lucich says he often suffered through frustrating internet speeds and iffy connections while a student and esports competitor at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas.

“Obviously, the biggest challenge in running a wide, multiplayer online game is the internet connection,” says Riot Games’ Vandenbree. “We have dozens of people at our company who work with telecommunications providers to try to figure out the best way to make our game packets work. Anything that makes our infrastructure stronger in our country, and any other country, is good for the game.”



UNC Pembroke's Crystian Amaya and teammates competed at the Peach Belt Conference League of Legends Tournament.

Using internet connections to play traditional games is an updated take on an old norm. “People used to play chess by mail or by messenger,” says Chris Bellinger, a Staunton, Virginia, resident and avid gamer. He participates in role-playing games with friends and family from across the miles thanks to internet connections and gaming platforms that allow real-time communication and play.

Bellinger says members of his groups, which total about eight people in each, are involved in Pathfinder, Dungeons & Dragons and Star Wars role-playing games. He participates in Pathfinder and D&D games with old friends and runs another D&D game with members of his family. Group members include people in Virginia, Florida, South Carolina and Iowa.

“We’re pretty spread out, so now it’s pretty cool,” Bellinger says. “It allows us to stay in touch. I don’t know that I would have much contact with my friends otherwise.”

One of the current games now played through the popular Roll 20 gaming platform originated from one that Bellinger and his friends started at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. “That game ran for about eight years with different people coming in or going out,” he says.

Roll 20 makes game play smooth and easy when coupled with a communications platform called Discord that allows for group chats and messaging.

While those platforms are relatively new, Bellinger says traditional gamers have been taking advantage of internet connections since the introduction of the World Wide Web. And before that, players used text-based multiuser dungeons, or MUDs, to meet up online for a gaming experience once confined to table tops or living rooms. “So, there’s always been ways to game online,” Bellinger says.

Don't stop believing

OIL SPRINGS COUPLE SPARKS CHRISTMAS JOY

BY JEN CALHOUN

When Lee Weddington returned from a contract job on a pipeline in Ohio a few years back, he was proud to show off his newest asset — a full, white beard. “When I work away from home, I don’t shave,” says Weddington, who retired in 2004 after 29 years as a Kentucky state trooper.

The beard soon became a conversation piece around the Oil Springs area and in his own house. “I thought it was the ugliest thing I had ever seen,” says his wife, Linda, who laughs when she remembers her reaction. “I kept saying, ‘Get in there and shave that thing off.’ He wouldn’t do it.”

Children, on the other hand, experienced something different when they saw the beard, Lee Weddington says. In church one day, three little girls came up to him. The brave one of the bunch whispered to him, “We know who you are.” When he asked who that might be, they replied, “You’re Santa Claus.”



Lee and Linda Weddington play the roles of Santa and Mrs. Claus for local events and parties during the Christmas season, then donate their appearance fees to charities.

Photo courtesy of Angela Goodman Photography

"I thought, 'Well, that's that then,'" Lee Weddington says. "I kept the beard."

Friends at Highland Church of Christ, where he serves as a deacon, also took notice of the effect he was having on children. When the preschool organizers asked the Weddingtons to team up to play Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus for a function about three years ago, the couple agreed.

"My sister said, 'Well, if he's going to do that, we're going to need to get him a good outfit,'" Linda Weddington says. "But I wasn't going to stand in the background with him getting a pretty outfit, honey. So, Mrs. Claus got one, too. We ordered them from Amazon."

SPREADING THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Now, the Weddingtons' calendar stays full through the holiday season. They play the jolly old elf and his wife at gatherings that have included a Christmas party at Foothills Communications, annual events at a local furniture store, the Shop with a Cop event in Prestonsburg and other appearances. "We do photo sessions for a couple of the photographers here where parents can pay to get their kids' pictures taken with us," Linda Weddington says. "All the money goes to a nonprofit organization to buy Christmas presents for children in need."



Photo courtesy of Angela Goodman Photography

Lee Weddington, a retired state trooper and Santa Claus lookalike, discovered that his long white beard kept children guessing about his true identity.

Other times, organizations will offer the couple money for their time. When that happens, they give the money straight back to the Shriners Hospital for Children in Cincinnati.

They also visit local nursing homes throughout the Christmas season. "People mustn't forget the nursing homes," Linda Weddington says. "They light up just like little children, too. They say, 'Santa Claus is here!' For just a few seconds, they forget where they're hurting."

"YOU GOTTA BELIEVE."

Playing Mr. and Mrs. Claus changed the couple's already sunny outlook on life, they say. "Every time we go out, we have a ball," Linda Weddington says. "We love it, and we've got it down."

Even without his Santa suit, Lee Weddington turns children's heads around the country. On a June trip to Destin, Florida, store clerks at a Bass Pro Shops approached him with a request. "They said, 'Hey, can you come down here and talk to this little girl?' She was talking about Santa Claus."

He told the store workers he'd handle it. "I went to her, and I asked her, 'Do you believe?' She looked at me, and I could see in her eyes she did," Weddington says. "I asked her what she wanted for Christmas, and I told her I was in Destin for a vacation from the North Pole. She was tickled to death."

He's also popular in public places, especially when children are misbehaving, says Linda Weddington. "It happens all the time," she says. "We go out in town, and he'll put his finger aside of his nose or look at them. Oh man — they straighten right up."

When they're not playing Mr. and Mrs. Claus, the couple helps out with their church or acts in plays. They recently worked in a September edition of Story Patch at the old Oil Springs High School. Lee Weddington also works part time as a substitute teacher and as an inspector on gas and oil pipelines in Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The Weddingtons have been married nearly 20 years and share six children and 10 grandchildren.

Becoming Santa and his wife has brought more fun to their lives, they say. "It keeps us young," Linda Weddington says. "You can't just sit and do nothing, or you'll curl up and die. You gotta get out. It's changed our lives. All our children are grown. Instead of sitting here looking at each other on Christmas Eve, we go out and find us some love."

They also realize how important it is to bring happiness to others, whether it's family, friends or complete strangers. "Being Santa means loving and caring for other people," Lee Weddington says. "You can't quit believing. That's the thing." 📺

Finding Santa

Interested in booking Santa and Mrs. Claus for your next event? Contact the Weddingtons either by phone or email at 606-297-5752 or at weddingtonlee@gmail.com.

A holiday delight

Baking Christmas cookies makes for a strong tradition

It's the most wonderful time of the year, when cooks around the country take to their kitchens to bake Christmas cookies.

"It's a tradition in families," says Stephany Houston, baker and owner of WildFlour Bakehouse in Sevierville, Tennessee. "Ours was that we would go to my grandmother's house — all of us girls — and make cookies. Then we would have them for the whole week before Christmas."

Houston recalls her grandmother, Alva Dell, using an old pastry press to create beautiful shapes for her German spritz cookies. That press is now long gone, but a new "old" one has taken its place. A friend found it at an antiques auction and brought it to Houston so she could re-create that experience she fondly remembers in her grandmother's kitchen years ago.

Spritz cookies are just one confection filling bakery cases during the holiday season, tempting customers as they walk through the bake shop doors. This is only WildFlour's second year in business, but as word spreads, a



Baker Stephany Houston re-creates the experience of making cookies with her grandmother.

growing, loyal customer base has taken root.

"Most every neighborhood has their baking lady," Houston says. "That's what I am — the neighborhood baking lady, who also has a storefront." In a previous life, before opening WildFlour, Houston was a 911 operator and "had a lot of downtime," giving her the opportunity to watch YouTube videos about cookie decorating.

"I pretty much taught myself," she says.

Now, she teaches others at classes at the bakery and makes cookies for customers who bring in their own recipes. "Everybody has their own little cookie recipe they want to have in their homes over the holidays," she says.



Tips for GREAT COOKIES

Stephany Houston, owner of WildFlour Bakehouse, teaches baking classes, where she stresses important steps to take before getting started:

- ▶ Read the entire recipe before you begin. A lot of people don't, and they skip important steps.
- ▶ Always cream the butter and sugar together. That's very important. Then, mix the dry ingredients and incorporate the two together.
- ▶ Do not overmix the batter, which will result in tough, dry, crumbly cookies. Stop mixing when the ingredients are just mixed together.



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STEPHANY'S GINGERBREAD MEN

- 3/4 cup butter
- 3/4 cup brown sugar, packed
- 3/4 cup molasses
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon Chinese five spice
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 1/4 teaspoon cloves
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 3 3/4 cups all-purpose flour

In a saucepan over low heat, melt butter, then stir in brown sugar, molasses, salt and spices. Transfer the mixture to a medium-sized mixing bowl, let it cool to lukewarm, then beat in the egg.

Whisk the baking powder and soda into the flour, then stir into the molasses mixture. The dough will be very soft and sticky, but don't be tempted to add more flour. It will firm up once it's chilled.

Divide the dough in half and pat each half into a thick rectangle. Wrap well and refrigerate for 1 hour or longer. The dough may be sticky and hard to roll if not thoroughly chilled, so make sure it's chilled before continuing.

Heat oven to 350 F. Once the dough has chilled, take one piece of dough out of the refrigerator and flour a clean work surface. Roll the dough to a thickness of 1/8 to 1/4 inch. The thinner you roll the dough, the crispier the cookie. Flour both the top and bottom of the dough if it starts to stick.

Cut out shapes with a floured cookie cutter, cutting them as close to one another as possible to minimize waste. Transfer cookies to ungreased cookie sheets. Bake the cookies until slightly browned around the edges — 8 to 12 minutes — or until they feel firm. Let cookies cool on baking sheet for several minutes until set. Then, remove to a wire rack to cool completely. Repeat with remaining dough. Decorate cookies as desired.



ALVA DELL'S CHRISTMAS SPRITZ

As you can tell by reading, Alva wrote this recipe for her family.

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 large egg
- 1/2 pound unsalted butter at room temperature, cut into small cubes
- Decorations of choice

Heat oven to 350 F. Whisk together the flour, sugar and salt in a large bowl, then sprinkle with vanilla and almond extracts. Crack the egg in the center of the bowl, then dot the flour mixture with the pieces of butter. Mix everything together with your clean hands until you get a dough. Try not to knead too much, as this makes tough cookies. You just want the dough to come together cohesively.

Press the dough through a cookie press to make traditional spritz. Put on the die of your choice — star and snowflake

patterns are good for the holidays. Then, load the press with the dough. Ratchet out the dough onto an ungreased cookie sheet. This takes practice, so be prepared to mess up at first. Just return the not-so-good ones to the dough ball and start again. Some people like larger cookies that require two or three cranks. Others like a more dainty cookie that requires just one crank of the cookie press. My mum sometimes twisted her wrist a little when making these to get a swirly pattern going on.

Bake the cookies at 350 F for 10-12 minutes. As they bake, get your decorations ready, because you'll need to act fast once they come out of the oven.

The cookies will not brown, so don't wait for that to happen. As soon as they come out of the oven, start decorating them. My favorite toppings are colored sugar and pieces of walnuts stuck in the center of the star pattern.

Cool the cookies on the sheet for 5 minutes, then carefully remove them to a rack. Let cool completely before putting them away. These cookies freeze well. 📦



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