



## Georgetown's Helping Hams

PHOTO BY SHERRY MCRAE

SCARS member Bruce Elbert began volunteering to provide emergency communications while living in California, assisting during fires, earthquakes and even with President Ronald Reagan's funeral procession.

*By Maureen Griffin*

In 1873, Guglielmo Marconi became the first person to communicate across the Atlantic Ocean via radio. Soon, land based telegraph operators were taking their Morse code skills to sea or stations along the ocean. Amateurs, eager to communicate with distant counterparts, began building elaborate and powerful antennas, often shutting out other radio operators and interfering with commercial radio transmissions. The offending operators were derisively referred to as "hams." Over time, "ham" lost its negative connotation and today amateur radio operators routinely refer to themselves as "ham operators."

The Sun City Amateur Radio Society (SCARS) was chartered in 2002. In the years since, membership has grown to more than 70 members. Like many of Sun City's chartered clubs, some members have found a way to promote and enjoy their hobby while making a valuable contribution to the residents of Sun City and the Central Texas community.



SCARS also assists Sun City residents with programming of their weather radios.

Reaching outside of Sun City, some members of SCARS have joined forces with the Williamson County Amateur Radio Services (WC-ARES) to provide assistance to Georgetown at large. A nonprofit organization comprised of FCC-licensed, amateur radio operators, WC-ARES provides emergency communications

services as a public service.

This service is provided under a number of circumstances. Power outages caused by natural disasters or crisis situations are probably the most well-known examples. Should normal communications be disrupted by, say, a tornado (such as the one which devastated Jarrell in 1997),



The Red Poppy Ride is one of the largest events in which the hams participate. More than half of the race's radio communications volunteers are also members of SCARS.

these SCARS members can use their technical expertise, emergency training and radio equipment to communicate with and assist local hospitals and emergency service agencies.

How are these titans of transmission able to communicate when the rest of the world is off-line? A dedicated meeting room in the Activities Center houses 10 radio positions, five radios and one receiver, all provided by the club for the use of its members. A series of antennas, providing access to different wavelengths, are located on the roof. In case of power outage or natural disaster, the equipment can be operated by batteries and a propane generator located on site. A repeater, located in a ballroom closet, has been provided by the CA to facilitate long-distance radio communication by relaying the signal. This repeater makes possible communication between Sun City radio operators and locations throughout the state and nation in case of a natural disaster or crisis. Operators can receive Morse code, voice and email communications via their equipment and

relay that information to other locations and agencies until electricity and cell service can be restored. Sun City is one of only a handful of sites in the area with such capabilities.

Of course, these volunteers aren't just waiting for disaster to strike – they're happy to provide their unique service in good times as well. For the past several years, SCARS/WC-ARES volunteers have handled all communication during the Red Poppy Ride.

Benefiting the Williamson County Children's Advocacy Center, Sertoma of Georgetown and the Georgetown Police Department Bike Program, the Red Poppy Ride has been held in conjunction with the Red Poppy Festival every spring for the past 14 years. Catering to cyclists of all levels, this ride sprawls across northern Williamson County with five different routes ranging from 14 to 100 miles in length. Sun City's airwave altruists regularly provide mobile support, gear and communications backup for bicycle riders making their way along the meandering course.

Red Poppy Ride coordinator Paige Allen is grateful for their contribution, calling Sun City's WC-ARES hams "an invaluable asset" to the annual event.

"We rely on their communications from setup to breakdown," explains Allen. "Their most important service is providing a layer of safety and security for the participants that is unseen in most bike rides. With an eye on every rider, participants can feel secure knowing they will not get lost. In the event of an emergency or bad weather, their coordination with EMS and transportation support means that help is not far behind." Without their assistance, Allen states "the Red Poppy Charity Bike Ride would not be what it is today!"

If you are interested in learning more about supporting your community through amateur radio, consider enquiring with a fearless frequency facilitator near you. You'll find them at monthly SCARS meetings, held on the first Wednesday of each month in the Atrium at the Activities Center.