



The Washington Youth Tour

Investing in America's Future for 50 Years

STORY, PHOTOS BY BYRON McCOMBS

“Send youngsters to the nation’s capital, where they can actually see what the flag stands for and represents,” said U.S. Sen. Lyndon Johnson at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Annual Meeting in Chicago in 1957. Electric cooperatives across the country accepted that challenge and have been sending students to Washington, D.C., ever since. In fact, 1,700 exceptional students from all over the United States descended upon the nation’s capital in 2015 to take part in the Washington Youth Tour (WYT).

Georgia’s electric cooperatives sent 111 delegates

on the 2015 WYT (only Tennessee and Texas sent more), which was held from June 11-18. The Youth Tour, Georgia’s oldest leadership program for teens, celebrated 50 years of investing in the future leaders of our country.

In 1965, the inaugural year of Georgia’s involvement in the WYT, a dozen students participated in the trip. Since then, more than 3,000 teens have been sponsored by EMCs in Georgia and given the opportunity to experience this prestigious leadership event.

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From left, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC delegates Shea Underwood, Madeline Walker and Collin Worley pose in front of Mount Vernon, the most popular historic estate in America.

The Washington Youth Tour, *Continued from page 24A*

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC (BRMEMC) has had the privilege of sponsoring local students on the Youth Tour since 1985, when we sent our first two delegates. Freya Ledford, from Union County, and Stephen Roach, from Clay County, represented our co-op that year. Since that time, the WYT has continued to grow in size and stature. Each year, students return from the weeklong tour to share stories of the trip's impact on their life.

Our 2015 delegates—Madeline Walker, from Union County, Ga.; Shea Underwood, from Towns County, Ga.; and Collin Worley, from Clay County, N.C.—took advantage of every minute as they navigated through the seven-day adventure.

Unlike a school or church youth group trip, where most of the young people are acquainted with one another, the Youth Tour knits together 111 delegates who have never met before. Walker says, “I was so amazed, not only at all the history and monuments that were around me, but at all the different people who were around me. Although many of us came from such different backgrounds and families, it didn't matter; we all made incredible bonds and friendships.”

The WYT is a leadership experience designed to expose delegates to lessons they can use throughout their lives. “The trip taught me the importance of being on time, the value of being open, the usefulness of a good demeanor and the impact words can have on people,” says Underwood. “The tour helped me realize

just how significant one person can be in the history of a nation.”

The one word Worley uses to describe the Washington Youth Tour is “incredible.” He says, “The experiences, laughs and tears I shared among new, lifelong friends are indescribable. The opportunities I had and will continue to have as a result of the Youth Tour are indescribable. The newfound respect for others and our country are indescribable. If I could relive this experience 100 times, I'm sure each time I would learn something new about our country, others and leadership.”

Our country has experienced many changes during the past 50 years. As a result, understanding what the flag stands for and represents is more important than ever.

BRMEMC is proud to participate in a trip that provides this opportunity to our future leaders.



Top right: From left, Shea, Madeline and Collin enjoy a sunset cruise down the Potomac River. **Bottom left:** The three BRMEMC delegates gather in front of the Marine Corps War Memorial (Iwo Jima statue) following the Sunset Parade. **Bottom right:** From left, Collin, Madeline and Shea stand outside the U.S. Capitol building before meeting with Georgia's U.S. senators, Johnny Isakson and David Perdue.



BYRON MCCOMBS

Michael Smith, Georgia's 2014 Youth Leadership Council representative, mans the selfie stick as 2015 Washington Youth Tour delegates, chaperones and leaders converge for a group photo during team-building exercises in Atlanta. Smith was a delegate from Jackson EMC.



What tour stop or activity made the greatest impression on you? Why?



Taylor Haynes, *Amicalola EMC, Jasper*. Arlington National Cemetery, because in those fields were people of all different ages who fought for our freedom. It caused me to step back and capture the moment and the beauty of the country and the freedom that comes with it. [Like](#) . [👍](#)



Collin Worley, *Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, Young Harris*. The greatest impact on me was the Supreme Court. After taking Advanced Placement U.S. government and politics at school, I had knowledge of many Supreme Court cases. Seeing where the cases took place was an amazing experience! 😊



Cassandra McCullough, *Coastal Electric Cooperative, Midway*. I think it would be a tie between the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. Both of these tour stops were very emotional for me. They both represent eras where we had to go through great amounts of growth and learning, and I am thankful we have these places to remind us of our growth. [Like](#) . [👍](#)



Cheyenne Tippens, *GreyStone Power Corp., Douglasville*. Arlington National Cemetery, the memorials and the Holocaust Memorial Museum. They are dedicated to people who lived and died for the freedom of our nation. The ceremony at Arlington was bone-chilling. Listening to the Army band play the national anthem is something that will stay with me forever. [Like](#) . [👍](#)



Mae Manley, *Upson EMC, Thomaston*. The Pulitzer Prize photography exhibit in the Newseum made the greatest impression. The pictures were so moving, and they allowed you to catch a glimpse of life in other time periods and cultures.

Tour Photographer Relishes 'Dream Come True'



BY KEVIN BRAUN

Every family has one—the designated photographer on vacations and for gatherings and special occasions. That person spends much of the time looking through a camera viewfinder (or at a phone) to capture every photo op for posterity. Except for the kindness of a passing stranger (or, these days, a selfie stick), there might be no evidence the photographer was even there.

Byron McCombs has served four years in that capacity for Georgia's Washington Youth Tour (WYT) family. McCombs, staff assistant at Blue Ridge Mountain EMC in Young Harris, went on three tours as a chaperone before he was asked to step into the new role of trip photographer. "To spend time with the caliber of young people selected to attend the tour—while surrounded by our country's history—is a dream come true," says the former history teacher and youth minister.

It's difficult enough just to keep up with the weeklong tour's breakneck pace and the many logistical obstacles of moving 120 people (counting students and chaperones) through Washington, D.C. But that's just part of the challenge. "There's no problem taking plenty of beautiful pictures in the nation's capital," says McCombs. "It's trying to get photos of the students with other students from their sponsoring EMCs in front of a historical landmark that presents the real challenge."

Electric cooperatives in Georgia use the photos taken by McCombs in their newsletters published in *GEORGIA Magazine* and can distribute them to local media to accompany stories promoting the Washington Youth Tour.

Each year brings a new group of exceptional students, and the opportunity to interact with them is what draws McCombs back. "Each of them has a story to tell, and I like hearing them—where they come from, how they got where they are and where they think they are going," he says.

McCombs' contributions to the Youth Tour go far beyond photographs. "Byron's knowledge and background as a history teacher enrich the group's experience, and his witty sense of humor has caused many uncontrollable bouts of laughter," says Gale Cutler, tour director for Georgia EMC. "The students love him, and I am so thankful that he is involved with the Washington Youth Tour."



BETH McMILLAN

Tour photographer Byron McCombs, center, enjoys a rare moment in front of the camera with a group of 2015 Washington Youth Tour delegates.



A number of former Washington Youth Tour (WYT) delegates followed a path that led them to military service. Here's a look at a few:



Tara Wickersham Miles
with her father, Retired Lt. Col. Daniel Wickersham.

Tara Wickersham Miles

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, 2010 WYT delegate

- Graduated in May 2015 from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point with a degree in kinesiology.
- Graduated in December 2015 from Basic Officer Leaders Course (BOLC) in Fort Sill, Okla.; air defense officer.

“My time at West Point taught me a lot about leadership and life. Following freshman year, I attended Air Assault School, where I learned a great deal about transporting equipment via helicopters and rappelled 90 feet from a helicopter.

“Going into my junior year, I was put in charge of new cadets as they began their first summer at West Point. That is where I met my husband. The following summer, I spent two weeks learning infantry tactics in the mountains of New York and later shadowed a second lieutenant in South Korea for three weeks. My senior year, I was a leader in the Professional Military Ethics Education program.

“I was lucky enough to marry my best friend, Nicholas Miles, a fellow West Point graduate, this past summer. My husband and I will be stationed at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Md.”

★ **About the WYT:** *“I made great friends, and I learned a great deal from the experience. I hope this trip continues to help develop young leaders like it helped me.”*

Blake Cox

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, 2009 WYT delegate

- Graduated in December 2014 from the University of North Georgia (UNG) with a criminal justice degree.
- Graduated from Basic Officer Leader Course at Fort Lee, Va., stationed at Fort Campbell, Ky.; serving as a platoon leader in Alpha Company, 426 Brigade Support Battalion, 1st Brigade (Bastogne), 101st Airborne Division.

“When I was younger, I wanted to be an FBI agent. Growing up and hearing my father’s stories of his time in the military had a huge impact on me. Also, my undying love and patriotism for this country only got stronger as I got older, and I could not think of any better way to give back than to be ready to answer this nation’s call to service. UNG is one of six senior military colleges in the nation, with an intensive ROTC program that turns aspiring college students into some of the Army’s finest officers.”



Blake Cox

★ **About the WYT:** *“The majority of the chaperones and personnel who sent the students were doing this in addition to their jobs, family and everything else. They did it because they cared. In that regard, I always try to take time and give back. That does not have to include any uniformed services; it can be a youth baseball coach trying to motivate youngsters to be all they can be. Kindness will go a long way in life.”*