

## The Washington Youth Tour: A Trip to Remember

STORY, PHOTOS BY BYRON MCCOMBS

**E**nergized with unlimited potential, a select group of high school students from EMCs across Georgia gather each year to experience endless opportunities as they tour Washington, D.C., together.

The itinerary for the weeklong Washington Youth Tour (WYT) is strategically planned well in advance. What can't be planned or predicted is the chemistry created when all the elements that make up the dynamic group of students are combined. It's a formula that makes each year's trip unique and memorable.

In 2017, 113 student delegates, 14 chaperones and

three tour directors united to make the annual WYT, sponsored by electric cooperatives in Georgia, a special event.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC's 2017 Youth Tour students—Abby Carder, from Cherokee County, N.C.; Chase Williams, from Towns County, GA.; Emmi Schakat, from Union County, GA.; and Jacquelyn Stewart, from Clay County, N.C.—joined their talented and ambitious peers to build leadership skills, understand the importance of civic involvement and community service and tour the

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From left, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC delegates Abby Carder, Chase Williams, Jacquelyn Stewart and Emmi Schakat pose at sunset in front of the breathtaking World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

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nation's historic sites to increase their knowledge of the country's rich heritage.

The memories began in Atlanta on June 8, 2017, with the kickoff banquet for student delegates and their families, before the students departed the next morning for D.C., where they spent the remainder of the trip. Through the week, delegates experienced 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.

Students see history come to life as they learn about the people and places that helped shape our country. Stops in the nation's capital included Mount Vernon, Arlington Memorial Cemetery, the Smithsonian museums, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Mount Vernon, Supreme Court, U.S. Capitol, National Archives, National Cathedral, Supreme Court, Library of Congress and Kennedy Center. The students also toured the revered Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, MLK, World War II, Vietnam War and Korean War veterans memorials.

Visits to the iconic sights, as well as up-close encounters with the history they have been taught in the classroom, can have a profound effect on the students' understanding of their country. "The inspiration I gained from the pioneers of American history, like George Washington, drives me to lead better, think deeper and explore new possibilities," says Emmi Schakat.

In D.C., the Georgia contingent was joined by 1,700 delegates from across the country from different walks of life, different backgrounds and different life experiences, giving them a broader perspective and deeper appreciation of the world at large. The opportunity to mix and mingle with a melting pot of their peers always leaves a lasting impression when the delegates return home.

"I was surprised at how similar, yet different, everyone was and the friendships that would develop from just one week on the tour," Chase Williams says,

For Jacquelyn Stewart, the most interesting part of the trip was the people. "There were so many different personalities, but we all seemed to mesh together very well. I learned about different points of views and I am better for it."



From left, Chase Williams, Abby Carder and Jacquelyn Stewart gather in front of the U.S. Capitol before taking a guided tour of the building.



The White House was just one of many stops for Emmi Schakat, Chase Williams and the other delegates.



BRMEMC's Abby Carder, left, and Jacquelyn Stewart, far right, join Coweta-Fayette EMC delegates Abby Adams and Rachel Gomes for a photo op in Old Town Alexandria, VA., before taking a cruise down the Potomac River.

In addition to visiting the historical sights in D.C. and spending time with fascinating peers from all over the United States, delegates also engage with members of Georgia’s congressional delegation, including personal visits with U.S. Sens. David Perdue and Johnny Isakson. Meeting our political leaders allows students to gain perspective on some of today’s important issues and their role as involved citizens.

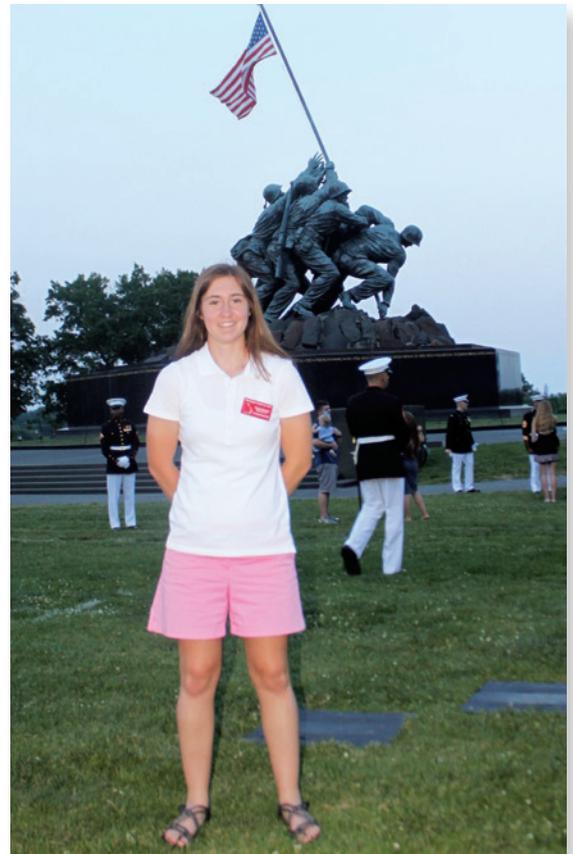
Seeing the U.S. Capitol, the House of Representatives and the Senate left a lasting impression on Abby Carder. “It was exciting to see the places where the policies are made that govern our lives,” she says.

The goal of the WYT is to provide the students—our next generation of leaders—opportunities and experiences that will empower them to make meaningful and lifelong contributions to their communities.

Spending a week away, surrounded by new people in a different environment, often allows delegates to forget any preconceived limitations on their lives back home. So many times, the WYT provides students a launching pad into leadership roles they never would have thought possible.

The Washington Youth Tour is indeed a trip to remember. It is a trip to remember the sacrifices made by American soldiers who fought to secure the freedoms we enjoy today and for delegates to never forget their responsibility to protect all that has been achieved for themselves and future generations.

BRMEMC believes there is no better way to promote stronger communities and a stronger nation than to support our future leaders today.



Following the U.S. Marine Corps Sunset Parade, Emmi Schakat poses in front of the Iwo Jima Memorial.



From left, Jacquelyn Stewart, Chase Williams, Emmi Schakat and Abby Carder stand in front of Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington.

# In Packing for Trip, Delegates Leave Comfort Zone at Home

A few months before the Washington Youth Tour (WYT) each year, delegates from Georgia's electric cooperatives receive a suggested packing list for the weeklong trip. Among other items, the list includes six casual touring outfits, two dressy outfits, comfortable shoes, rain gear and sunscreen.

One thing not on the recommended list, though, is each delegate's comfort zone. It's definitely excess baggage for this trip.

Stepping boldly outside the familiar and being flexible and open to new people and activities are part of the leadership experience designed to help delegates grow in many ways so the trip can have a lasting—often lifelong—impact.

Forgoing the comfort zone is a common theme in the surveys that former WYT delegates complete after the trip ends. The 2017 group, which numbered 113, is no exception.

"The thing that will help me most in the future is that I had to step out of my comfort zone," says Jacquelyn Stewart, who represented Young Harris-based Blue Ridge Mountain EMC. "Meeting over a hundred people

you don't know and going on a weeklong trip with them is intimidating, but when you let yourself be open to new people and possibilities, nothing but good can come of it!"

"A lot of times, your comfort zone is holding you back from achieving something, whether it be meeting new people or trying new things," says Dalton Crowe, who represented Amicalola EMC in Jasper on the 2017 tour.

"Sit with someone new every day, go out and dance on the dance floor, ask as many questions as possible, thank your bus driver at every stop and don't let the exhaustion get to you," advises Jennifer Thorpe, a delegate from Coastal Electric Cooperative in Midway.

At the end of the tour, the delegates' parents notice the dramatic impact that just one short week can have. "From the bottom of my heart, thank you for giving my daughter the experience of a lifetime,"

writes one mother to Senior Tour Director Gale Cutler of Georgia EMC in Tucker. "Her world is larger, her vision longer and her aspirations greater."



## *A Night at the Theater*

As part of the Washington Youth Tour experience, 2017 delegates were treated to an evening at Toby's Dinner Theatre in Columbia, Md., to see the closing performance of "Beauty and the Beast."

Following the outstanding performance, Belle (Nicki Elledge) and The Beast (Russell Sunday) were kind enough to pose for photos with the students. "You were an amazing closing show audience," Elledge told the group.