

Tech-savvy teen keeps county informed

By **MICAIAH WISE BILGER**
Sentinel reporter

It's been a while since the old joke "What are the three fastest forms of communication?" has applied to this technology-centered world.

Telegraphs are rarely used anymore, text messages are substituted for telephone calls and tell-a woman — well, that one might still be true.

But for anyone who is making a new list specific to the Juniata Valley, 16-year-old Jeffrey Harrison probably should fit in somewhere.

When an ambulance siren sounds or flashing lights surround a vehicle accident in Juniata County or its surrounding communities, more than 2,000 Facebook fans check in with Harrison's Juniata County Talk page, where he posts local emergency calls.

But there is a unique angle to Harrison's story, and it's no joke.

Jeffrey and his twin brother, Billy, were born 12 weeks prematurely and weighed about 2 pounds each, their father Bill Harrison says.

The early complications left Jeffrey with cerebral palsy. Now a teenager, the young man still has the use of his upper body, and his father proudly says his son is "smart as a whip."

So, when Jeffrey watched his parents and later his siblings dedicate their time to serving the community as volunteers with the Beale Township and Friendship Fire companies, he did not just sit around and make excuses about not helping because of his disability.

Instead, he decided to begin Juniata County Talk, a website, Facebook page and Twitter account where people can visit to find out what's going on with fire and EMS crews in Juniata and surrounding counties.

It began as a website first on Feb. 22, 2009; but the page did not draw much of a crowd, Jeffrey says.

"When the site first started it was very plain and I thought of deleting the site at one point," Jeffrey recalls. "I decided to go with the social media. Then it just started growing and growing and growing."

He now has more than 2,000 followers on Facebook and 75 on Twitter. The Juniata



Above — Jeffrey Harrison updates his wall on his Facebook site 'Juniata County Talk.' He has more than 2,000 members on his site.



Right — He started the Juniata County Talk website to inform viewers of any area fire, accidents or other emergency news.

Far right — Jeffrey was given an award by the Beale Township Fire Co. for developing the company's website.

County Talk website still is up and running, too, at www.freewebs.com/towntalk/

The Juniata High School junior says he spends a few hours every week listening to scanner feeds and posting information about emergency situations onto the websites.

If he does not catch an address or other information about a specific incident, he listens through the archived audio to find it. Sometimes, he also will listen through archives when he misses something while he is at school.

But his mother, Gail, and sister, Lizzy, insist that Jeffrey spends at least eight hours a week at his task, sometimes staying up until 2 a.m. to listen in and report.

"But not on school nights," Gail says, smiling.

Bill Harrison jokingly says Jeffrey's only hindrance has been the family's lazy cat who likes to sit on the computer keyboard and take a nap.

The Juniata County Talk website has a wealth of information relating to emergency response, including maps, call logs and a frequency menu.

Jeffrey also designed a page called "Live scanner zone"

where people can listen online to emergency communication feeds in Juniata and neighboring counties, as well as Dauphin, Cumberland, York, Lancaster, Chester counties and more.

He will add links to other county scanner feeds upon request; and he also asks people to let him know if a feed is not working, because he will contact the administrator about fixing any problems.

With permission, he posts links with photos from fires, accidents and other incidents taken by other fire companies.

And there were many emergency situations to report in 2011. The year brought multiple natural disasters to Juniata County — first two tornadoes and then a flood.

Jeffrey says his sites saw a lot of traffic online during and after those events.

"Everyone was watching," he remembers.

Juniata County Talk is Jeffrey's project, but he also helps local fire companies start their own websites and Facebook pages.

In December, Beale Township Fire Co. honored the young man with an award for

his work designing web pages for the fire companies.

"I'm not an IT tech, but I know the basics," Jeffrey says modestly, mentioning his computer teacher, Bob St. Clair. He has taken four years of computer classes in school.

His posts on Facebook constantly receive "thank you" comments, or "I was wondering what's going on" or "Can you tell me more about ...?"

Juniata County Talk even gets a glance from people who are traveling.

One example is when a friend of the Harrisons checked in with Jeffrey's site and saw his post about an accident near Clarks Ferry. The man was traveling that way, and when he saw information about the accident he decided to take an alternate route, Bill Harrison says.

But a lot of people do not realize just who is behind the posts.

"I get so many people come up to me and say, 'Is your son the one who has Juniata County Talk?'" his father says. "Even the teachers at school follow him."

Bill Harrison says the site makes his son feel a part of

everything.

"We're all involved in the fire company," Bill Harrison says. "It's a way he could do a bit and be involved."

Occasionally, Bill will carry his son into his vehicle and take him to the scene of an emergency, so that Jeffrey can see "the other side" of what he is involved with.

Because Jeffrey cannot go outside a lot in the winter, his mother says the website gives him an useful activity to keep busy.

Jeffrey also rides in the firetrucks in parades, and Friendship Fire Co. recently built a new handicapped ramp so he can access the building and attend company meetings more easily, his father says.

For Jeffrey, Juniata County Talk is not about gaining recognition for himself in parades or through awards. He is proud to be able to use his abilities to keep people informed about local emergencies.

"... I have been trying to make Juniata County Talk a better site every chance I get," Jeffrey says. "People have said it's a great site, and they are glad I do it for the community."



Sentinel photos by BUFFIE BOYER