



## The Washington Youth Tour

### Timeless Leadership Lessons and Treasured Friendships

STORY, PHOTOS BY BYRON McCOMBS

**B**lue Ridge Mountain EMC (BRMEMC) is fortunate to have the opportunity each year to send three local students on the Washington Youth Tour (WYT). The tremendous leadership program, sponsored by Georgia's electric membership cooperatives, will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year and continues to transform young people's lives.

BRMEMC's 2014 delegates—Andrew Burch, Danielle Diehl and Rachel Todd—made the most of every moment during the weeklong adventure.

The 2014 tour brought the largest Georgia group ever—109 students and 16 chaperones journeyed to Atlanta from throughout the state to attend the kickoff banquet and begin the week of life-changing opportunities. The banquet was emceed by FOX 5 Atlanta's Beth Galvin, the station's medical team reporter and a WYT alumna.

State Rep. Brooks Coleman served as keynote speaker, a role he has played for more than two decades. Coleman, 75, is chairman of the Georgia House Education Committee, and his heart for young people is evident by the enthusiasm and passion he displays each year when he speaks to the students.

Before flying to Washington, D.C., the group toured President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Little White House in

Warm Springs, Ga. During FDR's frequent visits to Warm Springs, he became acquainted with the plight of rural Georgians living without electricity. As a result, he determined to make electricity available to all Americans

by establishing the Rural Electrification Administration Act, which was signed at the Little White House.

Once in Washington, the WYT delegates are immersed in the history and culture of the nation's capital. A non-stop schedule is designed to teach them lessons not duplicated in any classroom.

Highlights of the tour include stops at Arlington National Cemetery, the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, MLK, WWII, Vietnam Veterans and Korean War memorials. The group also toured the U.S. Capitol, viewed

the Declaration of Independence and visited the Supreme Court, the Library of Congress and Smithsonian museums.

In addition to the monuments, museums and visits with members of Georgia's congressional delegation, our students are always positively affected by the week-long exposure to such a gifted group of fellow delegates. Because the group is composed of students from

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BRMEMC delegates (from left) Danielle Diehl, Andrew Burch and Rachel Todd pose in front of the beautiful World War II memorial.

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various walks of life, they learn to appreciate diverse points of view and accept different social, racial and cultural backgrounds.

Delegate Rachel Todd, a Union County High School student, says, "The caliber of students alongside me throughout the week constantly amazed me. The invigorating conversations I had with other delegates added a whole new level to the trip. It's so refreshing and reassuring to know that there are other teens my age who do work hard and dream big."

Remember, the students show up for this trip not knowing one another, which makes the transformation from complete stranger to treasured friend quite remarkable, as Hayesville High delegate Andrew Burch can attest. "The trip forced me out of my comfort zone and helped improve my social skills as a result of placing me in an unfamiliar environment surrounded by a large group of people I had never met," he says. "After only one week of interacting with this incredible group of my peers, I had formed relationships that may last a lifetime."

Ultimately, the goal of the tour is to impart life-changing leadership qualities into each of the students' lives. Towns County delegate Danielle Diehl shared a personal insight that highlights the tour experience. "Meeting these amazing young people who are talented in such a wide variety of areas that I know nothing about, I realized something about leadership," she says. "Even though I pride myself on being a good leader, I discovered that I can't be the best at everything. And, if I meet someone who is better than me at something, it's important to



Blue Ridge Mountain EMC delegates (from left) Rachel Todd, Andrew Burch and Danielle Diehl pose in front of historic Mount Vernon.

let them lead.

"Leadership isn't about always being in control. It's about letting the person most capable lead and assisting them in any way possible because I won't always be the most capable person."

Now there is a lesson that all our leaders in Washington, D.C., could benefit from learning.



**Above:** U.S. Rep. Doug Collins meets with the three BRMEMC delegates and others who live in the 9th Congressional District. **Right:** Our delegates stand in front of the beautiful National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.



# From Delegate to Co-op Employee

Participating in the Washington Youth Tour (WYT) often opens delegates' eyes to potential career paths. Sometimes, they find a job with one of Georgia's electric cooperatives, which sponsor the tour. Three former WYT delegates who followed that path answer this question:

What Washington Youth Tour lessons have stayed with you and now help you in your work with an electric cooperative?

## Kelly McEwen



**Participated:** 2001, representing Carroll EMC (CEMC), Carrollton  
**Current job:** Administrative assistant in Engineering and Operations, CEMC; also worked at CEMC while attending college



All the delegates became friends so easily, and we were made to feel like we were part of a family. That is also what I recall from my past experience working at Carroll EMC during college and it is true today. Cooperative employees—within their own cooperative or with another from across the state—share a special camaraderie and relationship.

Cooperative employees strive to make their communities the best places to live and work and feel it is our duty to be responsible citizens and give back to our communities. Our world would be a better place if everyone held fast to these values.

## About the 2014 Delegates

Of the 65 who submitted survey responses ...

**43** are members of the **National Honor Society** and/or **Beta Club**

**31** had **never flown** in a plane **before** the **WYT**

**19** are members of **4-H**

**17** had a family member participate in a previous **WYT**

**14** are **members of FFA**

**The Holocaust Memorial Museum** was the tour stop or activity that left the **most lasting impression.**



## Charlie Durden



**Participated:** 2001, representing Georgia EMC, Tucker, and Washington EMC, Sandersville

**Current job:** Member services representative, Sawnee EMC, Cumming

Before I participated in the WYT, at the age of 17, my life revolved around school, church and sports. By the time I started my senior year of high school after returning from the trip, the WYT had given me a more guided focus on the things I wanted to do with my life. After the events of Sept. 11 (we were the last tour group before 9/11), I felt a stronger sense of responsibility and the need to be a good steward to my community, just as the pioneers of the electric membership cooperatives were to the communities they served at the dawn of the Rural Electrification Administration.

I now get the great opportunity to meet the tour delegates we send to Washington, D.C., each year. I enjoy learning of the experiences each had on the trip.

## Leah Tritt Johnson



**Participated:** 2007, representing Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, Young Harris

**Current job:** Member services representative, Amicalola EMC, Dahlonega office



The Youth Tour helps the younger generation with public speaking, responsibility and time-management skills, and gives small-town students the chance to travel somewhere they may never get to see or go otherwise.

I was extremely shy and attended the smallest school in the state, Woody Gap School in Suches. For me, it was a lot of firsts: first time flying, first time traveling farther than a surrounding state and the first time being alone on a trip without my family. But the Youth Tour gives you a chance to create a new kind of family ... a one-of-a-kind connection with youth across the state and even the country. I created a special bond with the Georgia group and love being able to see where they are now.

As a member of Amicalola EMC's Youth Tour Selection Committee, I interview and evaluate applicants. I hope that one day my husband, John, and I can go back to Washington, D.C., as chaperones.



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