

'It can change your life!'

The 'awesome Washington Youth Tour' kids



Faren Rachels, of Sparta, and Callan McDermott, of Richmond Hill, were chosen by Georgia Electric Membership Corp. (GEMC) as statewide-sponsored delegates. Faren is from Washington EMC's area and Callan is from Coastal Electric Cooperative's area.



Every school year, Georgia's electric membership corporations (EMCs) continue a leadership tradition that takes place in area high schools—they get the ball rolling for the Washington Youth Tour.

It costs the students nothing; the EMCs foot the bill, investing in the future leaders of our community and state. As Julia Schuchard, a delegate representing Walton EMC in Monroe, says, "It is not just a week of sightseeing. It is even more than a chance to meet other students from across the nation and shake hands with congressmen. I gained a new sense of pride in my country and respect for those who fight to defend the freedoms it offers." Following are insights from other delegates ...

What is the Washington Youth Tour?

BY ERIN CHUPP, GEORGIA MAGAZINE EDITORIAL INTERN

Each year, approximately 90 Georgia high school students earn the opportunity to bring their history books to life with an unforgettable experience.

The students are selected from Georgia's electric cooperatives to represent our state as delegates on the Washington Youth Tour (WYT) over the course of a week. Two high school teachers also join the tour, to learn firsthand about the program.

In 1957, Sen. Lyndon Johnson initiated the beginning of the WYT when he suggested "sending youngsters to the national capital, where

they can actually see what the flag stands for and represents." Since 1965, an all-expenses-paid trip to our state's and nation's capitals gives a greater respect of the price of freedom: Faces are connected to Holocaust victims' names, rows of white crosses at the Arlington National Cemetery stretch as far as the eye can see, and a 19-foot-tall Abraham Lincoln gazes into each ambitious set of eyes.

More than 1,400 students from 43 states travel to Washington, D.C., for the tour. Georgia's EMCs have funded this unique experience for 39 years.

How it changed their views of the world:

- **Faren Rachels** (Georgia Electric Membership Corp.—GEMC/Washington EMC, Sandersville): The time we got to spend with our congressmen is something I will always remember. We got to ask them questions and talk about issues we were concerned with.
- **Erin Garner** (Hart EMC, Hartwell): We listened to brilliant speakers who inspired me to make a difference, and I found out what legislators actually do all day (and how hectic it can be).
- **Rebecca Gaal** (Sawnee EMC,

(Continued on page 30)

Cumming): It opened my eyes even wider to solidify my desire to enter law and politics.

- **Matt Henning** (Snapping Shoals EMC, Covington): Once I saw those monuments, I was not only happy to finally see them, but I also realized how much I really love this country.

- **Julia Schuchard:** Meeting and speaking with representatives of Congress made me realize that the issues debated in Washington have an impact on my life and that I can have a voice in those issues.

- **Josh Dunn** (Oconee EMC, Dudley): The tour instilled in me a great respect and pride for our country, a better understanding of the EMCs of Georgia and, most important, equipped me to be a better leader in Wilkinson County, Georgia.

How it affected their lives:

- **Ann O’Neal** (Carroll EMC, Carrollton): The WYT helped me realize that I needed to get more involved with my government and better familiarize myself with what is going on in the world today.

- **Callan McDermott** (GEMC/Coastal Electric, Midway): The



BYRON MCCOMBS, BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN EMC

Above: (front row) Sarah Griffin (Planters EMC, Millen), Erin Garner (Hart EMC, Hartwell), Rachel Morgan (Middle Georgia EMC, Vienna) and (back row) Kayla Sasser (Planters EMC, Millen), Faren Rachels (GEMC), Emily Brantley (Washington EMC, Sandersville) and Kristin Rivers (Jefferson Energy, Wrens) ham it up during the Sunset Parade at the Marine Corps War Memorial. Left: Matt Henning (Snapping Shoals EMC, Covington), Emily Brantley, Sherrie Moon (Rayle EMC, Washington), Melanie Hollingsworth (Okefenoke REMC, Nahunta) and Allison Durrence (Canoochee EMC, Reidsville) get ready to “perform for their plate” on Friday night.

WYT has changed the way I look at my future in many ways, because it has helped me realize how much I love Georgia and that I want to live here and start a career here. I learned many things about myself on the Washington Youth Tour—I realized that I could be anything I want to be when I get older.

- **Heather Nesom** (Satilla REMC, Alma): It taught me it was OK to disagree with someone and not to be afraid to express my views.

- **Faren Rachels:** I learned that I can be a leader in ways I never thought of before. I learned I can make a difference in my school, my community and my country.

- **Erin Garner:** I left Washington inspired, in awe and ready to change the world.

- **Bliss Kotal** (Hart EMC, Hartwell): I realized how many other students there are in the United States who care about making a difference, who have such great leadership skills.



Ann O’Neal (Carroll EMC, Carrollton) hears from U.S. Rep. Jack Kingston as he addresses Georgia youth at the congressional luncheon.

A few of my favorite things ...

“I enjoyed every single event, but the Spy and Holocaust museums were my favorites.”

Ann O’Neal, Carroll EMC, Carrollton

“The cruise down the Potomac River. We had so much fun dancing and getting to know each other and the people on the boat from other states.”

Heather Nesom, Satilla REMC, Alma

“During the rally and the riverboat cruise, we all got a chance to bond and really be proud of where we were from.”

Callan McDermott, GEMC/Coastal Electric, Midway

“You don’t realize it’s educational until you think about it when you get home and you realize, ‘Hey, I learned a lot on that trip.’”

*Heather Nesom,
Satilla REMC, Alma*

What they will remember:

- **Rebecca Gaal:** The Korean, Vietnam and World War II memorials brought tears to my eyes because I never really considered the number of lives that paid the ultimate price for my freedoms.
- **Ann O’Neal:** My most memorable moment was watching four of our Youth Tour representatives



A sentinel and bugler approach the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in preparation for the Georgia delegation’s wreath-laying ceremony.

participate in the “laying of the wreath” at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

- **Emily Anne Brantley** (Washington EMC, Sandersville): Touring the monuments (World War II,



Standing tall at the World War II Memorial, left to right: Faren Rachels, Amelia Studdard (Jefferson Energy, Wrens), Jeremy Rowland (Jefferson Energy), Erin Garner (Hart EMC), Rachael Wood (Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, Young Harris), Kristin Rivers (Jefferson Energy) and Kyle Staton (Blue Ridge Mountain EMC).

Jefferson, FDR and Washington) at sunset with friends and admiring the beautiful structures was awesome!

- **Callan McDermott:** The National Youth Day Rally, the World War II Memorial and the riverboat cruise.

Youth Tour, then and now

BY ANDREA WILLIAMS

Talk about déjà vu. I arrive in Atlanta to serve as a chaperone for the Washington Youth Tour (WYT) and one of the first people I meet is Bill Verner. What makes this meeting unusual is that we had both been here exactly 20 years earlier, myself as a wide-eyed high school junior and Bill as my WYT chaperone/director.

In many ways we’ve changed a lot over the last 20 years, but in other ways we’re still the same. I would say the same thing about the WYT. The WYT is still about recognizing and building leadership among Georgia’s youth. It still involves a highly competitive selection process that brings together outstanding students from all over the state. The institutions and memorials we visited are still awe-inspiring. I think the students will still tell you, as I would have in

1984, that this was one of the most memorable trips of their young lives.

As far as the differences go, several are notable. The current group is twice as large. New memorials have also been built since 1984. I enjoyed the World War II, Korean and Roosevelt memorials. I was especially moved by the Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened in 1993. It is hard to find the words to adequately describe the feelings that this visit invoked. I will never forget it.

As an EMC member and customer, this is a program in which I can take great pride. I am thankful for having been selected, in 1984 and 2004, to attend the tour. Our guides and coordinators were experienced and knowledgeable. I



A 1984 Youth Tour delegate, Andrea Williams (left, center), a Cochran resident and teacher, revisits the Washington Youth Tour as a chaperone this year. At right, she poses with Sen. Zell Miller.

enjoyed the week that I spent with the students and the other chaperones. Here’s the deal—I’ll do this again in 2024, but only if Bill agrees to go too.

A chaperone for this year’s WYT, Andrea Williams teaches science at Bleckley County High School in Cochran. Originally from Eastman, she holds a doctorate in educational administration from Georgia Southern University. She would love to hear from any of the 1984 Youth Tour participants; e-mail her at awaw@direcway.com.

Through their eyes

BY THATCHER YOUNG

Daily we hear stories of our troubled teenagers, as if they are a lost generation. We have allowed a few bad apples to spoil the barrel, completely ignoring the many teens who are true leaders in their schools and communities.

This summer, I joined 88 Georgia high school students for the Washington Youth Tour. It was a joy to share the shrines of liberty and democracy that crown our state and nation's capitals. To witness the students' awe as they stood in front of the symbols of unity and sacrifice that created this greatest of nations inspired awe in me.

On a sunset tour of the newly dedicated World War II Memorial, we listened to veterans recall their experiences in battle in Europe and on

the Pacific. Their stories of courage and sacrifice brought home to these students that—at their very same age—these young men and women had answered the cries of freedom and liberty, and put their lives on the line in sacrifice for so many.

Students and chaperones were reminded that our country is today answering the call to do battle against enemies of liberty. It was encouraging to see these students recognize that sacrifice and, for me, it was an amazing opportunity to glimpse the future of our state, nation and world through the eyes of future leaders. These teenagers are the future, and that future is bright.

Thatcher Young is staff assistant for Government Relations at GEMC.



Rachael Wood (Blue Ridge Mountain EMC), Josh Dunn (Oconee EMC, Dudley) and Emily Thomas (Little Ocmulgee EMC, Alamo) pose in front of the Supreme Court building.



Chris Reid (Flint Energies, Reynolds) meets his congressman, Rep. Jim Marshall, at Georgia's congressional luncheon.

Why take the tour?

• **Emily Anne Brantley:** The Washington Youth Tour would not have been the same if I did not get to meet all of the other delegates, chaperones and coordinators from Georgia. I got to make many friendships I will cherish forever.

- **Rebecca Gaal:** You're surrounded by rich history, frozen moments in time, spectacular architectural sights and tributes to those who made freedom possible. [Also] consider the nights out spent dancing, eating and making enough friends to last a lifetime!
- **Ann O'Neal:** You can meet many

"I now have 87 people throughout the state I can always call upon whenever I need anything."

Callan McDermott,
GEMC/Coastal Electric, Midway



Rachel Morgan (Middle Georgia EMC), Bliss Kotal (Hart EMC), Erin Garner (Hart EMC), Sarah Griffin (Planters EMC), Kayla Sasser (Planters EMC) and Kiah Busch (Amicalola EMC, Jasper) enjoy dinner at the Hard Rock Café.

different people and form with those people bonds you will keep forever.

- **Julia Schuchard:** Tour-goers will form friendships with other amazing students who are sure to become leaders.
- **Faren Rachels:** Don't let this opportunity slip by. Amazing people have made this wonderful trip possible and it is truly the experience of a lifetime.

GEORGIA Magazine *would like to thank Gale Cutler, a Washington Youth Tour director for Georgia, for her help in producing this story—and for her guidance on the tour!* 🌟