



The Washington Youth Tour

Electric Cooperatives, Community and Country

STORY, PHOTOS BY BYRON MCCOMBS

Since achieving the monumental task of delivering electricity to rural areas all over the United States, the calling of co-ops has always been to have a positive impact on the communities they serve. Providing exceptional local students the unique opportunity to experience their country's history up close in Washington, D.C., achieves that goal.

“Send youngsters to the nation’s capital, where they can actually see what the flag stands for and represents,” encouraged U.S. Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Annual Meeting in Chicago in 1957. Since that future president’s challenge was presented, electric co-ops from sea to shining sea

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From left, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC delegates Ashley Smith, Hillary Owens and Joanna Irvin stand in the back yard of Mount Vernon, George Washington’s home, overlooking the Potomac River.

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have been sending students to Washington, D.C., each year to educate our next generation of leaders.

In 2016, more than 1,700 talented and ambitious students from 43 states descended upon the nation's capital to take part in the annual pilgrimage known as the Washington Youth Tour (WYT). Blue Ridge Mountain EMC's 2016 WYT delegates—Joanna Irvin, from Union County, Ga.; Ashley Smith, from Towns County, Ga.; and Hillary Owens from Clay County, N.C.—joined three Georgia EMC tour directors, 112 fellow delegates and 14 chaperones for the prestigious leadership event.

The weeklong journey, which took place June 9-16, offered students a mix of leadership and team-building exercises, history lessons with visits to some of the country's most treasured museums and monuments and a rare opportunity to meet one-on-one with members of Georgia's congressional delegation.

Delegates and their families gathered in Atlanta for a kickoff banquet June 9. The following day, after morning team-building activities, students departed for the nation's capital. Highlights there included guided tours and stops at Arlington National Cemetery, Smithsonian museums, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Mount Vernon,

Supreme Court, U.S. Capitol, Washington Monument and the MLK, FDR, Jefferson, World War II, Korean War Veterans, Vietnam War Veterans and Lincoln memorials.

Delegates have ample opportunities to practice their social and networking skills on the WYT. "It's OK to be nervous about meeting everybody," Owens says, "but keep in mind they are all in the same position as you are. So don't hold back because the more friends you make, the more enjoyable the trip will be."

"Spending time with so many ambitious peers was encouraging," says Irvin. "The newfound knowledge I gained from the tour sparked more of an interest in history and the importance of preserving our history."

Smith says, "I can honestly say the Washington Youth Tour was one of the best experiences of my life. I also met, and traded pins and puns with, some of the brightest adults and students in the nation. The Youth Tour left me with an incredible sense of patriotism, and I was continually encouraged to be my best self."

The WYT allows students to revisit their country's history, while spending time with their nation's current leaders, in hopes it will inspire them as they pursue their future careers.



Left photo: From left, BRMEMC delegates Ashley Smith, Hillary Owens and Joanna Irvin at the World War II Memorial. Center: Ashley, Joanna and Hillary pose in Old Town Alexandria, Va., before taking a riverboat cruise down the Potomac. Right: Ashley, Joanna and Hillary stand in front of the U.S. Supreme Court Building.



The Washington Youth Tour: One-Week Trip Requires All-Year Planning



Even with the plethora of travel-related apps and websites available today, planning a family vacation takes a lot of work. Try finding an inexpensive flight that's not at the crack of dawn or late at night or booking a good hotel that's near most of the places you want to visit. Then—just for fun—add in buying tickets to a popular attraction, a process that can take patience, persistence and precision timing.

Now, imagine doing all of this for a “family” that numbers as many as 130—Georgia’s annual Washington Youth Tour (WYT) contingent of delegates, chaperones and staff. The trip lasts a week, but the planning process goes on all year.

Georgia Electric Membership Corp.’s Gale Cutler, who has served as WYT director since 2000, has already booked the delegation’s Washington-area hotel through 2019. Also, each year during the June trip, Cutler goes online after



BYRON MCCOMBS

Youth Tour Director Gale Cutler, center, is flanked by Tour Coordinators Lindsay Bridges, left, and Beth McMillan. They are responsible for the precise planning that provides Georgia delegates the best experience possible on the tour each year.

midnight to request the following year’s wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, which can be done exactly a year in advance.

Last year, Cutler and Tour Coordinator Lindsay Bridges stepped out of a banquet in March to go online and book June admission tickets for the Holocaust Memorial Museum the minute they became available. Planning the Washington Youth

Tour takes “if you snooze, you lose” to the highest level.

“It takes a lot of timing and a little bit of luck to get tours and tickets at times that we can assemble to create a great trip, but it is worth it,” Cutler says. “Our goal is to craft an experience that takes teens ‘up close and backstage’ with our country’s legislators and landmarks to provide a personal connection to our nation’s history and inspire them to become better leaders.”

Magazine Cover Photos: A Peek Behind the Scenes



After delegates from across Georgia arrive in Atlanta for the Washington Youth Tour kickoff, they pose for the first of the week’s many photo ops. This, however, is the only one in front of a green screen.

Photographer Louis Tonsmeire, of Cartersville, banter with the dressed-up delegates, grouped by EMC, helping to ease any nervousness they (or their parents) may have at meeting so many new people. Once one group’s photo is completed, another is ushered in. The *GEORGIA Magazine* cover shoot finishes up just in time for the kickoff banquet.

Magazine Production Coordinator Gayle Hartman then goes through all the images, picking out the best one of each co-op’s delegates (eyes open, clothes and hair in place). The green screen is removed, the photos are retouched and a Washington, D.C., landmark—most often the U.S. Capitol—is placed behind the delegates. The process takes several weeks because of the volume of photos involved.



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As photographer Louis Tonsmeire lines up the shot, Washington Youth Tour delegates pose for the cover of *GEORGIA Magazine*. The green screen is later replaced with an iconic Washington, D.C., scene.

The cover shots were taken on site in Washington, D.C., until 2009. The change came about because of the Youth Tour’s busy schedule and the time the photo shoot took. Plus, shooting the photos outdoors meant the weather could always be a factor.



Jeremy Nelms
General Manager

Manager's Message

Happy New Year

Greetings. I hope you enjoyed time spent with family and friends during the holiday season and that 2017 is off to a fine start for everyone. As we begin the new year, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC (BRMEMC) continues to focus on ways to provide the best service possible to its members.

With great anticipation, I look ahead to the opportunities this year holds for your co-op. In the spring, your Board of Directors and senior management will be drafting the first-ever strategic plan for BRMEMC. This plan will help us define our strategy, set our priorities and establish goals as we move forward. It will also focus our attention and resources to accomplish the tasks we set forth during the planning process. In addition, the plan will serve as our guide while making

budgeting and personnel decisions throughout the year.

To support this strategic planning effort, BRMEMC staff has been conducting a phone survey of members to better understand their satisfaction level. Some of our members may have already experienced this interaction, and for those of you who provided feedback, your comments are very much appreciated. The baseline we establish with the survey results will help guide our communications strategy in 2017 and for years to come.

Your EMC and its employees will continue working each day in an effort to provide the highest level of service. Attaining this goal begins at the top, which is why I will always make myself available to you, our members.

Cooperation among Cooperatives

BRMEMC Crews Assist Black River Electric Cooperative with Power Restoration



Blue Ridge Mountain EMC has a proud tradition of assisting fellow co-ops in time of need. Two crews spent a week in October 2016 working to restore power for members of Black River Electric Cooperative in Sumter, S.C., following Hurricane Matthew. From left are Brad Wilson, Robert Gray, J.D. Dockery, Johnathan Hyatt, Tim Tanner, Derrick Lovingood, Skip McKeral, Nemo Milam, Chris Nelson, Randy Curtis, Joe Colwell, Daniel Nelson and Kenny Hall.