

The Intrepid-DX Group “Dream Rig” Youth Essay Contest

What attracted me to amateur radio?

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On March 13, 2020, schools in Virginia discontinued in-person classes due to the risk of transmitting COVID-19. At that time, I was only 15 years old, and we were sent home indefinitely from school. As the coronavirus outbreak spread, much of the world was forced into panic and lockdown. I began attending school virtually, with no social interactions with my peers and friends. With the pandemic restrictions and developments constantly changing, I started feeling anxious, fearful, and isolated. I shared my feelings with my parents, who challenged me to turn this negative event into a positive one by finding a hobby that would be both enjoyable and educational.

To assist me, my dad gave me a stack of old Popular Mechanics magazines to hopefully spark my interest in building a project. One particular article caught my attention, which was about Astronaut Owen Garriott. In 1983, Garriott flew as a mission specialist aboard Columbia, which was notable for several monumental first events. However, what really caught my attention was that Garriott, the world's first amateur radio station from space, made contacts with land-based amateur radio operators using the call sign W5LFL.

I was astonished to discover that amateur radio operators were able to communicate with astronauts while orbiting the Earth. I spent an entire night watching YouTube videos of amateur radio operators making contact with satellites using simple equipment. The following day, I went to the shed and retrieved my dad's collection of garage sale radios. Among the radios, I found one that was capable of VHF communication. I remembered that a school had successfully contacted an astronaut using VHF, so I decided to use the Radio Shack HTX-202 VHF transceiver to try and do the same. I quickly inserted 6 AA batteries, turned it on, and learned how to program the frequency. After finding an app on my computer that tracked the International Space Station, I used the frequency the schools used for their contact. I stood outside for over a month, listening intently, but I never heard anything.

I wanted to understand why I couldn't hear or speak to the astronauts and what information the amateur radio operators possessed that I was missing. During my online research for answers, I discovered a club offering amateur radio courses on the Zoom media platform. I enrolled and completed the bi-weekly classes course for the technician, did some self-study, and felt ready to take the technician test. Unfortunately, the online course didn't offer online testing, so I went to the ARRL website to find a testing site nearby. After conducting some research, I was able to locate a test center at the Williamsburg Area Amateur Radio Club (WAARC), which was about an hour away. We got in touch with the club and discovered that they were still conducting testing while observing the COVID-19 pandemic safety practices. I remember we took the test outdoors and followed strict facial masking and social distancing protocols, as this occurred during the peak of the pandemic.

Upon my arrival, I received a warm welcome from the club's Volunteer Examiner Coordinator, who introduced me to the entire team and other club members who were present to offer support for the testing. We were assigned seating, received a brief from the VE coordinator, and took the test. I was elated to discover that I had passed my technician exam and was provided with the frequency for the repeater. Even though I was eligible to take the General test, I refused because my sole intention was to contact the International Space Station and have a conversation with an astronaut, which only necessitated a technician license. Initially, my goal was to engage in something unique to pass the time and distract myself during the pandemic, but I was mistaken!

I immediately came home, programmed the club's repeater frequency into the HTX202, and began monitoring it 24/7. I began to associate voices with call signs and monitored the frequencies 24/7, so much so that I ran out of batteries quickly. It took me around five days to receive my call, and when I tried to reach the repeater, I failed because of the low output power of the HTX202 and the distance to the repeater. My dad purchased a 2-meter radio, we connected it to a 12V battery, and we duct-taped an antenna to an extendable paint pole.

My courage had dwindled by the time I was ready to get on the air. I became nervous about using the repeater, and "microphone fright" set in. I remember the invitation by the VEC to contact him if we were having difficulty getting on the air. I contacted him and explained my apprehension, and with some coaxing, I made contact with the WARRC VEC on

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the club's repeater. Immediately after my first contact, several of the monitoring club members made contact with me in quick succession, and the microphone fright faded away.

While chatting on the repeater that day, I received an invitation to join the 2-meter "coffee and radio net." at 9 am every day. This net was created to unite people, spread goodwill, and ease the stress associated with the pandemic. The following day, I checked into the net, started making contacts, and began participating in other nets on the repeater. The local nets quickly became a great source of comfort and something I looked forward to participating in regularly, as they were both educational and relatable. I found that the people involved were enjoyable to be around, even though I had never met most of them. Eventually, I received an invitation to attend a club meeting on Zoom, and soon after, I joined the club.

Field Day 2021 was a pivotal moment that solidified my commitment to amateur radio. It was the first time I met most of the club members. We all gathered at a local restaurant for breakfast on the Friday before field day to set up the field day site. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the Amateur Radio operators' spirits were high. It was hard to eat as there was so much going on - listening to their stories of DX feats, discussing the latest builds, and various amateur radio topics. However, what stood out the most was their interest in me as a new ham. They took the time to explain everything in simple terms, which made a difference in understanding the concepts they were discussing. I have never seen a group devoted to a hobby like this and asked myself more questions. What made these people from various walks of life want to contribute to this hobby?

During the event, I got to use an antenna launcher to shoot lines into the trees and attach antennas to the lines while in the treetops. I connected coax cables, assisted in setting up a computer network, and got to use an antenna analyzer for the first time. I was introduced to many technical concepts, and the seasoned Amateur Radio operators took the time to explain the concepts in simple terms. One of the experienced hams showed me the GOTA HF station and provided me with valuable mentoring. Within a few hours, I was confidently running the GOTA station after some outstanding coaching by a seasoned ham and got non-hams on the air for the entire field day. Initially, I had planned to spend only the first day and leave that evening, but I ended up staying for the entire Field Day. Most importantly, this experience helped me gain confidence and knowledge, and I will never forget the lessons and memories of my first field day.

After participating in Field Day 2021, my commitment to the hobby solidified, and it became clear that amateur radio would be a lifelong journey for me. Everyone I met shared my interests and was enthusiastic, energetic, and dedicated to the hobby. I have never met such a like-minded group; their kindness and hospitality were unmatched. I also began to study for my Extra license. My dad purchased an Arrow antenna and an HT radio, allowing me to make satellite contacts independently. Throughout that summer, I regularly worked the FM satellites and always kept an ear out for the ISS, hoping to hear an astronaut. On June 26th, 2022, I had the pleasure of contacting astronaut Kjell Lindgren (KO5MOS). This was a significant milestone for me as it represented the fulfillment of my initial goal and the reason I got involved in the hobby.

As a 19-year-old immersed in premedical studies at Old Dominion University, my journey as an amateur radio enthusiast has been nothing short of transformative. Acquiring my Amateur Extra license on April 23, 2021, marked a pivotal moment in my commitment to this passionate pursuit. On my 18th birthday, I proudly earned the title of an ARRL-accredited VE examiner to give back to the community. Beyond VE examination support, I restarted my university's amateur radio club, assuming the role of president and contributing to its resurgence. Recently, I have had the honor of being selected as the ARRL Virginia Youth Section Coordinator, which has further fueled my dedication. Additionally, my engagement with HamSCI, a Citizen Science Initiative, showcases my commitment to scientific exploration, where I manage social media and extend our outreach beyond the borders of the United States. Without the support, encouragement, and guidance of my amateur radio club members, none of this would be possible.

Amateur radio has been my anchor during uncertain times. It has provided me not only with comfort but also the confidence to pursue my lofty ambitions. Although curiosity initially drew me into this hobby, it is the selfless dedication and personal example of my fellow amateur radio operators that keep me steadfastly dedicated to this hobby. I attribute this dedication to the people I call my "ham family." My association with this hobby has blossomed into lifelong friendships and mentorships, encouraging me to continuously explore new horizons beyond my comfort zone. The camaraderie within this community is not only strong, but it's also infectious, always propelling me forward with a burning desire to contribute to and enrich the amateur radio world. Amateur radio is not just a hobby, it's a vibrant and supportive community that motivates me to make a meaningful impact.