

Next-Gen Contesters

The Intrepid-DX Group began an essay contest five years ago to gather views and ideas from young people in amateur radio. The group hopes that the information collected from these young operators will help us all attract and retain more young people. The event, called the “Dream Rig” essay contest, has gathered quite a few entries over the years. This year the theme of the essay was: “What do you see as ham radio’s place in society? How can it benefit our society, and at the same time, become attractive to others your age?” For winning first place, 16-year-old Katie Campbell, KE8LQR, won an ICOM IC-7300 transceiver. The second-place winner, 14-year-old Lila Shearer, KK7RRV, received an ICOM ID52A dual-band D-STAR handheld; while third place winner 15-year-old Michael Simon, KK7KLG, was awarded an ICOM T10 dual-band HT. KE8LQR shared a copy of her essay for the readers of *NCJ*.

Katie is a junior at Columbiana High School in Ohio. She has been an Extra-class licensee since age 11, and the president of her school’s amateur radio club, K8LPS. She teaches youth classes for the Long Island CW Club and is a very accomplished CW operator. She has been a participant and a graduate assistant for the Youth DX Adventure. She has competed in many radiosport events, including some at K3LR and other large contest stations. School Club Roundup is always a huge activity for Katie. She has served as ARRL Assistant Section Youth Coordinator for Ohio for 4 years and the net control for Ohio Section Youth Net, which she started 3 years ago. She has been the YLRL youth chairwoman since 2021. She



Sixteen-year-old Katie Campbell, KE8LQR, pictured with her new ICOM IC-7300 transceiver. [Colleen Campbell, KB8VAQ, photo]

has been a YLRL keynote speaker at Hamvention and presented at Carole Perry’s youth forums at both HamCation and Hamvention. She is also the Public Relations Manager for Youth on the Air Americas, and a member of its camp planning working group, among a long list of other achievements and endeavors. Here is her essay:

How Ham Radio Benefits Our Society

I frequently wonder what I would tell my younger self about amateur

radio if I could go back and have a conversation with myself six years ago while I was studying for my Technician Class. Since passing my Technician exam in March of 2019, I’ve done a number of things that I never thought I would be able to or have the opportunity to do — I’ve given presentations in front of hundreds of people, learned another language (well, sort of — I think we can count Morse code), traveled around the US and abroad, met mentors and Elmers and, most importantly, formed friendships that will last a

lifetime. While all these things may look good on a resume, especially for a young person, they've had far more important effects. These experiences have shaped who I am today and influenced nearly every aspect of my life. They've helped me become more outgoing, helped me develop my values, improve my communication skills, develop my sense of empathy, and inspire me to learn as much as possible about every subject that I can. Usually, though, when I think about how amateur radio has affected who I am, I wonder what the purpose of amateur radio is in society because it seems impossible that something that's had such significant impacts on my life is merely benefiting society through the obvious – volunteerism and existence as a fun hobby. After much contemplation, I've concluded that the most important purpose that amateur radio serves in society is to bridge gaps, culturally and generationally.

I attend a public high school, and as I've gotten older, I've started to notice how poorly most of my peers communicate, especially with adults. Some of my classmates are so nervous to interact with adults that they struggle to send an email or ask a question in class. It's no secret that young people are struggling more and more to communicate with adults, but what is the solution to this issue? That's where amateur radio comes in. Being a young ham puts you in a very interesting position where everybody wants to talk to you (except for the few who feel that young people are ruining the hobby). You get your license at 10, 13, maybe even 16 years old, get on the air, and have almost an instantaneous pileup. Suddenly, you've gone from not talking to adults, to talking to adults more than other young people and you don't even realize it. Amateur radio provides a gateway for having conversations with people or demographics that you may find intimidating by simply being something that both parties have in common.

Aside from simply talking to adults, amateur radio gives young people an opportunity to be taken seriously and to use their voices in a professional manner. Before getting my license, I was incredibly shy. I didn't even want anything to do with a presentation in class – that would have been a nerve-wracking experience. Speaking part in a school play? Absolutely not. Giving a presentation to an audience of 50, maybe even 100 people? Forget about it. However, giving presentations and speaking about the things that I've done in amateur radio has become one of my favorite parts of what I get to do with the hobby.

I love getting to be an example for young females in amateur radio, or more generally, STEM, and getting to encourage them to pursue whatever hobbies or career that they want even if it's not “the norm” for a young lady. Amateur radio has given me the chance to discuss something that I'm passionate about with an audience who wants to listen and wants to use my experiences to facilitate change for the better. I find that in other areas of my life, young people are usually regarded as “not having anything meaningful to share” and are not listened to because people don't believe that we can be catalysts for change. If I hadn't gotten involved with amateur radio, I wouldn't have this platform to share my experiences, inspire other YLs to do what they love, or develop more effective communication skills.

Thus far, I've focused on the “professional” aspects of being a young ham, in the amateur radio sphere, but I think it's also important to reflect on the more casual and insouciant parts of the hobby. Although it sounds cliché, I believe that the most important parts of amateur radio are the connections that you form and the friendships that you build. I haven't been involved in the hobby nearly as long as many of my fellow radio enthusiasts, but I have been involved long enough to figure out what parts of the hobby are paramount for me,

and those are at the top of the list. While black and white accomplishments like winning contests or passing licensing exams and learning code are fun parts of amateur radio and give me clear-cut goals to work toward, the human connections I've formed are by far the most rewarding parts of the hobby.

After getting my license and getting involved with amateur radio, my friend group shifted out of my small middle/high school to a worldwide network of people who enjoy similar things to me. Now, some of my closest friends live in another state/country or even on another continent. Before getting involved in the amateur radio community, I knew very little about any other countries and their respective cultures. After meeting people from these different countries and different backgrounds, I've been able to expand my views and values, as well as deepen my sense of empathy. I've noticed that getting to know individuals with specific experiences helps you have more empathy towards other people or groups with similar or the same experiences. Lack of empathy and understanding is certainly a problem in the world today, but I feel as though amateur radio is helping us to overcome these challenges. Traveling around the US and internationally for amateur radio has given me a strong opportunity to witness and experience these regional/cultural differences from an outsider's perspective, which has helped me realize that no differences between people or cultures are so great that they should cause divides. I'm sure that these realizations are not unique to me, and this means that amateur radio is undoubtedly helping us build bridges across these cultural gaps and differences.

Admittedly, if most of my peers or classmates read what I've written so far, they'd roll their eyes and tell me that amateur radio “seemed boring” or that it's a “nerd hobby” (and while they're most definitely not incorrect



Katie operates CW on a Parks on the Air event at Youth on the Air Camp 2023 in Ottawa, Ontario, with a straight key she built earlier in the week. [Kristy Milluzzi photo]

with that second point...I've learned to own it...). With assumptions like that running rampant, it is incredibly hard to make amateur radio appealing to young people. We can tell them that it's fun, or that it's a good community/network to be part of, but nothing leaves a more vehement and lasting impression than showing

them what amateur radio is all about.

A few weeks ago, I convinced my physics class to take turns getting on the air for the school club roundup. At first, we were working people "contest style" – the basic "59, we're in Ohio, my name is, we are a school" ...until some of my friends and acquaintances from YOTA camp

and other YOTA events started responding to our CQs. A few of them asked to talk to me, and the physics class who knew me as a quiet and reserved student with only a few friends at school, was shocked that I had this many friends. After actually seeing that amateur radio can be a fun hobby and lead to veritable and authentic friendships, a few of the kids in the class decided to start a study group to work on learning the material for their Technician exams. After reflecting on some of the ideas that I discussed in this essay, I've realized that amateur radio has had a far bigger impact on me (and my life) than I thought. So, if I could go back and have a conversation with my ten-year-old self while I was studying for the Technician license, I would tell myself about all of the amazing things that I'd get to experience because of getting that license – the places that I would go, the incredible things that I'd accomplish, and most importantly, the people that I'd meet (although I doubt that ten-year-old me would believe that most of that has happened). I hope that young people around the world continue to see the value of amateur radio and what it can do for society by bridging gaps culturally and generationally, and I hope that they are also inspired to pursue amateur radio endeavors and that they also get to experience things that will inspire them and teach them the invaluable lessons that I've gotten to learn through my involvement with amateur radio.