



Graham County Electric Cooperative representatives pose on the dock before boarding for a riverboat cruise. From left are Kayla West, Alyson Wakefield, Leisel Griffin and Dillon Jones.

Journey To Washington, D.C.

Area students experience the birthplace of our nation, gain insight to history

As Gila Valley students return to the classroom, a few students can share terrific memories of an extraordinary summer. For Thatcher High School students Leisel Griffin, Alyson Wakefield, and Kayla West, along with Pima High School's Dillon Jones, the words "experience of a lifetime" took on a new meaning. They enjoyed a weeklong tour of Washington, D.C., compliments of Graham County Electric Cooperative.

Every year, high school juniors compete for an opportunity to participate in Washington Youth Tour, an event sponsored by the National Rural Electric

Cooperative Association and Touchstone Energy Cooperatives. This year's delegates joined 40 other students from Arizona and southern California as they toured historically significant sites such as Mount Vernon, Arlington National Cemetery, and several memorials and museums, including the Holocaust and Smithsonian's.

During the July board meeting, the students shared their experiences with Graham County Electric Co-op's board of directors and expressed gratitude for being able to participate in this life-changing experience.

"It was the experience of a lifetime and something that I will always remember," says Leisel, daughter of Antoninette and Wayne Griffin. "I enjoyed having the chance to tour the city and see some of our nation's monuments."

She says meeting Congressman Tom O'Halleran was one of the coolest parts of the trip.

"It gave me a new perspective into politics and made me want to take a more active role in my community," Leisel says. "I was also interested in the things we learned about cooperatives during our workshop. I've grown up in the



Above, the Graham group with the cast from the "Beauty and the Beast" dinner theater. Photo courtesy of Kayla West.



Left, Leisel plays an icebreaker game with Marcus Reaves from Sierra Vista

community and have always heard about Graham County Electric Cooperative, but have never fully understood how large of a role it plays in our community. This truly was the trip of a lifetime. Thank you for making this a possibility not only for me, but for the past and future applicants."

Alyson, daughter of Candace and Shawn Wakefield, says, "It's amazing how much your perspective and appreciation changes in seven days! While I was in Washington, D.C., I was able to meet other people and create friendships. One of the days we were there, I had the opportunity to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. While reading all of the names, I gained a greater appreciation for the men and women that have fought and given their lives so that I can enjoy my freedoms. I gained a greater appreciation at the Holocaust Museum. I have grown up learning how tragic it was, but experiencing it in real life is a whole

different feeling. It was a trip that I will always remember."

Kayla, daughter of Jennifer and Kevin West, reflected on her unique opportunity for the trip.

"Throughout the tour, I had the opportunity to visit several monuments, museums, and address important figures, including Congressman Tom O'Halleran," says Kayla. "Interacting with the various co-op groups, as well as my own, created lifelong friendships. Cooperative insight groups and an assortment of facts learned along the way contributed to a new respect I gained toward my local co-op. I express my sincerest thanks for this remarkable learning and leadership opportunity. It's one I'll cherish forever. I'm grateful to have been a part of this program and am excited to encourage the next batch of students to apply for this trip of a lifetime."

Dillon, son of Rane and Sam Jones, expressed his gratitude as well.

"I was so nervous going on this trip because I was going with three Thatcher

girls who I didn't know, but the whole trip was a blast," he says. "If I had to choose my favorite experience from the trip, I think I'd lean toward the USMC Museum and Sunset Parade. The maturity and solemn respect felt there was unbelievable. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to explore more parts and places of this great country. This was an unforgettable trip that taught me so much. I will be sure to inform my younger classmates on how fun and amazing this trip was. Hopefully they'll be able to experience the same great trip."

The Washington Youth Tour was inspired by Lyndon B. Johnson when he addressed NRECA's annual meeting in Chicago in 1957. The future president declared, "If one thing goes out of this meeting, it will be sending youngsters to the national capital where they can actually see what the flag stands for and represents."

In 1964, NRECA coordinated the first joint activities. Approximately 400 young people came from 12 states. Today, more than 1,800 students come from more than 43 states, including 44 students from the Arizona/California delegation.

"It is exciting to hear of their special experiences that will stay with them for a lifetime," says GCEC Washington Youth Tour Coordinator Diane Junion. "These awesome students get to see so much of our nation's history and make so many lasting friendships. Not only learning about our nation, they are involved in learning about the cooperative principles at work. It is cool to see them change in a week's time. They come back so enthusiastic and embrace all they did. This program opens doors and provides opportunities to students that they may never have had otherwise." ■

Youth Tour students will visit area high schools soon to promote the Washington Youth Tour contest. They encourage all juniors with an interest in free travel, education and making new friends to join the competition. Applications will be available at the GCEC office in Pima, on the GCEC website (www.gce.coop) or from the student counselor at each of the local high schools.