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ACHS instructor, tech club readies for streaming a sports season like no other

Justin Faulconer

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Mike Cargill, advisor of the Amherst Lancers Tech Club, poses with one of the main high tech cameras that will be used by his media students, Peter Garrison, left, and Grace Stinson.

Lee Luther Jr.

As rain relentlessly saturated Amherst on Dec. 4, the night of the town's much-awaited reverse Christmas parade, members of the Amherst Lancer Tech Club were feeling the pressure to broadcast the event.

Keeping equipment dry in the downpour, getting stuck in traffic and losing power at one point were obstacles the team had to overcome in streaming the event online via video, said Mike Cargill, who heads the club and serves as Amherst County Public Schools' digital media communications manager.

"I got as wet as anybody out there. We were able to pull off a miracle, in a sense, because there were so many factors," Cargill said of Amherst County High School students streaming the event in such conditions. "They all said this is the best day they had all year. The memory we created is even though we don't have all the answers, we have to give it our best shot. We had to problem-solve how to fix this so the show could go on. I thoroughly enjoyed pulling it off with so many challenges."

Now a new challenge awaits for Cargill and the club: standing in the gap for spectators in streaming sports events for near-empty gyms and facilities during a sports season unlike any ever experienced in the Amherst school division's history. With a gauntlet of restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Seminole District has decided no fans will be let into sporting events because of limits on crowd sizes.

While the Lancer Tech Club has recorded and broadcasted sporting events for years, its role is needed now more than ever as families and loved ones are not able to sit in on games this winter. Cargill and students in the club have prepared for the planned Jan. 7 kickoff of sports at the high school, which marks the first athletic contests since the pandemic was declared in March.

The club plans to use three cameras in the ACHS gym, including one on the wall that moves back and forth to capture the action and two stationary cameras, all of which transmit back to its studio. Cargill and students will add content to the production in streaming the games on its online and social media platforms.

“We’re going to do as many games as we can,” Cargill said. “We don’t know what the end product is going to look like.”

In more than 17 years with Amherst schools division, Cargill has helped the high school and two middle schools’ students learn multimedia in a real-world setting through hands-on experience. The club, which unofficially started 16 years ago, began streaming football games in 2011.

Cargill estimates the club has filmed more than 3,500 events, including the aftermath of the tornado that ripped through the Elon community in spring 2018, and has live streamed more than 2,500 events.

He estimates the group has produced more than 500 videos in the past 16 years and more than 200 students have participated. The precursor to the current club was AMS Live, which started while he previously worked at Amherst Middle School.

Under his leadership, students filmed the morning announcements on a VHS tape that was broadcasted across the schools. He started working at the high school in August 2015.

A native of Oregon and the son of a rancher, Cargill grew up on a farm and attended a publicly funded school with a dorm in which he lived. His roommate lived 153 miles from the school and he and classmates had chores.

“We grew up around athletics and that’s where my passion for athletics comes from,” Cargill said. “I’ve been involved in athletics my whole life and I think sports is so unique because you learn so much by participating. You learn about teamwork, work ethic and overcoming challenges.”

His grandparents, admirers of the late Jerry Falwell, wanted one of their grandchildren to go to the Lynchburg college he founded, Cargill said. In 1982 he fulfilled their wish by coming to the East Coast for the first time to attend Liberty Baptist College, which by the time he graduated five years later had become known as Liberty University.

Cargill's degree was in physical education and he had a minor in athletic training. He became a certified athletic trainer at Liberty where he worked 10 years. He also was at Jefferson Forest High School a few years before coming to Amherst in 2003.

He describes the Lancer Tech Club as a hands-on laboratory where students sharpen their skills, dive into areas that interest them and develop time management expertise through projects.

"This is a job site. You're going to learn the basics you need to know to operate a camera and the different technologies," Cargill said, adding the hands-on component is crucial. "This is where they make a mistake and learn from it. The key is to learn from it."

The club has five focus areas: a streamers group, capturing footage and images through drones, a STEM competition team, a music group and a sportscaster group. Students also have been instrumental in streaming Amherst County School Board meetings this year with technology that allows them to operate cameras remotely and podcasts hosted by Superintendent Rob Arnold.

"The key is if you can make it fun and educational, kids want to be involved with that," Cargill said.

The club currently has its lowest number of students Cargill has seen because of the pandemic's effect on enrollment, with many students staying at home, he said. In 2016 the group streamed 94% of athletic games because of high student participation, he said, noting it varies over years.

"We have to figure out a way to provide streaming with fewer students," he added.

Cargill said during the most recent Christmas parade the students weren't stationed and had to stream while on the go, a first for the group.

"They're learning to be problem-solvers and move forward with things," he said.

Arnold said Cargill's extensive experience and work with the established club is vital to the division's streaming efforts.

"It certainly has become a greater need right now," Arnold said of the online outreach. "Mr. Cargill has been way ahead of the curve on this."

As school officials emphasize the public's patience and understanding with COVID-19 measures restricting access to sporting events, Arnold said the division is fortunate to have Cargill and the club.

"We're trying to do everything we can to give people opportunities," Arnold said of streaming sports.

Cargill said he enjoys building relationships with students and teaching responsibility and commitment as they tackle productions.

"Why do people take pictures? Because they want to remember," Cargill said of the club's role. "We are archiving and documenting history. Once it's gone, it's gone."

https://newsadvance.com/community/new_era_progress/news/watch-now-local-4-h-youth-back-in-the-groove-at-summer-camp/article_0eaa92f4-f163-11eb-a576-23b7f94df01a.html

Watch Now: Local 4-H youth back in the groove at summer camp

Justin Faulconer

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Adult volunteer and longtime 4-H camper David Johnson teaches campers how to grill Kabobs. 4-H camps returned last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lee Luther Jr photos for the News & advance

“I say that you don’t do 4-H correctly if you don’t lose your voice by the end of end of the week,” said a hoarse Jackson, a team counselor at the Amherst 4-H camp.

Jackson has taken part in the camp since he was a fifth-grader and had every reason to yell and raise his voice to the maximum levels of fun from July 26 to July 30. After a year off because of the COVID-19 pandemic, just more than 140 kids returned to retake the grounds of the center in Appomattox County for a week of nature, swimming, soaking in a wide range of outdoor activities and bonding in person rather than over a computer screen or phone.

“This is a time where kids can let loose, have the best time of their life,” Jackson said of the Amherst camp. “All the staff here, they really bring out everything in the kids.”

Kathy McMillan, a 4-H technician and program assistant, said the Amherst camp normally has about 280 but this year was reduced to half capacity because of COVID-19 restrictions. The youth, ages 8 to 18, are enough to fill the camp without sharing with other counties, she said.

The half-capacity camp is a “more subdued” environment this year but still highly enjoyable, according to McMillan.

“Kids need to be out of the house,” she said of the camp’s appeal.

Jackson had to wait a year, with the unexpected hiatus in 2020, to become a team counselor and enjoyed making the most of it this time around.

“I always looked up to the counselors,” Jackson said. “I thought maybe I could make a difference and kids could look up to me just like I did the other counselors.”

Jackson said other than the usual homesickness he didn’t receive any comments from kids not enjoying the camp experience this year.

“It’s a little weird at times, the schedule is a little weird sometimes, but we make it through,” Jackson said of the adjustments.

Holiday Lake 4-H Educational Center, located within close proximity to Holliday Lake State Park, has served Central and Southside Virginia since 1940 and draws youth and adults from 17 counties and two cities each summer, according to its

website. Programming focuses on natural resource education, outdoor adventure, shooting education and youth leadership development, the website states.

Summer camp was held for Lynchburg and Appomattox 4-H youth the week after the July 4 holiday, Nelson County kids took part in their camp in mid-July and Campbell County's 4-H camp was held the first week in August.

David Johnson, a volunteer at the Amherst camp, has taken part in the camp experience for most of his life. Johnson, who graduated from Amherst County High School in 1999, said he knows many people with children who have had hardships from the pandemic with their kids being cooped up inside and apart from friends and activities.

"In general the whole thing is hard, kids not being able to go out and interact," Johnson said. "But one of the great things about camp is you get to interact with people you normally wouldn't see in school. I've seen people make friends way across the county and even from other countries just coming here, and we missed out on that last year."

Nyia Barrow, a teen leader, said it's her last year coming before college and she was glad to come back.

"This week has been really different with all our COVID precautions, but it has been a lot of fun and it's been nice getting to know our campers one on one because we're with them all the time," said Barrow. "I missed it a lot last year and I'm glad we were able to come back this year."

As a camper, it's been a fun place to come, spend time with friends and get to know new people, Barrow said. As a leader she's learned to take care of kids and keep them safe, entertained and happy.

Johnson, while leading a small cooking group, said he missed volunteering last year at the refuge for local youth.

“I have said this many times, no matter what happens this week, even if it’s something we don’t like, like having to wear a mask, it’s still better than the camp we had last year,” Johnson said. “And it’s been a good camp.”

https://newsadvance.com/community/new_era_progress/news/watch-now-amherst-high-schools-theater-stays-active-during-pandemic-records-competition-play/article_c2da98a6-9267-11eb-baac-97b38b6c4984.html

Watch Now: Amherst high school's theater stays active during pandemic, records competition play

Justin Faulconer

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Caroline Cockerham and Colson Davis act out a scene in Amherst County High School's production of "The Aliens Have Stolen Our Wives," for the New Era-Progress

An out-of-this-world experience has come to Amherst County High School's drama program for a spring production of "The Aliens Have Stolen Our Wives," an original play written by ACHS instructor Patricia Emmert and her husband.

The challenges of COVID-19 have led Emmert and the drama students to put on their competition play in a pre-recorded performance sent to the Virginia High School League. The school's theater program participants normally travel in the fall to perform for the VHSL competition and observe other schools' productions, but this year Emmert and crew had to improvise by recording the performance in an empty auditorium at the high school.

Emmert described the original piece as a "ridiculous, silly, funny" story of a fictional town called Bigelow where men play poker, women go shopping and they enter the aliens as they study human behavior and mating rituals referred to as the SOLs (standard of love).

"I thought it was a lot of fun and the kids have really enjoyed it," Emmert said. "It's just what we needed."

Since the pandemic, the drama program has been in a constant state of adapting. The spring musical last year was scrapped and a late fall production, "Spoon River Anthology," was held outdoors with characters staying socially distanced in a graveyard setting. Drama students also did a recent improvisational show via Google Meet and plan to hold a live performance April 17 outdoors at the high school.

"When you're performing, the beautiful thing is the audience is part of the show," Emmert said. "The kids told me they're so happy to just hear an audience's reaction — on time. They're excited about that."

The drama club also plans to perform "The Lion King Jr." in the school's parking lot the first week of June.

The pre-recorded production of "The Aliens Have Stolen Our Wives" will be posted on Amherst Theatre's website at **emmertstheatre.com**.

"It's all new to us," Emmert said of putting on a show without a live audience. "This is the first time we've ever recorded a show."

The recording includes a full performance in real time without any editing and the camera doesn't pick up all the nuisances of each character, she said.

"They don't get any feedback from an empty theater room," Emmert said.

Despite the challenges, the students made the most of it.

"We have had a lot of fun with this show," Emmert said. "This play just kind of started as a joke but we ended up really liking it."

Colson Davis, a senior, said he didn't think he was going to have the chance to be on the stage this year and is thankful to have the chance to perform.

"Just to be able to do even a recording is a blessing in my book and I'm really grateful for the opportunities Mrs. Emmert gave us this year," Davis said.

Student Eleanor McPhatter said the performance felt much the same but different in a lot of ways as well. "We did it like a normal show, basically," McPhatter said.

Nico Thomas said he enjoyed playing a character he described as an egotist, which contradicts Thomas's personality. The performance without live laughter or applause is different and he had a good time, adding the theater cast is a "one-of-a-kind."

"Mrs. Emmert did so many things to make the production fun," said Caroline Cockerham, who played a narrator for the show. "It was really fun how she managed to make this like a normal play, even though it's not like a normal year."

Emmert said some students have expressed disappointment and frustrations with the interruptions to daily life COVID-19 has caused, as well as missing out on a range of experiences.

"The more we get to be together in person live, the more we get to heal," Emmert said of dealing with the pandemic. "They're healing. It was a gut shot. These kids who do theater just want to interact and be engaged. Theater kids have always had to be that

way. Something breaks, something shatters, a line is dropped — they're trained to adapt.”

Emmert said she wants the students to keep moving forward and embrace what works this year.

“We've got to figure this out together — and they just did.”