

GO PIONEER

DECEMBER 2024



FOCUS ON.

Martens Machine Shop

PG. 07

Swipe, Follow, **Connect**

Explore how technology reshapes human connections, from dating apps to parasocial relationships and AI companions.

Begins on PG. 01

DEEP FAKES 101

Uncover the ethical implications and technological wonders of deepfakes, including tips to spot them.

Begins on PG. 05

Warm Up This Winter

Discover the ultimate recipe for crockpot hot cocoa and homemade marshmallows—perfect for cold days and holiday gatherings.

PG. 12

Letters from LEADERS

Kim Grellner - VP Marketing Sales & Service



A Season of Gratitude and Connection

The holiday season is a time for reflection, gratitude, and celebration. As the year comes to a close, we're thankful for the connections we've built, the progress we've made, and the trust you place in us as your cooperative.

This October, we celebrated our 71st Cooperative Month—a moment to reflect on the cooperative model and its unique ability to empower communities. During our Annual Employee Meeting, our team came together to learn, collaborate, and honor the milestones we've achieved this year. These moments remind us why we do what we do: to serve the 80 communities in our network, now connected by over 11,000 miles of fiber. Since 1953, we've returned over \$153 million in patronage to our members, highlighting one of the many benefits of being part of a cooperative.

The holidays also bring increased online activity, making cybersecurity more important than ever. Whether shopping for gifts or connecting with loved ones, remember these key tips:

- **Beware of phishing scams.** Be cautious of unsolicited messages or deals that seem too good to be true.
- **Prioritize secure transactions.** Shop only on trusted websites and use secure payment methods.
- **Strengthen your defenses.** Use strong, unique passwords and enable multi-factor authentication.
- **Keep everything updated.** Ensure your devices have the latest software and security patches.

We remain committed to helping you stay connected and safe as we look forward to 2024 and beyond. Thank you for being a vital part of our cooperative's success this year. From all of us at Pioneer, we wish you a joyful holiday season filled with connection, celebration, and hope for the future.

Welcome to GoPioneer!

Our mission is to help the communities of Pioneer learn, evolve and move forward in the ever-changing world of technology.

We welcome feedback, story ideas, or any questions relating to this magazine, previous articles, or even your personal inquiries.

Baffled by your teen's obsession with emojis? Confused about why you get WiFi in the garage but not in your bedroom? Let us know! This magazine is just as much yours as ours, and we are excited to help you become more adept in the tech world.

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Topic of December 2024:

The Impact of Technology on Connection and Growth

In this edition of GoPioneer, we explore how technology is transforming the ways we connect, grow, and thrive. From dating apps and parasocial relationships to the ethics of deepfake technology, we dive into the innovations shaping our lives and communities.

PS. Happy Holidays from the Pioneer family! As we look ahead to 2025, we'd love to hear your story ideas—check out page 6 to share your thoughts and help us make next year even better!

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SWIPE, FOLLOW, CONNECT

The Evolution of Relationships in a Tech-Driven World

Technology has changed the way we do so many things... including how we form and maintain relationships. From dating apps, to online gaming buddies, all the way to virtual companions—the digital age has reshaped human connection in ways we (probably) didn't imagine. Whether you use technology to foster your romantic relationship, build emotional bonds with AI, or follow influencers, there's no question that the way we interact with each other has evolved.

One of the most significant ways we've witnessed this change has been through the creation and rise of dating apps. Platforms like Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge have made it easier than ever to connect with people all over the world. It only takes the swipe of a finger for someone to search for a romantic partner—or even new friendships—regardless of where they live. Whether or not these apps are truly used for sparking a romantic relationship is dependent on the person, but the theory behind the apps was to democratize dating and offer people the chance to explore and connect with someone that had similar ideas to them.

Dating apps are just one part of a growing story when it comes to technology and relationships. Recently, the rise of AI virtual companions, such as Replika, has added a new layer to human relationships. These AI-driven apps are designed to provide companionship and emotional support, learning from user interactions to offer personalized conversations... kind of like an IRL (in real life) friend. The idea of forming a bond with AI is questionable to some, but when studies, such as one done in 2023 by A/B Consulting find that one in three Americans are lonely... well, some might argue it might be necessary. It's an interesting connection, but not one of the only interesting connections we see today.

Parasocial relationships have become a more pressing and complex issue over the last decade or so. Parasocial relationships are one-sided connections people form with online personalities, celebrities, and influencers. Thanks to social media, fans can follow their favorite creators closely and it can lead to them feeling like they know them personally, and often lead to them crossing boundaries with people who likely don't even know they exist.

As we jump into these technology-driven relationships over the following pages, we'll explore how technology influences the way we form connections.

The **Debate** Around Dating Apps

Since their rise in the early 2010s, platforms like Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge have reshaped how people meet and connect. Once seen as an innovative way to meet potential partners, dating apps have now become a staple for single people worldwide, with millions of people swiping, matching, and chatting every day.

As of 2023, 320 million users worldwide are active on dating apps, with Tinder being in the lead with over 30 billion matches since its launch in 2012. Some argue that these apps have made dating more accessible and efficient, allowing users to meet people beyond their usual social circles. Location, convenience, and ease of use have made these apps incredibly popular, especially for younger generations. However, while these apps have grown the pool of dating partners, there's still the Big Question: do dating apps actually help people find meaningful relationships?

According to a Pew Research survey found that one out of ten partnered adults have found a long-term partner or married someone they met on a dating app which... doesn't seem all that crazy impressive. However, when you consider that's out of 320 million users, that brings us up to 32 million meaningful lasting relationships were brought together by the apps, which sounds far more impactful. Still, critics will argue differently.

Some believe that dating apps, particularly those like Tinder, are contributing to the rise of hook up culture. With ease of access to countless potential partners, some view dating apps as a platform for casual encounters, rather than building long-term relationships. The swipe feature in particular sparks this concern, because it encourages fast, surface-level judgements that often prioritize physical attraction over deeper compatibility.

Many younger users believe that this has made dating harder, because it's prolonging hook up culture and creating decision fatigue. Others feel pressured to keep searching for someone "better," rather than committing to one person that they've matched with, which leads to an endless cycle of swiping and shallow connections.

There's also the problem of anonymity. Sure, they have your photo and a few details (maybe too many... like where you work and live...), but there's still an anonymous side to dating apps. Without knowing a person IRL, the consequences seem lesser, which often leads to things like ghosting, where one person disappears from the conversation without explanation; one-stop dates where one person uses the other for a free meal, then never speaks to them again; and many other unique acts. For those that sign on to dating apps for a genuine relationship, this impersonal nature can lead to frustration, disappointment, and disconnection.

At the end of the day, dating apps are just tools. How they're used depends on the person behind the profile, but that doesn't make the benefits OR consequences of their existence any less real or complicated.

From Punch Cards to *Swipe Right*

The Evolution of Modern Matchmaking

1960s



Computer-Based Matchmaking

The first computer matchmaking services, like 'Operation Match,' used university computers to pair people based on their personal preferences.

1995



Rise of Online Dating

Match.com launches as the first online dating platform, offering singles a new way to find love on the internet.

2009



Geolocation Dating

Grindr pioneers location-based dating apps, allowing users to meet people nearby using GPS technology.

2012



Swipe Culture

Tinder introduces its swipe-right and swipe-left functionality, revolutionizing how users browse potential matches.

2020s



AI Companions and Virtual Relationships

AI-based virtual companions like Replika become part of the modern dating landscape, offering emotional support and conversation.

Understanding Parasocial Relationships

Believe it or not, you might already be familiar with parasocial interactions. Have you ever shouted at your TV during a sports game, hoping to “advise” a player who clearly can’t hear you? Or maybe you’ve laughed along with a sitcom character’s jokes, feeling like you’re part of the scene? This is a classic example of a parasocial interaction. When these interactions deepen over time, they can evolve into parasocial relationships—one-sided connections that individuals form with celebrities, influencers, or even fictional characters.

Parasocial relationships were first defined in the 1950s by psychologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. They observed that audiences of television and radio shows often felt a sense of connection to media personalities.

Today, social media has boosted these dynamics, making it easy for fans to know intimate details about influencers’ lives. In fact, a study by Thriveworks estimates that over half of Americans have experienced a parasocial relationship, though only a fraction readily acknowledge it. Why are these bonds so common? Psychologists think it’s because we naturally respond to familiar faces on screens as though they’re real people in our lives, creating a sense of connection that feels personal. But for many people, especially adolescents, these relationships serve as a “safe space” to explore feelings and identities.

In a 2017 study, researchers found that young people can use

these connections to develop a sense of self and autonomy. Viewing these relationships from a safe emotional distance allows them to explore different aspects of identity without the vulnerability that real-life relationships might have. Dr. Lynn Zubernis, a psychologist who has researched fandoms and parasocial relationships, has discussed how people, particularly those in fandoms, often emulate characters they admire as a way to explore aspects of their own identity and values.

Here are some of the top reasons someone might develop a parasocial bond:

Accessibility

Social media provides 24/7 access to the lives of influencers and celebrities.

Loneliness and Escapism

Parasocial bonds can offer emotional comfort, especially to people feeling isolated or stressed.

Reliability and Consistency

Influencers share content regularly, creating a routine for their audience that fosters familiarity.

These relationships can feel meaningful, but they are inherently one-sided, which can have both positive and negative effects on mental health and self-perception.

How Parasocial Bonds Form

Initial Exposure



You begin watching or following an influencer, celebrity, or media personality.

Regular Consumption of Content



Indicates ongoing engagement, such as watching content daily or following updates.

Perceived Intimacy



Symbolizes the development of an emotional connection or sense of familiarity with the influencer.

The Mental Health Effects *Parasocial Bonds*

Parasocial relationships can bring comfort, connection, and even confidence, but they also have complex effects on mental health. These one-sided bonds can help individuals feel supported and motivated, especially in times of loneliness, but they also influence self-perception, social behavior, and emotional well-being.

When it comes to the positives, parasocial relationships can be a source of confidence, particularly for people with lower self-esteem or those who tend to avoid close relationships. Connecting with a character or influencer who embodies qualities they admire can encourage them to adopt these traits in their own lives. It's widely understood in psychology that people often look to admired public figures and fictional characters as sources of inspiration, using these figures to help shape their identities and personal values. Research suggests that these connections can make people feel closer to their ideal self, providing a sense of encouragement and security. For adolescents, parasocial bonds offer a way to navigate feelings and

identity safely, allowing them to explore relationships and personal growth in a controlled setting. However, parasocial relationships also come with potential downsides.

Relying heavily on parasocial connections can lead to feelings of inadequacy, as people compare themselves to the curated lives of their idolized figures. For some, these bonds might even discourage real-life social interactions, leading to social isolation. There's also the fall out when a public figure or character behaves in a way that disappoints or challenges fan expectations... it can feel like a betrayal, triggering real emotional responses.

Parasocial relationships illustrate the complexities of technology-driven connections. For some, they offer a valuable source of inspiration and emotional support; for others, they might lead to frustration or detachment from real-life relationships. Regardless, they highlight the profound ways in which technology influences our relationships and emotional lives.

Emotional Investment



Reflects growing care and attachment, where the viewer feels genuinely affected by the influencer's life.

Formation of Parasocial Bond



Represents the solidified one-sided bond where the viewer feels a sense of loyalty and friendship.

DEEPFAKES 101:

Understanding the Technology and Its Implications

Deepfakes have become a buzzword in recent years, captivating public interest and sparking ethical debates. But what exactly are deepfakes? Simply put, deepfakes are highly realistic and manipulated videos, images, or audio clips created using artificial intelligence (AI) to make it look like someone said or did something they never actually did. While the technology holds exciting possibilities for entertainment and media, it also raises serious ethical questions.

Deepfake technology relies on a subset of AI called deep learning, which uses algorithms to study vast amounts of data and replicate certain features. Here's a basic breakdown of how they're made:

To create a deepfake, developers need a large dataset of photos or videos of the person they want to mimic. This could include images from social media, news footage, or any publicly available media.

Using Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), AI systems train themselves to map the target's facial movements, expressions, and voice. GANs have two components—one generates synthetic content, while the other evaluates its authenticity until the output appears indistinguishable from real footage.

After the system has learned the target's appearance and voice, creators can overlay this data onto another person's face or body. With advanced software, the result is a seamless video or image that's nearly impossible to distinguish from reality.

Deepfakes have some pretty crazy uses, especially in the entertainment world:

- Deepfake technology can be used to de-age actors, create virtual characters, or even allow actors to appear in scenes they weren't physically present for.
- Companies can use deepfake tech to localize ads, making a single spokesperson appear to speak in different languages for international campaigns.
- Deepfakes have even been used to "resurrect" historical figures for educational purposes, allowing viewers to experience history more vividly.

However, while deepfakes offer creative possibilities, they also come with significant ethical concerns. From privacy violations to political manipulation, the potential for abuse is high. As deepfake technology becomes more accessible, the ethical and legal frameworks struggle to keep up, leaving individuals, companies, and governments vulnerable.

Key Ethical Concerns

Privacy Violations and Consent

Deepfakes can infringe on a person's right to privacy. In some cases, people's faces are used without their permission, creating content they would never have consented to. This raises questions about personal agency and control over one's own image.

Political Manipulation and Misinformation

Deepfakes pose a unique threat to political stability. With the ability to fabricate videos of political figures saying or doing controversial things, deepfakes could be used to influence elections, spread disinformation, or incite unrest. This potential for manipulation makes it difficult for the public to trust digital media, undermining democracy and social cohesion.

Harassment and Exploitation

Unfortunately, deepfakes have been weaponized to create explicit content without the subject's consent, often targeting women and public figures. The harm caused by these videos can be devastating, leading to emotional distress and reputational damage.

HOW TO SPOT A DEEPFAKE

Unnatural Eye Movement

Deepfakes often struggle with natural eye movement or blinking.

Odd Lighting and Shadows

Inaccurate shadows or lighting can give away deepfakes.

Inconsistent Lip Syncing

Sometimes, the mouth movements don't perfectly match the words being spoken.

Uncanny Valley Effect

Deepfakes may look almost human but often feel subtly "off," which can be unsettling.

Cheers to the Holidays and Your **Great Ideas!**

As the year comes to a close, we want to take a moment to thank you for being part of the Pioneer family. Your support inspires us to continue bringing innovative technology and meaningful connections to our community.

This holiday season, we wish you joy, relaxation, and memorable moments with your loved ones. From all of us at Pioneer, Happy Holidays and a prosperous New Year!

As we plan GoPioneer Magazine for 2025, we want to hear from you! Is there a topic you've always wanted to explore? A tech trend you're curious about? Content you feel like we're missing? Your ideas and suggestions can help us create content that speaks to you.

We've created a handy-dandy little form for you to submit your ideas anonymously at GoPioneer.com/community/gopioneer-magazine. Of course, you're also always welcome to email us your ideas at GoPioneerOK@ptci.com.

Thank you for being a valued part of our community. We look forward to hearing your thoughts and making 2024 our best year yet—together!

Happy Holidays



Happy New Year!

***Your voice
matters! Send
your ideas in!***



From a Chicken Coop to 21,000 Square Feet

From Modest Beginnings to a Pillar of Industry in Western Oklahoma and beyond

The Beginning of Martens Machine Shop

What began in a modified chicken coop in rural Oklahoma has grown into a 21,000-square-foot facility that serves customers in industries ranging from agriculture to wind energy. Martens Machine Shop has evolved over decades, adapting to industry changes while staying rooted in its commitment to quality and service.

The story starts with Henry Martens, father to current owner Paul Martens and grandfather to Jake Martens.

"My grandfather was a businessman. He moved houses with steam engines and ran threshing crews, and had the first Ford dealership here," Paul said. "He had a small machine shop in Fairview in the early 1900s with a few machine tools." Paul's father, Henry, continued to move houses for many years.

In 1974, Henry was approached by Waldon Equipment, who said the area could use a weld shop. Tired of being on the road moving houses, Henry decided to start a machine shop.

"So, my dad, brother and I —only 15 at the time and got to skip a day of school—drove to Oklahoma City and bought some welders and grinders and started Martens machine shop in a modified chicken coop," Paul said.

The shop, located 100 yards east of their current location, started small but laid the foundation for what would become a local institution.

A Legacy of Growth and Innovation

By 1980, the shop had outgrown its original location and moved into what would later become the red shop on the north end of Fairview. Over the years, the family business continued to grow and diversify.

Like his father before him, Jake grew up working in the shop, learning to weld and operate machinery from an early age.

"Kids went to the city swimming pool and rode bikes in the summer. The first day after school got out in May, I was sweeping floors and running band saws at eight years old," Jake said. "That was when you went to the shop and started working. It was all I'd known."

However, when Jake graduated from Oklahoma State with an engineering degree, his father Paul had different plans for him.

"What I told him is you're going to graduate and you may not come back to the machine shop, and I had three main reasons," Paul said. "Number one, you have to go away. You need to go away from me and you need to go work for someone else and see how they think. Number two, if you ever come back, I want you to bring something new, because if you come back



at a glance

Q+A

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I wanted to be a race car driver. — Paul

Yeah, same! — Jake

We did get to race, we both did, and he still races a lot. — Paul

Steph says there is irony in a school video I did. I said I wanted to be an engineer, and at the time, at five years old, I was going to drive a train. — Jake

on a hard day, what inspires you to get out of bed?

What do you mean 'a hard day'? I mean, I get up and I'm ready to go to the shop every day. I'm always excited to see what the day will bring at the shop. — Paul

I mean, I'm the first one here. I turn the lights on. I worked corporate world, and I've told Steph that the worst day at our machine shop was an average day working for someone else and working in a corporate company. — Jake

Photo: From a chicken coop in 1974 [upper right] to a state-of-the-art facility today, Martens Machine Shop continues its legacy.



FOCUS ON. Martens Machine Shop



right after you graduate, you'll just do the same thing. You'll just repair rusted out dumpsters and build bail spikes. You got to bring something new. And number three, you are inequitably, unconditionally, not obligated to come back to this machine shop and take over. Period."

Jake would spend 13 years working for various global and national hydraulic companies, eventually ending up as a VP of sales. In 2022, his company would decide it was time for some "restructuring." Jake felt it was the perfect time to return to the family business. When he did, he brought not just growth but a new direction for innovation

"When I came back, within 30 days, we were pouring concrete and adding on," Jake said. The expansion wasn't just about physical growth—it was about evolving the shop's services to meet modern industry demands. "My phone was already ringing with global companies asking, 'Where are you? Can you service us?'"

The company's ability to adapt to new challenges and incorporate innovation into their work has been key to their success.

"We don't say no to much," Jake said. "We get a lot of work from wind farms across the central U.S.. They come to us with problems that other companies say can't be fixed, and we build custom parts or repair equipment that's been out of production for years."

Their reputation has even attracted customers from far beyond Oklahoma.

"We have wind contractors driving all the way from Illinois to Fairview to have us build parts," Jake said. "And I say, man, come on, why are you driving all the way out here? And they're like 'hey, I travel all over this country and there aren't a lot of you. I can just draw something on a piece of paper, talk to you, and you guys say 'we'll have that next week.'"

The Heart of the Business

It's the people at Martens Machine Shop that make it successful.

Jake and Paul are clear that their employees are the backbone of the business.

"Our employees are the backbone, they're everything," Paul said. "Leadership and culture are a big deal here. We treat everyone with respect, and in return, we expect respect and hard work from our team. If you show up to work, keep your mouth shut, and are respectful, you're going to learn a lot at Martens."

Martens Machine Shop prides itself on fostering a family-like culture.

"There's no profanity, no practical jokes, no picking on each other," Jake added. "We've built an environment where everyone feels valued and safe. Our welding shop and facilities are all air-conditioned and heated with geothermal energy because we take care of our people."



This approach has paid off in terms of employee loyalty and retention.

"Our shop manager started here when he was 17, and now he's 33. His father even works here," Jake said. "We have several father-son teams working here, and many of our employees have been with us for 20-plus years, so we have a big tenure."

Looking Ahead

Despite the ongoing growth, Paul and Jake emphasize that the shop's mission has remained the same: innovation, integrity, and customer satisfaction.

"We help a lot of people who are broken down and don't know where to go," Paul said. "Our mission is simple: Do what we say we're going to do, treat people fairly, and stand behind our work."

For Martens Machine Shop, innovation isn't just about keeping up with trends; it's about constantly finding ways to do better and serve a wider range of customers.

"Innovation for us is figuring out how to solve problems when others can't," Jake said. "It's about keeping things moving, whether it's a farmer's broken piece of equipment, a swing set that needs a hinge, or a wind turbine that's been out of production for years."

As Paul and his wife, Lori, look to retire in the next three-five years, Jake and his wife, Stephanie, have begun taking on more responsibilities at Martens.

"We're excited about the next 30 years," Jake said. "We've got a great crew, and we're continuing to add passionate people who want to learn and grow with us."

Photo: The machine shop division inside Martens Machine Shop includes CNC lathes/mill and manual lathes/mill.

with Paul and Jake

What would be the one meal you could eat every single day and never get bored

Verenika (Or Verenki) Casserole. — *Jake*

That's an ethnic Mennonite dish. It's a pasta cassorole. — *Paul*

It's a pasta casserole with cottage cheese, bacon and pasta. — *Jake*

Sunday Roast and Potatoes. That'd be mine. — *Paul*

What moment are you most proud of?

Marrying my wife. I was older when I got married, and she'll be the first one to tell you, I was older and I had my ways, and I knew what I was going to do—and she has been the best partner. She's been there whether we're racing sprint cars in Wisconsin this weekend, or we're moving to Broken Arrow. — *Jake*

Raising kids with integrity. In today's culture and the way life is going, raising children with excellent work ethic, integrity, truthful, faithful to their spouse... you can drop the ball on raising Children pretty easy. That's mine. — *Paul*

Pioneer's Annual Employee Meeting:



Pioneer Employees getting together for a yearly team photo following the annual employee meeting

Every year, we come together as a team to reflect, learn, and grow because it's not just about staying informed—it's about embracing the heart of what we do: **Connect What Matters!**

On Thursday, October 24, over 400 Pioneer Telephone employees gathered in Kingfisher, Oklahoma, for our annual all-day meeting. This tradition has always brought important updates to our employees. This year, it came with a special twist—hands-on learning.

To kick off the day, the leadership team emphasized the importance of reflecting on the progress made over the past year, including reaching key financial milestones and achieving installation and service goals. They also outlined ambitious objectives for the coming year, focusing on expanding the fiber network and enhancing the customer experience.

After lunch, employees made their way to the rodeo fields in Kingfisher for a unique opportunity to get hands-on with fiber installation. This "install rodeo" was more than just a demonstration—it was a chance for employees to experience firsthand the work that brings fast, reliable fiber internet to our customers.

"We wanted every employee to experience firsthand what lies

at the core of what we do," General Manager Blake Callaham said. "It's not just about technology—it's about the effort, precision, and teamwork required to build something that truly serves our customers. Working side-by-side with our operations team today reminded us of all the dedication it takes to deliver the high-quality network our communities depend on."

Our annual meeting isn't just about business—it's a celebration of Pioneer's mission and the people who make it happen. It's a chance to step into each other's roles, understand the dedication behind the scenes, and remember that every single one of us plays a vital part in creating the services our communities rely on.

"At the core of what we do is a commitment to serving our customers with excellence," said Callaham. "Today wasn't just about learning how we install fiber—it was about understanding the dedication and teamwork that go into every project. No matter our role, we all play a part in building something meaningful for our communities."

This annual October tradition isn't just an event—it's a reminder of who we are, what we stand for, and how we're Connecting What Matters year after year.

CONNECTING W

Celebrating Growth, Goals, and Teamwork



Lynn Stout, Lead Outside Operations, demonstrates fiber installation techniques during the 'Install Rodeo,' part of the employee meeting's hands-on education experience.

Trey Gaines demonstrating fiber splicing to employees Johanna Adams [left], Janel Parish, [center], and Patricia Smith [right].



Matt Melvin [left] and Levi Hunt demonstrating how fiber is blown into orange conduit.



WHAT MATTERS

Meet Our PIONEER SCHOLARS



Lanie Bowles • District 1 • Buffalo

Lanie Bowles is an Accounting major at the University of Central Oklahoma, with plans to graduate in May 2026.

Lanie's journey to her current major wasn't straightforward. She initially pursued nursing for three semesters before deciding it wasn't the right fit. A job in an insurance office helped her discover her passion for the analytical side of business, which eventually led her to Accounting.

Now, as an intern in the UCO Office for Advancement, Lanie works alongside the Senior Director of Operations, gaining hands-on experience in the accounting world.

"With this job I have gotten to see a glimpse into the accounting world and I have loved it. I am very analytical so accounting was kind of a perfect fit," Lanie said.

After graduation, Lanie plans to obtain her CPA license and work as an accountant. She's most excited about building a career that allows her to

travel and explore the world.

Outside of school and work, Lanie enjoys spending time with her family and friends, going to the movies, shopping, and getting her nails done. Balancing work and school has been her greatest challenge, but she credits an open mind and the belief that "everything happens for a reason" for helping her find her way.

The Pioneer Scholarship will help ease her financial stress, allowing her to focus more on her academic and professional goals.

Lanie advises future college students to stay flexible and let life lead them.

"If you would've asked me a year ago if I'd be here today, I would've said there was no way because I was so set on nursing school," Lanie said. "Since then, I have been living by the saying, 'Everything happens for a reason.'"



Ember Black • District 6 • Okarche

Ember Black is a Nutritional Sciences/Allied Health major at Oklahoma State University, aiming to graduate in 2025.

With a passion for helping others and making a difference, Ember chose her major as a step toward achieving her dream of attending Physician Assistant (PA) school and specializing in pediatrics. Her goal is to provide reassurance and solutions for parents and their children during challenging times.

"I want to help make parents and their children more at ease when they're unsure of what to do next and help them find a solution to their problem," Ember said.

Ember's undergraduate journey has been marked by meaningful involvement in Greek life, volunteering with "Into the Streets," and conducting undergraduate research for the Nutritional Sciences department — an accomplishment she's especially proud of.

"What excites me most about my future is the opportunity to ease people's minds and help find solutions their problems. I'm eager to get out there and gain real-world experience," she said.

When she's not focused on academics or volunteering, Ember enjoys photography and spending quality time with friends and family. However, balancing everything hasn't always been easy. Her biggest challenge has been learning to go easier on herself.

"My advice to future college students would be to take it easy on yourself and have fun. When you have setbacks, don't give up — always keep chasing your goals," Ember said.

The Pioneer Scholarship helps Ember focus on her classes without the added financial stress, helping her to stay on track toward her goals. Looking ahead, Ember hopes to create a lasting impact in her field by comforting families and solving problems, one patient at a time.

You can learn about more of our 2024-2025 scholars in
the next issue of GoPioneer Magazine!

Crockpot Hot Cocoa with Vanilla Bean Marshmallows

Crockpot Hot Cocoa

ingredients

1 1/2 c.	heavy whipping cream
14 oz.	sweetened condensed milk
6 c.	milk
1 1/2 tsp.	vanilla extract
2 c.	chocolate chips milk chocolate OR semi-sweet

1. Add all ingredients to a crockpot and whisk until well combined.
2. Cover and cook on low for 2 hours, stirring occasionally, until chocolate is melted and well incorporated.
3. Whisk well before using a ladle to serve.

Vanilla Bean Marshmallows

ingredients

3 packets unflavored gelatin	1/4 tsp. salt
1 c. water	4 tsp. vanilla bean paste
1 1/2 c. sugar	powdered sugar
1 c. light corn syrup	

1. Pour 1/2 cup of water into a small bowl. Sprinkle the packages of gelatin over the water. Give it a whisk. Let the mixture sit while you make the sugar syrup.
2. Combine the sugar, corn syrup, salt, and 1/2 cup water in a saucepan. Cook over medium heat, do not stir this mixture.
3. Once the sugar dissolves, raise the heat to medium-high and cook until candy thermometer reaches 240 degrees.
4. Put the gelatin mixture and vanilla bean paste into the bowl of a stand mixer using the whisk attachment.
5. Slowly pour the sugar mixture into the mixer while on low speed.
6. Whip on high speed for 10 to 15 minutes. It will have gained volume and turned bright white.
7. Dust the bottom of a 9x13 pan with powdered sugar. Be very generous with the sugar, or you will never get the marshmallows out of the pan. Pour the marshmallow out and smooth.
8. Let the pan sit out, uncovered overnight.
9. The next day, cut out using a sharp knife or cookie cutter. Dip the knife or cookie cutter into powdered sugar so that you can get them out. Dust the marshmallows again, so they don't stick together.



Homemade Cocoa and Marshmallows
made by Blair!

Where did you find this recipe?

"I stumbled upon both of these recipes online as I was looking for something fun and different to take to holiday gatherings."

What is your favorite thing about this recipe?

"My favorite thing is that the hot cocoa couldn't be simpler and the marshmallows really bring the WOW factor."

Do you have any tips and tricks for preparing this recipe?

"Don't be intimidated by the marshmallows. I think you'll find the recipe to be much easier than you'd think. Trust me, just make the marshmallows."

- **Customer Service Representative,
Blair Hedrick**



25+ YEARS ANNIVERSARIES

Don & Karen Spradlin - Grandfield
Celebrated their 50th Wedding Anniversary July 27th. They have two children, and four grandchildren.

Gail & Darlene Kirk - Tipton
Celebrated their 66th Wedding Anniversary September 13th.
They have three children, five grandchildren, and six great-grandchild.

Ray & Virginia Walker - Frederick
Celebrated their 68th Wedding Anniversary September 23rd. They have a son, a daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren.

Tom & Barbara Schiska - Canton
Celebrated their 42nd Wedding Anniversary September 25th.
They have three children, seven grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

Michael & Mary Ann Schaefer - Okarche
Celebrated their 67th Wedding Anniversary September 28th.
They have four children, eight grandchildren, and 15 great-grandchildren.

Cliff & Jean Buckminster - Lahoma
Celebrated their 60th Wedding Anniversary November 13th.
They have three children, three children-in-laws, and three grandchildren.

Steve & Ivetta Severance - Tuttle
Celebrated their 40th Wedding Anniversary December 24th.
They have four daughters, five grandchildren, and a great-grandchild.

Gary & Suzan Brawner - Dover
Celebrate their 50th Wedding Anniversary December 27th.
They have two children and five grandchildren.

Roger & Wendy West - Woodward
Celebrate their 25th Wedding Anniversary February 22nd.
They have five children and two grandchildren.

Happy Anniversary from all of us at Pioneer!

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