

A man with a beard and a woman are smiling in a barbershop. The man is sitting in a barber chair, and the woman is standing behind him with her hands on his shoulders. In the background, another man is getting a haircut.

**HCTC**

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025

# CONNECTION

## Sharpening Skills

1962 Barber Company  
is a cut above

SAVING GRACE

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FILM FESTIVALS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## An Ongoing Mission

### NTCA supports rural broadband

**A**s 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 links 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 high-speed internet.



### GOVERNMENT

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



### EDUCATION

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



### 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



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](http://isaiah117house.com).

# Key Choices Ring in the New Year

Our students begin their paths to the future

**H**appy new year. I hope you had a wonderful holiday season and enjoyed your time with friends and family. Now, we're at a moment for resolutions and contemplating all we'll achieve in the next 12 months.



**CRAIG COOK**  
Chief Executive Officer

One particular group will soon reach a significant milestone—graduating from high school. Some members of the Class of 2025 have already cemented their plans for the next few years, but others are likely considering the short-term steps that will determine their long-term paths.

As these students begin their final months of high school, I want to thank them and their families for all they do, because these young people will become our community's leaders for decades to come.

In my role with HCTC, I appreciate the opportunities these young people have. We provide the essential communications resources for online education, work-from-home jobs and so much more. Every day, we see how young people make the most

of the digital tools connecting our community to the world.

Many students complete the early college selection process by late winter. Come spring, others will pick their next destinations. We celebrate these choices because a college education is a wonderful, challenging opportunity. From engineers to physicians, architects to business leaders, and so many other professional paths, the road begins with college.

However, that's far from the only option. Traditional colleges won't meet the needs of everyone. Some future members of the workforce will enroll at a community college, trade or technical school, and we applaud these choices. The route from high school to high-paying jobs in in-demand fields based on trade school educations may be shorter and much less expensive than traditional college degrees.

What would we do without expert locksmiths, reliable truck drivers, electricians, plumbers and the other tradespeople who make modern life possible? Individuals who invest their time to learn these skills are invaluable.

These are topics close to our hearts at HCTC because the people who install the networks that make our services possible need the training to bring you the highest-quality service. In fact, NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association and Northwood Tech in Wisconsin provide ongoing training and accreditation—including remote classes—to create a foundation for these vital professionals.

Our hope is all our young people have the resources and ability to choose the career best for them. Then, hopefully, they'll be part of our community for generations to come.

As we begin this new year, remember the high school seniors around us face important decisions. As their communications provider, we're proud to offer the powerful internet network linking them to all the resources they need to take their next steps.

May your 2025 be filled with joy. Thank you for letting us serve you. 

## HCTC CONNECTION

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025

VOL. 9, NO. 1

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## 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.

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UTILITY RESOURCES

### On the Cover:



Anabel and Daniel Medrano blended their talents to grow their Kerrville business, 1962 Barber Company. See story Page 12.

Photo courtesy of Gabe Rene Photography



SIGN UP  
FOR

**smart** hub

Make efficiency a priority in 2025, and resolve to save some time by signing up for SmartHub.

With SmartHub you can manage your HCTC account and pay your bill from anywhere. 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 assistance.

**To learn more, and to register for SmartHub, go to [hctc.net/smarthub](https://hctc.net/smarthub).**

# ATTENTION!

## HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS



HCTC is accepting applications for the 2025 HCTC scholarships available to graduating seniors who will attend a college or a technical school during the 2024-25 school year.

Above-average grades are not mandatory. A student's leadership qualities, community involvement, extracurricular activities and teacher recommendations will be considered.

"HCTC is committed to the rural economic development of our communities and that includes developing educational opportunities for our youth," HCTC CEO Craig Cook says.

**Students may apply online at [hctc.net](https://hctc.net). Applications are due March 3.**

# YOUTH TOUR

HCTC has a long-standing partnership with the Foundation for Rural Service to give students an opportunity to tour the nation's capital.

This year's Youth Tour of Washington, D.C., is scheduled for June 2-6.

The trip will include visits to the Lincoln Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, Vietnam Veterans and World War II memorials, the Kennedy Center, Smithsonian museums, the Federal Communications Commission and more.

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

Each applicant must submit an essay or upload a video about the effects of telecommunications on their future.

**Deadline to apply is March 3.  
Apply at [hctc.net](https://hctc.net)**





# 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.

“Over the years, our audience has given us many nicknames—spring break, immersion therapy, summer camp,” says Emily Lock, conference director for the Austin Film Festival & Writers Conference. “Fans’ passion for movies, TV and all kinds of new media

helps aspiring creatives forge the careers they’ve dreamt of, propels working directors into household names and ultimately imbues their art with meaning and cultural impact.”

The conference welcomes storytellers, rising talents and industry luminaries from across Texas and the world. Old friends who consider the trip a beloved tradition

rub elbows with new attendees who will experience the magic of the festival for the first time, Emily says.

With 60 film festivals on the docket for 2025, Texas is rich with options for fans of about any genre and at about every price range, according to the Houston Film Commission.

### FAN FOCUS

While its primary focus is giving filmmakers a place to introduce their projects



Ryan Gosling takes selfies with fans at the SXSW 2024 “Fall Guy” premiere in Austin.



Austin's State Theatre prepares to welcome festival guests to a screening.

## FESTIVAL SCENE

The **Hill Country Film Festival** in Fredericksburg runs through the last weekend in May. The festival was started in 2010 by the Hill Country Film Society, which now offers year-round film programs through the monthly Indie Film Series, Summer Film Camp and Film Affare, an annual exploration of food and film.

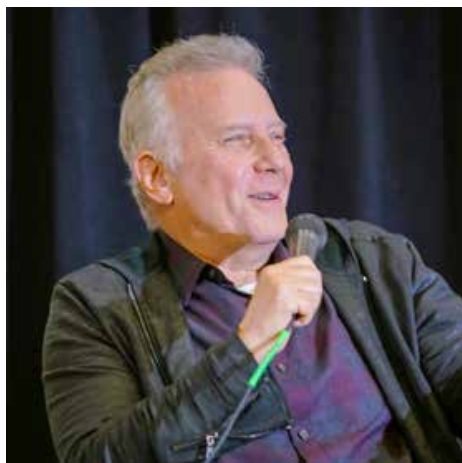
Midsummer brings the **San Antonio Film Festival**, from July 30 to Aug. 3. Celebrating its 31st year, the festival focuses on affordable attendance and works with top local hotels and restaurants to offer discounts.

Austin hosts more than two dozen film festivals. Besides the massive 2025 **SXSW Film and TV Festival** in March, the city has other fan-friendly festivals like the **ATX Short Film Showcase**, which is held every month. Eight local projects are screened, and their Texas-based filmmakers are on hand after each for a Q&A session. The **Best of the Year Fest** is held in August.

The end of summer brings fans and industry insiders together Sept. 12 at AFS Cinema for the **Austin Under the Stars Film Festival**, showcasing indie filmmaking. And in October, the **Austin Film Festival** marks its 32nd year of championing the art of storytelling and great screenwriting.

In Houston, events start with the Jan. 20-25 **ShortFlix Film Fest**, in its second year of showcasing films of 12 minutes or less at the Pearl Theater. The **Houston Greek Film Fest** ends the season at the Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston. The MATCH, or Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston, also hosts a spring festival, April 12-13, that highlights underwater videography.

and network with industry colleagues, almost every festival relies heavily on fan participation. Screenings and special events are open to the public.



Actor Paul Reiser answers audience questions about his film "The Problem with People" at the Austin Film Festival.

Ticket prices run the gamut from free admission upward to hundreds of dollars.

Fans at film festivals often interact with industry insiders while getting to see impactful projects that may never be shown at their neighborhood theaters. But beyond that, fans meet people with similar interests, making the festivals social events about 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 [filmfreeway.com](http://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 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 staffed completely by volunteers, and even the largest fests rely heavily on volunteers. Duties range from greeting patrons and taking tickets to helping out 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. 📺



# HEALING, RESTORIN

## Mercy Gate Ministries helps human trafficking survivors

Story by LAZ DENES

**A**rukah is the Hebrew word meaning to heal, restore and rebuild. It's the name Kerrville-based Mercy Gate Ministries chose for its new West Kerr County home designed to help survivors of sex trafficking and exploitation.

Eight Days of Hope, a national non-profit, began construction in early October 2024 and expects completion in the first quarter of this year. The 4,166-square-foot, five-bedroom, four-and-a-half-bath home is designed to house 12 survivors, doubling Mercy Gate's capacity to provide safe, subsidized and supportive housing as these women transition to self-sufficiency. The project was made possible thanks to generous donations from area businesses and

private individuals. As of late October, it was within \$40,000 of being fully funded.

Mercy Gate, which took shape in 2017, is the brainchild of co-founders Lisa Carpenter, Lana Seibert and Chae Spencer, the executive director. Their more than 30 years of combined experience in various ministries led them to join forces to eradicate poverty in the Hill Country and support trafficking victims into freedom. Mercy Gate's first residential facility opened in 2020, accommodating four survivors, and a second, able to house 12 survivors, opened in early 2022.

"Those kinds of services weren't really available here because most people in the Hill Country didn't even think it was a thing that happens here," says Lisa, the ministry's assistant executive director.

Matthew  
11:28-30  
come to  
me and I  
will give  
you rest



Mercy Gate volunteers add scripture verses to their construction project.

Mercy Gate members and volunteers with Eight Days of Hope join the project. From left are Chae Spencer, Colleen Fabling, Lisa Carpenter, Danny Fuller and Paul Buschong.



# G AND REBUILDING



Crews coordinate the next phase of the construction of the house.

She and her husband, Justin, started Kerrville's Cross Kingdom Church the year before Mercy Gate took shape. "I believe people are now getting educated and understanding that it does happen here. If you have drugs in your community, you have trafficking, period," she says.

## RECOGNIZING A NEED

Chae, Lisa, and Lana spent the early days of their ministry praying about how to narrow their focus to a particular cause. In August 2017, Chae answered a need for school clothes and supplies not knowing it would lead her to Karla Solomon, an exploitation survivor whose horrific story began in early childhood. That introduction eventually blossomed into Karla's current position as Mercy Gate's Director of Outreach and Training. "She was the first trafficking survivor we ever helped, and she has made the most of her healing journey by helping other women find the same freedom. You should see her now," Chae says.

"When we met Karla, she was terrified to leave her home. She was so traumatized. We knew after meeting her that this is where we needed to focus," Lisa says. "We immediately knew we were called to put our efforts, time, talents, and funds toward victims of exploitation and trafficking. Meeting Karla really helped guide us down the path to where we are today."

Mercy Gate uses a four-pronged approach to the various facets of sex trafficking and exploitation—prevention,

rescue, restoration, and advocacy. Its outreach and prevention programs reach thousands of individuals each year. The ministry partners with local and federal agencies, like the Department of Homeland Security, to rescue identified victims. Its built-in residential, nonresidential, and courtroom advocacy programs are designed to strengthen the restoration process. And its training and education efforts provide survivors with the tools and resources they need to thrive.

"Watching the restoration process is hard, but it's beautiful to see the light in their eyes come on again," Chae says. "When they come in, oftentimes they're so down, they're dark, they hate who they are because they're embarrassed about what they've been through. But then, all of a sudden, you see them believe the truth, which is, 'I'm a human being, and I'm worthy of having an amazing life.' And so that's when everything changes."

## AN EYE ON THE FUTURE

Despite common misconceptions that human trafficking is all about individuals being randomly abducted in public places, the reality is that more than 90% of victims are groomed and exploited by a family member or trusted adult, Chae says.

"What we see more often than not is women who were first abused at a very young age. It could be a family member, it could be a neighbor, it could be a church person, it could be anyone," she says. "And so, they were abused sexu-



Bubba Roberts frames a window opening.

ally very young, and it traumatizes them. It brings shame upon them. They don't understand why these things are happening to them and not other people."

Mercy Gate's long-term goal is to merge its efforts on a 20- to 30-acre campus in the Hill Country. It would include Magdalene Houses for the triage work bringing new survivors into the program, private dorms, tiny houses, a central fellowship hall for meetings and presentations, a computer lab for training and in-depth study, an equestrian facility for equine therapy and a large open area for relaxation, study, exercise, and organized activities.

"Our goal is to have one campus where we have our offices, classroom, residential facility, transition houses, but also a space where moms can live with their children," says Lesley Lehrmann, restoration program director who oversees Mercy Gate's trauma-informed healing program, The Journey. "It's not underway yet, but we are talking about and praying about this campus. Our dream is to one day be able to offer healing and restoration to the entire family."

## STAY CONNECTED Mercy Gate Ministries

3033 Junction Highway, Kerrville  
830-367-3285

[mercygateministries.com](http://mercygateministries.com)

Find Mercy Gate Ministries on Facebook and Instagram.

# COURAGE, COMMITMENT AND COMMUNITY

## Volunteer fire departments welcome new members



Illustration by Adobe Stock

Story by MELANIE JONES

**I**n 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 rescue vehicles. 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.

But the tide may be turning. The number of volunteer applications through NVFC increased from 31,309 in 2022 to 38,696 in 2023, the latest year for which data is available.

Kim Hilsenbeck is marketing director for the State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas, a trade association representing fire and emergency services workers for the past 148 years. She says the number of applications for volunteer firefighters through the website [volunteerfirefighter.org](http://volunteerfirefighter.org) dropped in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is rebounding. In 2020, that number was 1,992. It dropped as low as 566 in 2022, but by 2024 it was back up to 1,711.

### EYES ON THE FUTURE

Kim wants to challenge the idea that every volunteer fire department is struggling for new volunteers. In many places that is the case, she says, but departments in other areas are thriving, even growing. "It's not a blanket statement," she says of the idea of a shrinking volunteer force. "It's a little more nuanced than that."

Kim says Texas volunteer fire departments overall need to think about the future and replenishing their ranks. "Some are doing a phenomenal job pulling in volunteers," she says. "Others could use a little help."

In a way, it all comes down to marketing. "Departments need to have a toolbox of marketing and outreach methods, from social media to word of mouth to banners on the firehouse lawn," she says. "Fundamentally, it involves understanding and communicating with people."

Social media is absolutely one tool departments must use to recruit younger members, she says, including posting videos to TikTok and Instagram. Kim recently developed a social media seminar to help smaller, more rural departments better use social media platforms as a marketing tool.

Other options to attract new, younger volunteers are for departments to partner with local school districts to offer firefighter academies and to allow students to gain volunteer hours needed for graduation by working at a fire department.

### A HEALTHY MIX

Older firefighters aren't necessarily a bad thing, 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



“Departments need to have a toolbox of marketing and outreach methods ... Fundamentally, it involves understanding and communicating with people.”

—Kim Hilsenbeck, State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas marketing director

Photo courtesy of Steve Hirsch



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

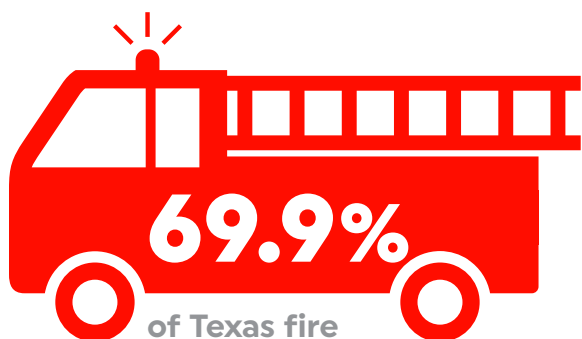
Photo by Adobe Stock/Teerapong23



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.”

Steve, who has led fire training in Kansas for 25 years through the state association, sees the benefits of having a wide age range of firefighters. “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.”

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?” Steve 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.” 📱



of Texas fire departments are all-volunteer

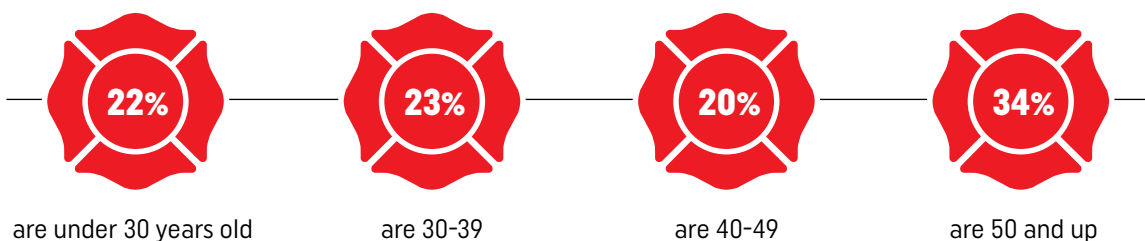
**11.8%**  
of Texas fire departments are mostly volunteer



**200%**  
Increase in call volume in the last 35 years



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



Source: National Volunteer Fire Council

# Sharpened Skills



## Kerrville barbershop is buzzing with business

Story by HIANNA SABO

Photos courtesy of Gabe Rene Photography



Anabel and Daniel Medrano review the latest business figures.

There's a place in Kerrville where time seems to slow down, and the atmosphere is just right.

The buzz of clippers provides a backdrop to candid conversations and expert grooming. Welcome to 1962 Barber Company, where high school sweethearts Anabel and Daniel Medrano's "haircut therapy" keeps customers returning for more than just a trim.

"We definitely see our people at their lows and at their highs," Daniel says. "And sometimes it's just a treat, you know, like a day spa."

Since 2014, the Medranos have blended tradition with modern trends. The name 1962 honors the year their parents were born. "We try to keep it as classic as possible with the conversations and styles, but you still get that old-school vibe with hot lather, straight razor, and hot towels," Daniel says.

### SERVING ALL AGES

1962 Barber Company is the result of years of hands-on experience and a keen eye for what customers really want.

Anabel started in corporate salons. "I noticed that we would get men on that side that would rather go to hairstylists because he or she knew how to use scissors," she says.

The shop caters to all ages. For younger clients, Daniel is seeing a popular trend. "It's like this long nest of hair on top with a very short taper on the bottom and the sides," he says.

Older gentlemen also enjoy 1962 Barber Company's services. "We offer services for older clientele, including shaves for those with skin sensitivities," Daniel says. 1962 Barber Company's signature hot towel shave is a crowd favorite.

### THE BUSINESS OF BARBERING

The Medranos leverage their social media accounts, posting before-and-after photos of customers who have radically changed hairstyles or wild beards they transformed into a more refined style.

In modern barbering, sharp scissors and a solid internet connection are equally vital. With HCTC's reliable internet, 1962 Barber Company maintains a strong digital presence in rural Kerrville.

The shop held its fourth annual Beard Bash in the fall, with guys proudly showcasing their chosen style, from ginger man beards to Tejas-style mustaches.

### MAKING TOMORROW'S CUT

The Medranos continue to innovate. "We're exploring potential hair treatment options with a local med spa," Daniel says.

Anabel, ever the entrepreneur, has also diversified into real estate, with her barbershop network evolving in unexpected ways. "It's pretty phenomenal," she says. "I turned all of my old barbershop tools, including my chair and my station, into office material now."

"You never know where your business will take you," Daniel says, "but for us, it's all about creating a space where people can feel their best." 🗨️

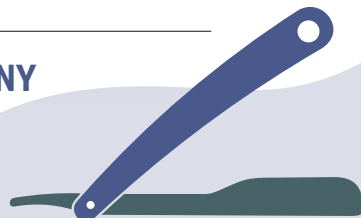


The vintage ambiance of 1962 Barber Company harkens back to the era the business was named for.

### 1962 BARBER COMPANY

512 Jefferson St., Kerrville  
830-900-1962

Follow the shop on Facebook  
and Instagram for updates





# LASTING IMPRESSION

## Fond recollections of a Youth Tour experience

Story by DIANNA TROYER



Photo courtesy of Mason Stacey

Mason Stacey grabs a selfie with a bust of George Washington at the Mount Vernon gift shop.

Mason Stacey knew exactly what he had to see at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

"The SR-71 Blackbird is the world's fastest and highest-flying manned aircraft," says Mason, who saw the jet in early June while visiting Washington, D.C., as HCTC's representative on the Foundation for Rural Service Youth Tour. "The Air and Space Museum meant a lot to me because I want to become a commercial pilot. I love flying with a family friend who has a plane and private airstrip."

A high school junior in the Harper Independent School District, Mason was selected for the tour after winning an essay contest. "I wrote about how important GPS systems are for aeronautics and telecommunications," he says.

In 1995, FRS began hosting the annual five-day tour of the nation's capital to teach teens ages 15 to 17 about rural broadband, government policies, and



Photo courtesy of Arlington National Cemetery

A tomb sentinel marches precisely 21 steps past the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier during the Changing of the Guard ceremony.

U.S. history. Participants from across the nation meet their legislators and tour museums, historical sites, national monuments, and federal offices.

Mason learned how federal legislators and regulatory agencies approved programs to reduce the cost of internet access for eligible households.

He and his fellow students also took in a play at the Kennedy Center while they were in town. Other unforgettable sites for Mason during the tour were national monuments and the Capitol. "Even though I'd seen photos, I didn't realize the scale of both until I was there, especially the Washington Monument," Mason says of the 555-foot, 7-inch-tall obelisk made of granite and white Maryland marble.

Seeing George Washington's restored house at Mount Vernon was impressive, too. "His tomb there was memorable," Mason says. "It's inside an arched brick enclosure." 🗨️

### APPLY FOR 2025 TOUR

The Foundation for Rural Service's 2025 Youth Tour is scheduled for June 2-6.

Teens chosen to participate learn about the policymaking process through meetings with congressional and Federal Communications Commission staff members. They also gain insight into the challenges of providing quality broadband in rural communities.

Students must be 15, 16 or 17 years old at the time of the tour. The deadline to apply is March 1. More information about the tour can be found at [hctc.net/2025-youth-tour-contest](https://hctc.net/2025-youth-tour-contest).



Photo courtesy of Architect of the Capitol

FRS Youth Tour attendees visit several national landmarks, including the U.S. Capitol.



# All the Comforts of Home

Classic trio's widespread appeal endures

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

## 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.





#### 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. 📺

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