

# Meet the Mentor

## A Virtual Mentorship Program

This Pennsylvania radio club found a way to continue mentoring its members and creating enthusiasm for the hobby, while overcoming the challenges of COVID-19.



### Don Evans, K3ZR

Despite the COVID-19 gathering restrictions imposed in 2020, South Mountain Radio Amateurs (SMRA), an ARRL Special Service Club, effectively found a way to not only attract new hams to the club, but to keep them motivated within the hobby. SMRA is located in South Central Pennsylvania and has over 100 members. During the pandemic, more people became interested in the hobby and many radio clubs experienced membership growth, despite a significant decline in member participation opportunities.

SMRA President Jack Himes, NC3O, explained the ensuing challenge: “We have a steady flow of new

hams from our Volunteer Examiners program by offering free membership into our club to every person who passes any level of their radio license [exam],” he said. “We also have [mentors] and our own continuing education programs, but when we were reduced to once-a-month virtual general meetings, trying to get the new hams to meet the experienced ones was the challenge.” Jack added that emails and phone calls by their mentors were unsuccessful, because they no longer had a safe way to fulfill the expectations of new hams during the pandemic.



On the first Tuesday of every month, members of the South Mountain Radio Amateurs (SMRA) meet virtually for their Meet the Mentor program.

## A Need for Change

New members are the key to growth in any organization, and mentors sustain that growth. Prior to the pandemic, new and experienced ham connections were made at SMRA general meetings, which often led to shack visits at home, resulting in lasting friendships. Additionally, there were QRP outings, traffic nets, project builds, and volunteer communication activities.

When activities were cancelled in 2020 because of the pandemic, SMRA needed to figure out how they could thrive in such unusual circumstances, and how hams could continue to encourage each other and explore ideas.

John Jaminet, W3HMS, a key club member, educator, and active mentor, recognized the immediate need to come up with an idea to provide new hams with support and camaraderie, while there was an increased interest in the hobby. Together with late SMRA Vice President Ed Crossley, W3SMF (SK), they recognized that new hams often didn't know where or how to seek assistance. Aware that many knowledgeable hams were willing to share their time and experiences, John came up with a plan to create a virtual monthly mentoring meeting called Meet the Mentor. The purpose of the meeting is threefold: to help new hams gain confidence and excitement talking on the air, to boost enthusiasm within SMRA, and to instill basic amateur radio skills.

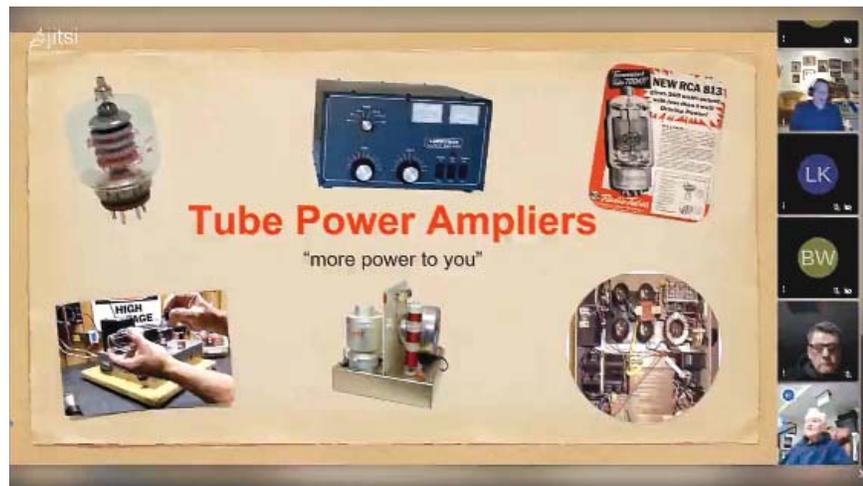
John had predicted that the virtual meetings would “fan the flames of radio excitement,” and he was right!

## The Meeting Format

Meet the Mentor virtual meetings are held on the first Tuesday of every month at 2300 UTC. John calls the meeting to order and introduces the participating mentors (there are usually about four in each session). Patti Single, KC3CDL, one of SMRA's Monday night net controllers, encourages attendees to join the Monday net and practice getting on the air. New hams then introduce themselves by their first name and call sign. The meeting continues with “show and tell,” which is utilized to elaborate on new equipment size, usage, and basic functions, which also allows new hams the opportunity to ask questions about their own gear. Then, three mentors each share a 5-to-10-minute pre-

sentation on varying ham radio topics that were chosen for discussion from a prior session. A question-and-answer discussion occurs at the end of each presentation. New hams are encouraged to ask questions, not only on the topics covered that evening, but on any aspect of the hobby that interests them.

Before ending the virtual meeting, participants are asked to share their recent technical activities or accomplishments. Often, a member recounts a DX contact, a goal they achieved, a YouTube channel they recommend, or a recent purchase. The meetings generally last 2 hours.



During the SMRA's Meet the Mentor virtual program sessions, three mentors share 5-to-10-minute presentations on a variety of ham radio topics chosen for that month's meeting.

Several mentors in the virtual meetings are assigned to be “jargon catchers,” who will stop a conversation to explain commonly used ham phrases and acronyms, such as 73, QRP, ARRL, Field Day, and more. Beginner hams have found this to be helpful. These mentors also serve as “question/chat watchers,” to ensure that discussions are paused to address incoming questions from the chat feature.

## Question Examples

During a recent meeting, one of the mentors — Glenn Kurzenknabe, K3SWZ — presented an overview of ham radio test equipment. He began by explaining what kinds of basic equipment every ham should purchase and become familiar with, including volt-ohm-milliammeters (VOM) and antenna tuners. He also discussed how testing equipment has developed over the years. Participants responded with numerous questions. Deb Robinson, KC3RTP, asked whether analog or digital test equipment was recommended.

Glenn noted that choosing to use the analog needle and scale or a digital readout is a personal preference, and detailed the cost and accuracy of both. When a VNA was mentioned, one of the jargon catchers — Scott Walker, N3SW — was quick to explain that the acronym stood for “vector network analyzer,” and provided a brief commentary about the instrument.

During these virtual meetings, teamwork plays a significant role to ensure successful presentations and discussions. At one meeting, a new ham — Bonnie Golla, KC3SFO — asked about the effectiveness of using drones to attach antennas to tall trees. The discussion focused on using expensive drones with sufficient lift and a remote apparatus to release the paracord on or over the tree. I suggested using an antenna launcher (also known as a spud gun) and shared information from an article I read about a pneumatic antenna launcher. Bob Raker, W0BR, one of the mentors, expressed that he has one and explained how he uses his homemade spud guns. It was a lively discussion, enhanced by the graphic provided by IT moderator Karl Gardner, W3KGB.

The synergy and creativity of SMRA members and mentors has enabled Meet the Mentor to grow into the quality program that it is today. Additionally, the program creatively experiments with methods to generate interest and questions from newer hams. Currently, a \$10 Amazon gift certificate is awarded to the person with the best question. SMRA President Himes determines the winner, and he recently said, “The questions keep getting better as the new hams are thinking about questions ahead of time and how to phrase them properly.”

## An Additional Forum

With over 70 recipients on SMRA’s general club email list, it became necessary to better manage the abundance of questions and answers that were being passed back and forth via email. The solution was to use the email groups service Groups.io, and limit its usage to those who were interested in Meet the Mentor. SMRA was already successfully using Groups.io for their Executive Board, Volunteer Examiners, and emergency communications group.

## Looking Ahead

Meet the Mentor has been going strong since its inception in November 2020. A recent poll completed by the program’s attendees reveals that, due to the convenience of the online program, there’s a desire for it to continue, even as COVID-19 gathering restrictions are lifted.

John reflected on the program, stating, “Our presenters have done a superb job of giving professional-level *PowerPoint* presentations, covering topics that new hams want and need to learn. The questions from new members and the super important follow-up questions have really gotten to the core of many tech issues,” he said. “More simply put, [Meet the Mentor] is ‘give-back time’ for veteran hams that will pay big dividends in the long run.” New amateur Ed Otto, KC3RFX, noted, “I love the sessions. [I] saw a couple presentations on the web and so I joined the club. I am pleased with the club and how willing everyone [is to share] great information. I have a good head start because of [Meet the Mentor]. I hope to contribute one day soon to [the program] and SMRA.”

Only time will tell what is in store for the future of Meet the Mentor. Surely, home shack visits will resume, as will the resulting camaraderie. This program was created out of necessity by a few hams with a united love for the hobby and an interest in keeping it growing, and has been an overwhelming success.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of my mentor and friend, Ed Crossley, W3SMF (SK), who was a professional educator and an active ham for over 62 years. He was an honorable man who enjoyed teaching the skills of successful DXing with his Icom IC-7300 and 75-foot-long wire antenna. He and his spouse Joyce Crossley, K3APE, always enjoyed operating together. Thank you, dear friend. You are missed.*

All photos by the author.

Don Evans, K3ZR, discovered ham radio in 1967 at the age of 12, after witnessing his best friends’ grandfather, Otto Wold, operate his radio. Him and his brother worked to save enough money to purchase a Knight-Kit Star Roamer shortwave radio receiver. Otto became his mentor and assisted him with his Novice-class license exam.

Forty-three years later, after a career move to Pennsylvania, Don attended the South Mountain Radio Amateurs (SMRA) Field Day, where he met several devoted, knowledgeable hams. In 2010, he joined SMRA, where top-notch mentors helped him to pass the Technician- and General-class license exams. Several years later, he earned his Amateur Extra-class license.

Don served as president of SMRA from 2014 – 2018 and continues to serve as a voting member of the club’s Executive Board. Currently, he is a Contact Volunteer Examiner, administering examinations for W5YI-VEC. He retired in 2019, and enjoys all things pertaining to amateur radio, as well as having more time to devote to the hobby and mentoring SMRA amateurs. Don can be reached at [k3zr@arrl.net](mailto:k3zr@arrl.net).

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