

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

VALLEY RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.

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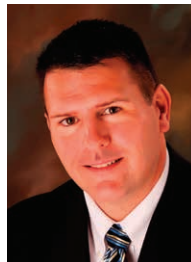
Corporate Office Hours
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7 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.

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Office Hours
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Democratic Member Control – and Cake



DOUG ROLES

SOME WORK AND RECREATION ACTIVITIES have been slower than others to bounce back from the COVID-19 pandemic. While most things have returned to a semblance of normalcy, events that recur on an extended schedule — like Valley Rural Electric Cooperative's (REC) series of nine district nominating dinner meetings — have taken longer to get back on track simply because of the calendar.

If you're one of our members in Districts 7, 8 or 9 and you can't remember going to a February nominating meeting, you're in plenty of company! It's been a few years — since 2019, actually. But you have an opportunity to attend this year. (See page 14D for details.)

Valley REC embraces the cooperative principle of “democratic member control” by having our consumer-members elect fellow co-op members to our nine-person board of directors. Our territory is divided into nine director districts, and a member from each serves on the board.

Each year, three seats are open for election. Board members are chosen through an at-large election at our April annual meeting. Members attending the annual meeting cast ballots to fill the three open seats, regardless of the district in which they live. For members to have their names placed on the ballot, they must be nominated at the nominating meeting for their district.

That process has been in place since 1975 and has worked well for the co-op. However, the pandemic forced the cancellation of in-person meetings for two years.

In 2020, the co-op held its usual sit-down dinner nominating meetings at the usual fire hall and social hall locations for Districts 1, 3 and 5. At that time, restrictions on gatherings were still in the future for our area.

The 2021 meetings, which would have been for members in Districts 2, 4 and 6, were canceled. Members interested in having their name placed on the ballot were nominated through a signature-gathering process. That was also the case in 2022 for Districts 7, 8 and 9.

In February 2024, members in Districts 2, 4 and 6 got back to normal with in-person meetings. And next month, members in Districts 7, 8 and 9 will have the same opportunity.

Valley REC moved to the dinner-meeting format 36 years ago. Before that, attendance at the strictly business meetings had been dwindling, and the thinking was if we persuaded members with food, they'd attend. It worked. Members had a good meal — the main course could be ham, turkey or swiss steak along with a variety of pies and cake — and buoyed that bedrock co-op principle of democratic member control.

In addition to the meal and fellowship, the district nominating meetings offer members an opportunity to get an update directly from cooperative leaders and a chance to ask questions about your electric distribution business. When it's your year for a meeting, be sure to exercise that co-op principle, and don't forget dessert. 🍰

DOUG ROLES

VICE PRESIDENT OF MEMBER SERVICES

Faith, Hard Work Turn Skincare Dilemma into Soap Business

DOUG ROLES, VICE PRESIDENT, MEMBER SERVICES

THE MANY SMALL BUSINESSES IN Valley Rural Electric Cooperative's (REC) territory all have their own tales of how they got started. The story of Jacks Mountain Soap Shoppe, part of the Mennonite business community around McVeytown, parallels the well-known Old Testament passage about the wife who "looked well to the ways of her household."

In Proverbs 31, a woman is praised for seeing the potential in a field,

purchasing it with money she earned by weaving and then investing in the planting of a vineyard. It's the kind of business acumen entrepreneurs of all backgrounds can appreciate — recognizing an opportunity. An empty field can become a vineyard. Or a child's allergy can lead to a cottage industry of unique skincare products.

"I started in 2014, on a small scale in my kitchen," recalls Sharon Dirks, Jacks Mountain founder and a Valley

REC member in Mifflin County for 14 years. "I was looking for something for my son for his skin allergies. My cousin asked me if I had considered making all-natural homemade soap."

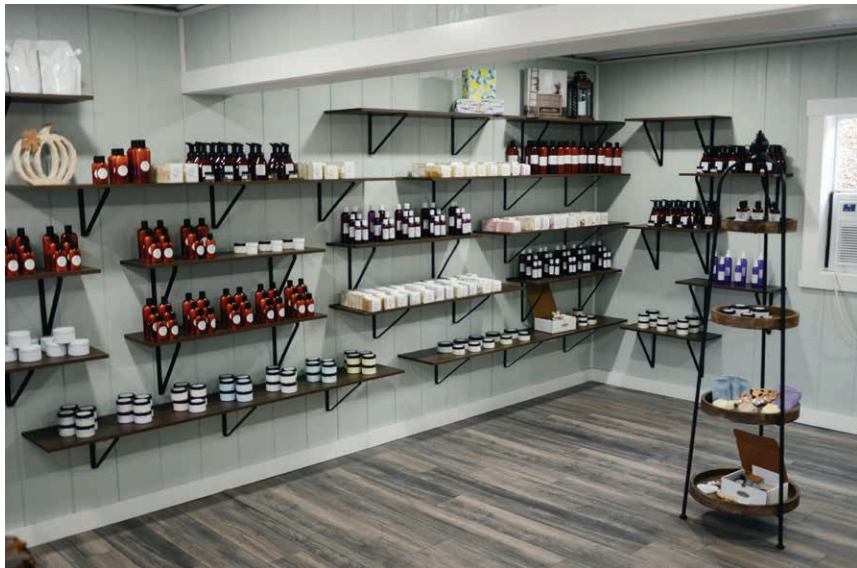
At first, Sharon wasn't interested. She liked her national-brand products. And she remembered soapmaking as something her mother did the old-fashioned way with animal tallow, a process that required a lot of work. There's a lot of stirring to get ingredients to "trace" (when oils and lye emulsify and can no longer separate). Then the soap must cure for several weeks.

But she gave it a try, starting with two basic family recipes she tweaked over time. Her son's skin cleared up and soon the whole family — Sharon and husband, Anthony; Jasper, 18; and Cambriah, 14 — began using the products.

"We all loved it; there's no cleaner feeling than using a homemade bar of soap," Sharon raves. "Now, we wouldn't even think about using other soap!"



A NEW BATCH: Sharon Dirks, owner of Jacks Mountain Soap Shoppe, displays a batch of pet shampoo mini bars. Below: A variety of skincare products for people and pets are available at her retail space near McVeytown.



Fulfilling a need

Sharon's goal is to make a full-time, family-sustaining income. As she began building her business, Anthony, who works at a local farm and garden store, noticed some long-term health challenges getting worse, raising concerns about how long he could continue to work full-time. A family friend suggested that, with the soap business, perhaps God was providing the means to compensate for a reduction in the family income. Sharon believes it. And she says she's learned a lot of business lessons along the way, including when to take on some help.

Jacks Mountain now has two part-time employees. The business is on

Facebook and Instagram, and Sharon now has someone who manages the shop's social media presence.

"I finally hired that out, too. I can't do it all," she acknowledges, adding that she previously hired someone for her bookkeeping.

She also applied for a business license, an experience she refers to as "not horrible."

After starting the business in her kitchen and selling from a small store, the Dirks moved the operation four years ago into their two-car garage adjacent to the house on School House Road. Last year, Sharon added a Mountain Road Structures shed beside the garage, creating an additional 400 square feet of store space.

In addition to bar soaps, Jacks Mountain offers bath bombs, lotions, deodorants, facial cleansers and pet shampoo. Early on, Sharon made her products available on consignment in several local stores and on Etsy, an online marketplace for handmade goods.

As the business grew, she teamed up with Exeplere, LLC, a Lewistown-based web services company, to create a website. Online sales now account for more than half her business. Sharon says over the years she has "paid out the snout" for marketing but understands the need to promote her business. Marketing,

production and online sales were all foreign before her foray into soaps.

Next steps

Sharon, from Belleville, and Anthony, from Kansas, met at a church service while Sharon was visiting friends and family in Kansas. Prior to becoming an entrepreneur, Sharon worked primarily in the home, raising their two children and periodically taking on house-cleaning jobs.

"I definitely never dreamed I would do this, never in a hundred years did I think I would do this," Sharon says. "I've shipped all over the 50 states time and again. I do sell quite a bit into Canada, too."

Sharon's next goal is to purchase a larger slab mold and cutter to increase production. Her biggest challenge is the price of shipping. And of her biggest reward, she says, "I love getting feedback that people absolutely love my products."

Traditionally, soap is made from wood ash lye and animal fat. Recipes now vary widely and can include a myriad of scents. Jacks Mountain uses oils, such as palm oil, coconut oil and olive oil. The business doesn't use dyes, formaldehyde or other chemicals.

Sharon is proud that her products are different from the mainstream. She says one of the things she's learned

from a trade group is to "charge your worth." And she politely but firmly declines to share her recipes, if asked.

"I did a lot of online research, a lot of trial and error," Sharon explains. "You can't even pronounce most of the ingredients in commercial soaps."

Product quality is at the heart of Sharon's business model. She uses the household's well water and a water softener for the products. Distilled water is used for facial products and lotions. Jacks Mountain offers gift sets and carries soy candles, made by Sharon's friend, Rita Peaster of Georgia, and by Sharon's niece, Sheila Peachey, also of Belleville.

"They both burn very nicely," she says of the candles. "I've tested them."

Sharon is quick to point out that traditional bar soap, which is cured longer, does not rapidly deteriorate, giving more value to consumers. She advises customers to keep their soap on a rack to avoid dampness, which shortens the life of the product.

Summing up her business approach, Sharon says she purposely stays amazed and grateful that people choose her products over the hundreds of other options available.

"You can't give up right away," she says. "You'll get to a certain point in your business where you are like, 'Am I going to put more into this?' You've got to have faith. That's the long and the short of it." 📌



MEASURING UP: Employee Alana Renno of Mattawana fills bottles of body wash at Jacks Mountain Soap Shoppe. At right: Jacks Mountain Soap Shoppe is located at 82 School House Road, McVeytown.



Meet Your Employees

DOUG ROLES, VICE PRESIDENT, MEMBER SERVICES

THIS MONTH, WE HIGHLIGHT LINDSEY Weikert, who joined Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) as a cashier and consumer services representative in November 2022.

She lives in Hartslog Valley, near McConnellstown, with her husband, Matt, and their two children — Luke, 2, and Macy, 4 months. Their home is served by Valley REC lines.

A 2007 graduate of Tussey Mountain High School, Lindsey is from the Saxton area. She holds an associate degree in dental hygiene from Allegheny College of Maryland in Cumberland, Md. In 2012, she completed a bachelor's degree in healthcare administration and management through Colorado State University's Global Campus. Lindsey worked from 2010 to 2015 as a dental hygienist at Modern Family Dentistry in Huntingdon.

"I was cleaning teeth and providing preventive procedures," Lindsey says. "I was doing fluoride treatments and X-rays."

From 2015 to 2022, she worked for Donald Marks Family Dentistry in State College. Her time there also included serving as the practice's

occupational safety and health administration officer. She ordered supplies and worked in "re-care," the scheduling of patients for follow-up treatment.

Lindsey says one of the things she enjoyed about the work was getting to know patients. She has continued to provide dental care to children through her work as Bald Eagle Area School District's public health dental hygiene practitioner, a position she has held since 2019. On Fridays, she visits the district's five schools.

"I provide screenings and dental education for kindergarten through sixth grade," Lindsey says. "I took college classes for a Level I instructor certificate to work for the district."

While on maternity leave with Luke in 2022, Lindsey learned about employment openings at Valley REC through friends at the co-op's sister cooperative, New Enterprise REC. Lindsey decided to apply because she grew up in a household served by New Enterprise and knew a lot about co-ops and their member-centric



ALL SMILES: Lindsey Weikert works at Valley REC's corporate office as a cashier and consumer services representative.

business model. Her father, Leroy Walls, has been a member of the New Enterprise REC board for many years, serving as its president, and currently is chairman of the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association board.

"Growing up, I had to go to all the New Enterprise annual meetings," Lindsey recalls.

At Valley, Lindsey processes checks and credits member accounts. She also fills in at the front desk of the corporate office, processes invoices for Valley Rural Energy Services (the electrical services arm of Valley REC), and helps co-op members who call or come in with billing questions. Lindsey says she likes the variety her job offers.

"It's never really the same," she says. "I'm two years in and there is still so much to learn. And I'm still able to help people, which is why I originally got into dental hygiene."

With two young children and her work at the co-op and the school district, Lindsey stays busy, and so does Matt. He works for his brother Jim's business, Weikert Excavating. He also runs his own contracting business, Hartslog Contracting, doing residential and concrete work, and he processes and sells firewood.

When they have some downtime, Lindsey and Matt enjoy spending time with family and being outdoors.

"We have a boat, and we like to go to the lake (Raystown)," she says. "We like going for walks."

Lindsey certainly helps her co-workers smile. She's one of the people you can count on. 🍷

