

Coffee and Radio: A Pandemic-Inspired Net

Dino Papas, KLØS

Many clubs have found innovative ways to stay in touch during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the Williamsburg Area Amateur Radio Club (WAARC) in Williamsburg, Virginia, started a Coffee and Radio Net, which meets daily at 9 AM on our local 2-meter repeater. Our goal was to help our members maintain contact and share information about local conditions regarding the virus. Now, after more than a year, many benefits have arisen from this daily net.

Dedicated Regulars

Our net slowly built a core group of regulars, mostly from our retired ham community. However, over the course of the past year, it has had more than 200 unique call sign check-ins from local club members, surrounding communities, and visitors to our area — well beyond the club's population of around 150 members. As the organizer and Chief Net Control Station (NCS), I've kept track of net rosters and topics discussed on most of those days, regularly recording check-in counts of over 40 members. We also found that our members use online listening apps such as Broadcastify (www.broadcastify.com). This allows them to continue listening to the net when they're away from their radios or traveling out of the area, often checking in via text to let us know they're still with the group.

Net Benefits

We usually engage in a topic or question of the day, ranging from technical radio topics to battling vermin in

The Williamsburg Area Amateur Radio Club has kept members engaged for an entire year while keeping members safe.



WAARC President Toby Papas, KLØSS, enjoying her turn as Net Control Station for the club's Coffee and Radio Net.

our yards or discussing our favorite desserts and music. We also have open-mic sessions and allow members to share what they're up to, ham radio-related or otherwise. Although I head the majority of the WAARC nets, other members have been generous enough to volunteer to do the NCS duties on the weekends. This is a great benefit to the volunteers. This is often their first time running a directed net, which gives them practice for operating in an emergency communications support environment.

We found that many local hams who might not have had an opportunity to interact previously have

been able to establish both amateur radio relationships and personal friendships as a result of the net.

A New Way to Gather

Of course, we've missed getting together in person, but teleconferencing platforms like Zoom help us with monthly meeting attendance. In fact, attendance has averaged well past the numbers historically seen when we were able to meet in person. The breakout room function on Zoom allows for smaller groups to gather. During our "Virtual Builders Group," we discuss mutual projects and interests while remaining in the same larger virtual space (see the sidebar, "A Virtual Builders Group," for more information).

Over the last few years, our club has focused on our newest hams, and we continue to support them (as well as our more experienced hams) with special interest groups that meet on Zoom. For those comfort-



One of the WAARC Virtual Builders Group meetings via Zoom.

able with participating in COVID-safe activities (wearing masks and socially distancing), we find that popular activities include foxhunting and learning to work satellites and the Amateur Radio International Space Station (ARISS) with portable equipment. Some of these members have also helped keep our three annual special event stations on the air.

A Virtual Builders Group

In 2014, the Williamsburg Area Amateur Radio Club (WAARC) created the WAARC Builders Group (more information on this group can be found in “A Ham Radio Makerspace,” by Dino Papas, KLØS, in the February 2015 issue of *QST*). Ever since its creation, the group has met every spring and fall for four to six biweekly sessions at Dino’s home. The club had just begun its spring 2020 session when the COVID-19 pandemic forced suspension of in-person activities. After using Zoom for meetings and staff work, the club decided to revive the group by forming a Virtual Builders Group on that platform.

Twenty-five members attended the first Virtual Builders Group session and experimented with how to share their technical projects with one another remotely. Some members even purchased dedicated video-streaming cameras and accessories to give better live demonstrations of projects and troubleshooting steps. Although meeting virtually isn’t the same as gathering in person, the club found that it provides a welcome forum for technically minded members, spanning the experience level from beginner to expert, to continue to share their love for all things ham radio and electronic.

Although the WAARC Virtual Builders Group is in its infancy, the club has had great success and interest from its members thus far.

COVID-19 has forced radio clubs to rethink how to accomplish Field Day. With ARRL encouraging hams to participate from their homes without penalty, we found that the number of club members who actually participated on the air from home far exceeded the number of operators typically keying the mic or CW at our Field Days in years past.

Looking Ahead

I’m not sure what will happen to our club once we’re able to meet safely in person again. One thing I know for sure is we’ve learned that computer teleconferencing platforms will continue to offer a means to help us keep in touch and interact in ways that may not have been possible before. Those activities should be retained and continue to be a valuable addition to club activities. If you’re in the Williamsburg, Virginia, area, be sure to grab a cup of coffee and join us at 9 AM on the Coffee and Radio Net!

All photos by the author.

Dino Papas, KLØS, is a frequent *QST* and *On the Air* contributor, and has been an amateur radio operator for over 50 years. He can be reached at kl0s@arrl.net.

For updates to this article, see the *QST* Feedback page at www.arrl.org/feedback.

