

TEXAS COUNTY & DISTRICT RETIREMENT SYSTEM

CONNECTIONS

A NEWSLETTER ESPECIALLY FOR RETIREES

SPRING 2020



Justice and mercy

Retired Montgomery County Justice of the Peace reflects on her 40-year career — and her fifth-degree black belt in judo.

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A park with a purpose

San Antonio is building a “Riverwalk for locals” that celebrates the city’s culture, art and natural environment. Page 7



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On the cover...

TCDRS retiree Edie Connelly served as Montgomery County Pct. 3's Justice of the Peace for more than 30 years. Photo by Rebecca L. Bennett



Edie and Andrew Connelly have been training in judo together since 1985. Photo courtesy of Edie & Andrew Connelly

**Rolling with the punches:
 Justice Edie Connelly steps onto
 the retirement mat**

Story and cover photo by Rebecca L. Bennett

“I went through a period of time where I wanted to be an attorney,” says Edie Connelly, Montgomery County Precinct 3’s former long-time Justice of the Peace, who retired in December of 2018 with nearly 40 years of TCDRS service.

“Then when I was in high school, we took one of those tests that are supposed to help you determine what you should be when you grow up,” she says. “Mine [said] I should be a park ranger!”

She laughs. “But really, I think the idea of the law suits my personality because I like things in order, and that’s what the law is. It’s a discipline.”

Discipline and drive

Born in Tennessee and raised primarily in Mississippi, Edie initially followed her desire to help her community by major-

ing in Social Work at the University of Mississippi. However, while pursuing her degree, she accepted a job as a campus police dispatcher that sparked her interest in law enforcement.

“It wasn’t just the excitement, but [also] the idea that you have this mystery and you have to look for clues to figure things out,” she explains.

When Edie moved to North Carolina in 1974, she switched her major to Law Enforcement at North Carolina Community College and soon received an intriguing job offer from the Jacksonville

Police Department. They asked her to join their vice and narcotics unit as an undercover officer, since no one in the community would know her true identity.

With very few women involved in law enforcement in the 1970s, Edie jumped at the opportunity to get her foot in the door. "I would usually go in with another undercover officer as a girlfriend for the narcotics [cases]," she says. "Vice was really the more dangerous part... [because] I was kind of on my own."

In 1977, Edie relocated to The Woodlands, Texas, and accepted a position as an emergency services dispatcher, eyeing employment with the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department (MCSD).

Edie got her break in 1979 when MCSD hired her as a jail deputy. Over the next seven years, Edie ascended the ranks, serving as an identification officer and as a detective working with juvenile offenders. Eventually, she advanced to Detective Sergeant and was tasked with investigating crimes against persons.

By the time Precinct 3's Justice of the Peace role opened up in 1986, Edie felt ready for a change.

"I was working sex crimes and domestic violence and child abuse, and after having done that for several years, it was really beginning to change my perspective of people," she explains. "I needed to do something else."

Eight other candidates ran for the office, but Edie ultimately prevailed and stepped into her new position as Justice of the Peace for the busiest precinct in Montgomery County on Jan. 1, 1987.

In the courtroom, Montgomery County Justices perform marriages

and oversee civil cases involving \$10,000 or less, landlord-tenant disputes, license revocations, dangerous dogs, and other administrative matters. They also preside over criminal cases at the Class C misdemeanor level, such as for traffic tickets and disorderly conduct.

Additionally, since Montgomery County doesn't have its own medical examiner, Edie also served as coroner for her precinct. This meant she had to be on call 24/7 to conduct parallel investigations alongside law enforcement to determine the manner and cause of death.

"Sometimes you have to recognize that things don't always happen the way you feel they should, and you have to roll with the punches."

"I never slept," she says. "A normal day would be getting telephone calls maybe twice or more times a night, court in the morning, court in the afternoon... we were busy all day long and all night long."

"Sometimes it was agonizing," she says, such as when she presided over cases involving dog attacks or investigated deaths involving child abuse and other forms of domestic violence. "But just the idea that you can help affect someone's life for the better. That's what I loved about it."

Ready to retire

Edie's decision to retire in 2018 came after her husband Andrew experienced a health scare and three new trauma hospitals opened in her precinct, doubling her coroner caseload.

"That and I'm not getting any younger, and I really wanted to spend more time [with my family]," she says. After more than 32 years as a justice of the peace, "It was just time to let somebody else do it."

Since her retirement, Edie has been

investing quality time with Andrew and her three children, 13 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. She and Andrew have also been traveling across the United States and even to Costa Rica to referee judo matches.

Andrew, an eighth-degree black belt, opened his judo dojo, School of Hard Knocks Judo Club, in 1985. Edie has been practicing since the doors opened and has earned a fifth-degree black belt. "I love the discipline of it," she says. "For me, it's a realistic form of self-defense."

Throughout her retirement, Edie plans to continue performing wed-

dings, take personal vacations and get involved in mediation, but for now, she's enjoying taking things slow. "The time has flown by," she says. "I'm still enjoying baking cookies and being able to go to the grandkids' [events]... I just was not able to do that kind of thing when I was working full-time."

Edie hopes to teach her grandchildren the importance of always striving to be fair, as well as the importance of tempering justice with mercy.

"It's great to talk about the law and the beauty of the directness of it, but the law can be really ambiguous," she explains. "If you don't [view every person as an individual], you won't be a good judge. No two cases are the same, so just be fair."

She also hopes to pass on her overcomer mentality. "And the second part of that is life isn't fair," she says. "Sometimes you have to recognize that things don't always happen the way you feel they should, and you have to roll with the punches." ★

Annual financial wrap-up

Now that 2020 has arrived, there are two important financial documents you will soon receive from TCDRS. Here's what you need to know about them:

1. IRS 1099-R

Before the end of January, TCDRS will mail you your IRS 1099-R. This form tells the IRS how much money TCDRS sent you in 2019 and how much was withheld for taxes. You will need this document to file your income taxes. If you received payments from multiple TCDRS accounts last year, you will receive a 1099-R for each account.

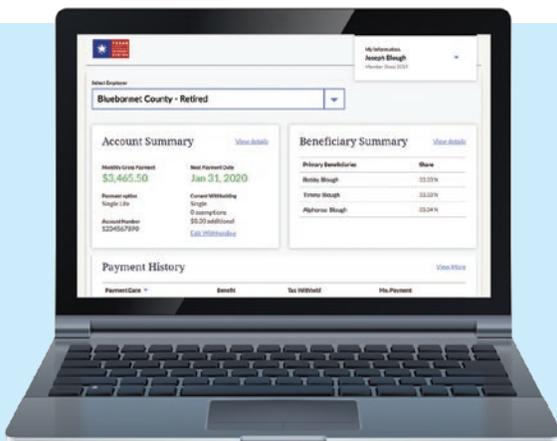
However, in addition to receiving your 1099-R in the mail, you can also access — and even download and print — your 1099-R online by signing into your online account at www.TCDRS.org and selecting it from the documents box. The IRS will accept a print-out of your 1099-R for your paper-filed tax return. For more information about your IRS 1099-R, visit www.TCDRS.org/1099s.

2. 2020 Benefit Statement

This month, you will also receive your annual benefit statement for 2020. This document shows your benefit payment amount for the year, as well as your current federal tax withholding and information about whether your employer passed a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for 2020.

What is a COLA and how do I know if I'm getting one?

Your TCDRS retirement benefit is a fixed benefit payment. That means the benefit amount will stay the same every month for the rest of your life once you start receiving it. Due to inflation, your benefit purchases less and less over time. Every year, employers consider the cost of their total benefits package and decide whether to adopt a cost-of-living adjustment, or COLA, to help restore some of their benefit's purchasing power. TCDRS will let you know in your annual benefit statement if your benefit has changed from a COLA.



WHAT YOU CAN DO ONLINE

You can view your important annual documents and manage your online account at www.TCDRS.org.

By the end of January

- Access your 1099-R and 2020 Benefit Statement

Anytime

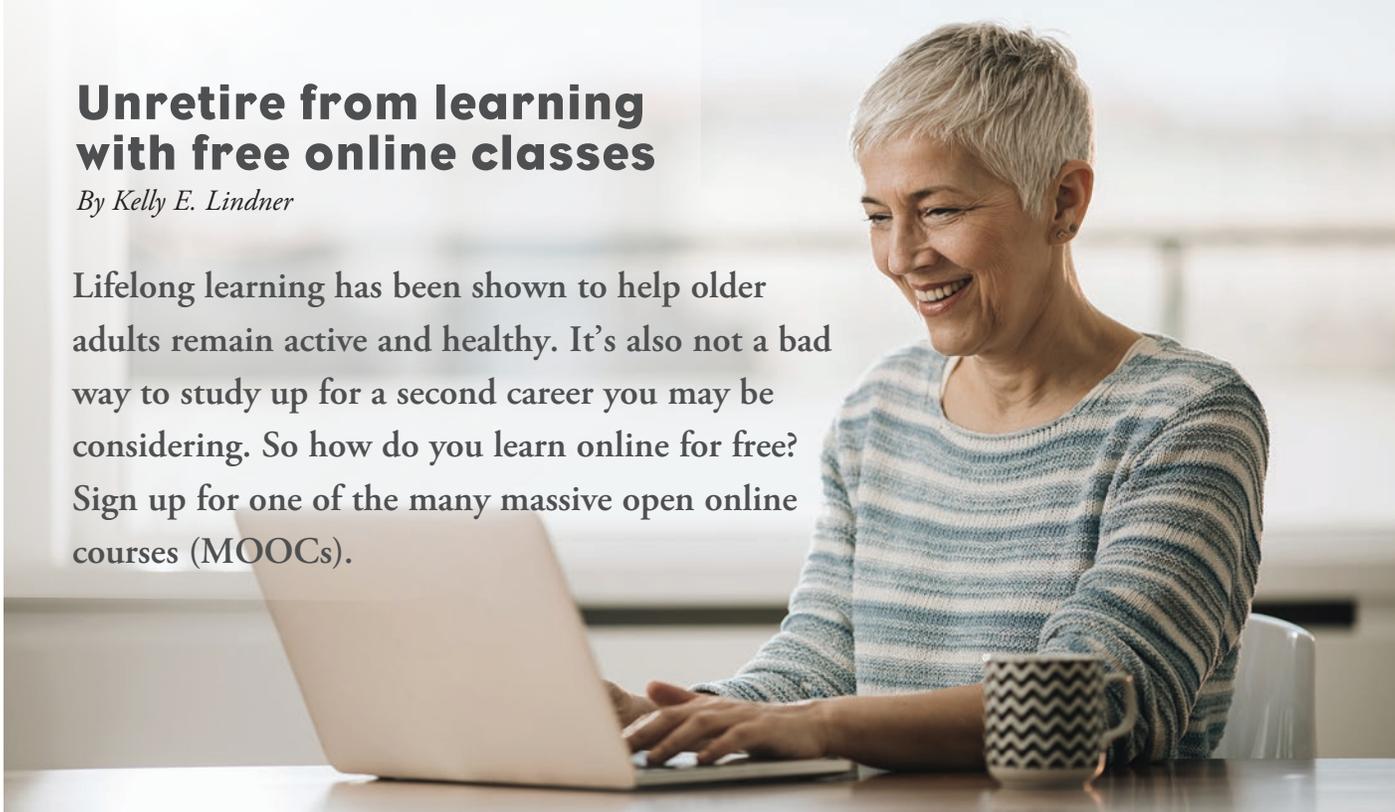
- Change your tax withholding
- Update your banking information

Please call TCDRS Member Services at 800-823-7782 with any questions.

Unretire from learning with free online classes

By Kelly E. Lindner

Lifelong learning has been shown to help older adults remain active and healthy. It's also not a bad way to study up for a second career you may be considering. So how do you learn online for free? Sign up for one of the many massive open online courses (MOOCs).



History of MOOCs

The first MOOC — “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge” — was hosted in 2008 by two McGill University professors for 25 students attending in-person and 2,300 attending online. Then in 2011, Stanford offered three open online classes for free.

By 2012, MOOC providers were popping up like social media platforms, and that trend has continued into the present. As of 2019, there are 13,000 MOOCs from about 1,000 universities worldwide, and the two most popular MOOC providers in the world are Coursera and edX.

Coursera was founded in 2012 by two Stanford professors. Today, the online learning platform has 40 million learners, more than 190 university partners, 3,600 classes, 15 certificates and 14 online degrees.

edX was founded in 2012 by MIT and Harvard. Today, the online learning hub has more than 20 million users, 120 institutional partners, 2,500 courses, 115 certificates and 11 online master's degrees.

Learn a thing or two

If you don't know what class to take first, you may want to try the most popular MOOC ever: “Learning How to Learn” by McMaster University and the University of California San Diego. This course is available on Coursera, and as of 2019, it had almost 2.5 million online learners. It could also help you

better absorb any future MOOCs you take.

You also might want to consider learning another language, since a 2013 study published by the American Academy of Neurology found that being bilingual can delay dementia by almost five years.

If you know exactly what you want to learn, visit [Coursera.org](https://www.coursera.org) or [edx.org](https://www.edx.org) and enter your interest into the search bar. Then click on the course and hit either the “Enroll for Free” (Coursera) or the “Enroll” (edX) buttons. After registering, you can truly learn for free by selecting either the “Enroll Without Certificate” (Coursera) or “Audit This Course” (edX) buttons.

Launch that second career

Though you could potentially pick up many of the skills you need to launch a second career just from taking free MOOCs, there are a few fields that require certifications or degrees. That's why some MOOC platforms, including Coursera and edX, offer certifications and even some bachelor's and master's degrees online for much less than matriculating in-person. edX even provides MicroMasters programs, which are much cheaper than their online master's degrees. ★

For even more ways to learn online, see “25 Killer Sites for Free Online Education” on [Lifehack.org](https://www.lifehack.org).

Sources: [PsychologyToday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com), [McGill.ca](https://www.mcgill.ca), [ClassCentral.com](https://www.classcentral.com), [Neurology.org](https://www.neurology.org), [Lifehack.org](https://www.lifehack.org), [Coursera.org](https://www.coursera.org), [edx.org](https://www.edx.org)

Lace up your boots and keep Texas beautiful

By Rachael Seeley Flores

Is getting exercise and meeting new people on your list of New Year's resolutions? Participating in highway, park and trail community cleanup programs could help you fulfill both of those goals — and do some good for Texas, too.

There are a host of volunteer programs across the Lone Star State that keep our public outdoor spaces looking beautiful. Each program varies in what you need to provide and how often it meets based on the work and the sponsoring organization, but here are a few highlights to get you started:

The road to beauty is paved with volunteers

Chances are, you've seen Keep Texas Beautiful (KTB) signs posted along Texas roadways. KTB supports a network of more than 300 community partners across the state that not only remove trash from roadsides, but also clean parks, waterways and beaches. Counties, districts, civic groups, schools and even individuals can host KTB events. The nature of the work varies by community need and sponsor. Visit [KTB.org/Cleanup](https://www.ktb.org/Cleanup) to learn more.



More than fun and games at TX state parks

Texas' gorgeous state parks rely on volunteers to help with a host of needs. Helpers supply muscle for trail maintenance, serve as park hosts and even assist with fundraising and outreach programs. Lend a hand for a day or sign up for a longer commitment at [TPWD.Texas.gov/State-Parks/Help-Parks](https://www.tpwd.texas.gov/State-Parks/Help-Parks).

If you build it, they will come

If you love hiking, team up with the Central Texas Trail Tamers. The volunteer group builds and maintains trails in diverse ecological locations across Texas. Work sites have included Guadalupe Mountain National Park, the Barton Creek Greenbelt Trail in Austin and Love Creek Preserve in Medina. Volunteers supply their own work clothes, pay a registration fee and come prepared to dig. Visit [TrailTamers.org](https://www.TrailTamers.org) to see upcoming events and sign up for an introductory class on basic trail design and maintenance. ★

Sources: [TrailTamers.org](https://www.TrailTamers.org), [KTB.org](https://www.ktb.org), [TPWD.Texas.gov](https://www.tpwd.texas.gov)



COMAL COUNTY MAKES IT EASY TO ADOPT A ROADWAY

A little innovation is going a long way toward boosting participation in Comal County's Adopt-A-Roadway program. Just three months after the county revitalized the program's website in December 2017, residents had adopted more than half of the county's available roadways.

Comal County's secret is an interactive map that displays which roadways are up for grabs. All it takes is a few easy clicks for volunteers to select a road segment and apply to conduct a one-time clean-sweep or adopt the road for two years.

Volunteers who adopt roads must collect and bag the trash along their adopted roadway at least twice a year. The county furnishes essential tools like traffic control signage, safety vests and trash bags, and picks up filled trash bags when the work is done.

Learn more about Comal County's program at [CCEO.org/Road/Adopt-Roadway](https://www.CCEO.org/Road/Adopt-Roadway).

San Pedro Creek Culture Park: A park with a purpose

By Kelly E. Lindner

San Antonio is building a new linear park that some are calling the “Riverwalk for locals,” says Tony Canez of Bexar County, Program Coordinator for San Pedro Creek Culture Park.

“In a way it is, but the purpose is different,” Canez says. “Flood control has always been the most important function of the project, but it was envisioned that the park could also reintroduce the creek as a natural and cultural asset for the community.”

In addition to flood control, the multipurpose park will promote culture, art and nature:

- **Culture:** Historical pieces along the water and walkways will convey the area’s history, since San Antonio started along the banks of San Pedro Creek in 1718.

- **Art:** Tiled murals, etched limestone and art installations created by San Antonio-based artists will shine along the banks of the park. The current “Rain from the Heavens” installation is a waterfall over porous steel panels that’s backlit at night to show how the night sky probably looked to the city’s founders on May 5, 1718.

- **Nature:** To protect restored native habitats and new shoreline greenspaces, you won’t find restaurants along the water. “With these delicate ecosystems, you wouldn’t want people throwing enchiladas into the creek to feed the ducks,” Canez says.

Partners in park

What started as an idea in 2011 became a collaborative effort of Bexar County, the San Antonio River

Authority (SARA) and the City of San Antonio by 2012.

“It was really the brainchild of the late Commissioner Paul Elizondo, who was the champion of the West Side of San Antonio,” Canez says. “He had a vision that San Pedro Creek would return to prominence as a culture centerpiece of the community.”

Flowing soon

Construction for the four-phase project began in November 2016. Segment one of phase one was completed in May 2018, just in time for San Antonio’s tricentennial. According to SARA Project Manager Kerry Averyt, the goal is to have all phases completed by 2025.

When finished, San Pedro Creek Culture park will encompass 2.2 miles through downtown San

Antonio, from near the intersection of North Santa Rosa and San Saba streets to where San Pedro and Apache Creeks meet under the I-35 South bridge.

But probably the biggest draw will be the area currently under construction between Houston and Nueva streets, which will include a performance plaza (adjacent to the historic Alameda Theater) and a 250-foot, interactive water wall with integrated lighting.

“We’ll have an art feature with lighting, where the public can interact with the water wall,” says Averyt. “That’s the most historic area, and I think that’s where you’ll see a lot of activities.”

“I’m always a big believer that Fiesta could be bigger, and I think a Fiesta event could also be at the park annually,” Canez says. “This should be a great place for the community to come and enjoy events.”

Learn more at SPCCulturePark.com. ★



The new park features murals by local artists, including *Beautiful Memories of the Alameda Theater and Times Passed* by Joe Lopez (top) and *From All Roads, We Are All One* by Adriana M. Garcia (bottom). Photos by Rebecca L. Bennett



In this issue of *Connections*:

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- ★ Unretire from learning with online classes
- ★ Keeping Texas parks and trails beautiful

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How to spot an IRS scam a mile away

It's tax time again and accountants aren't the only ones working overtime. Watch out for calls from IRS impersonators who want to scare you into paying phony tax bills. These sophisticated crooks use technology to disguise their phone numbers, so it may even look like you're getting a call from the IRS.

Here's how to see through their schemes:

- **The IRS won't threaten you.** The IRS will never insist on immediate payment of back taxes under threat of arrest, or the revocation of your driver's license.
- **If you receive a phone call, it's probably not the IRS.** The IRS will generally mail you a bill if you owe back taxes, and you have the right to appeal the amount they say you owe.
- **Go straight to the source.** If you are unsure, call the IRS directly using the official number listed on their website. You can also create an online account at www.IRS.gov/Payments to view your payment history and balance (if any).

Sources: AARP.org, IRS.gov