Washington Youth Tour

A Historic Opportunity

“If one thing comes 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.”

—Lyndon Baines Johnson
1957 NRECA Annual Meeting

By Pam Blair

The early morning excitement and noisy buzz of anticipation melts into silence as Washington Youth Tour students and chaperones join a packed crowd watching the slow, rhythmic movements of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery.

“People line the steps near the tomb, but the sheer silence stuns you,” says Savannah Chadwick of Uniontown, Washington, sponsored by Clearwater Power in Idaho. “Hundreds of thousands of people visit the tomb each year and still silence remains.”

In the bustling area around Washington, D.C., the quiet is eerie and deafening.

“Watching those people guard the tomb in silence, then exchanging their watch in a scripted ritual was inspiring,” says Andrew Damitio of Blodgett, Oregon, Consumers Power representative. No one encourages the silence. It is instinctive. It is an understanding of history and place, and a show of respect for those who paid the ultimate price for the freedoms Americans enjoy today.

Rachel Kloor, Oregon’s state-wide director, watched students shake the hands of World War II veterans at the cemetery.

“They did this without being reminded to do so,” Rachel says. “They just knew it was the right thing to do. The students took the time to ask them questions and thank them for their service instead of rushing to the next site.”

Arlington National Cemetery is one stop in a week filled with somber, reflective moments as history comes to life for participants in the Washington Youth Tour.

“I was in awe of the thousands upon thousands of white crosses, each symbolizing a person who gave their life for their country,” says Talitha Anderson of Anderson Island, Washington, sponsored by Tanner Electric. “Each of the crosses represented a family who would remember in each generation a man or woman whose life was cut short for the sake of their country’s freedom. I have a better understanding of just what it costs to keep our country free.”

A Fifty-Year Tradition
More than 1,600 students from 43 states converge on the nation’s capital each June for an awe-inspiring, life-changing, physically and emotionally exhausting one-week trip known as the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Washington Youth Tour.

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Each state has a coordinator. States with few representatives team up—and not necessarily with a geographical neighbor. Wisconsin was part of the Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming contingent. Hawaii partners with Kansas.
Washington Youth Tour was inspired by then-Sen. Lyndon Baines Johnson. “If one thing comes 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,” the future president said in a speech at the 1957 NRECA Annual Meeting.

The idea grew. By 1964, NRECA was coordinating activities for state delegations. While much has changed during the program’s 50 years, students remain amazed, inspired, humbled and grateful.

They see the roots of American history in visits to monuments and never-ending Smithsonian museums.

They meet with their elected representatives in a real-life civics lesson.

They learn about electric cooperatives, grassroots advocacy and the importance of assuming leadership roles.

They make lifelong friends with people who were strangers the day before.

They walk miles and sleep little, packing activity into every waking hour.

“Going into the trip, I expected a whirlwind of new sights punctuated by very short periods of sleep, which is what I got,” says Marta Faulkner of Canyon City, Oregon, sponsored by Oregon Trail Electric. “Of course, I couldn’t have expected what it felt to actually see Washington, D.C., in person, but I remember thinking, ‘Geez, I’ll be tired’ when I got that itinerary. I wasn’t really until the end, though. I slept until 2:30 in the afternoon the day after I got back home.”

Fellow OTEC representative Kate Averett of Baker City, Oregon, says she was “amazed by the amount we were able to learn and fit all into one week.”

“There is not one moment that you aren’t having a blast or learning something, or seeing something exciting,” adds Michael Stephens of The Dalles, Oregon, sponsored by Wasco Electric.

**An Action-Packed Schedule**

Every state contingent develops its own itinerary. In addition to the national memorials, stops often include George Washington’s ancestral home of Mount Vernon, the U.S. Capitol, the Washington National Cathedral and the White House.

Some groups also participate in a cruise down the Potomac. All attend the U.S. Marine Corps Sunset Parade and come together for Youth Day—a time to learn about electric cooperatives and grassroots politics and hear motivational speakers.

“I was moved the most when I realized how many people actually cared about our co-ops and the future generations of America,” says Austen Schiavone of Oregon Trail Electric.

**“This trip helped me realize that there is a bigger world with many opportunities. Thank you for the opportunity of a lifetime! This was the highlight of the 17 years I’ve been alive.”**

—Teddy Brumley, Aguanga, California

Anza Electric Cooperative

Weston Wiltbank of Safford, Arizona, snaps a photo at Arlington National Cemetery. “Looking upon the rows of white headstones that seemed to stretch on for miles, I now have a greater respect for those who have fought and died to keep our great country free, and remain the greatest nation under God the world has ever known,” says Weston, who was sponsored by Graham County Electric Co-op.
Portola, California, sponsored by Plumas-Sierra Rural Electric. “I could become an international lineman and help bring electricity to developing countries."

The Holocaust Memorial Museum deeply affected both students and adults. “It was the saddest thing I’ve ever seen and been through,” says Riley Fite of Safford, Arizona, sponsored by Graham County Electric. “When we walked through the room full of shoes my stomach turned. It really put things into perspective that we have life pretty nice here in our little town where we don’t have to worry if we are going to be killed each day. Even though we went throughout the sad memorials and museums, the trip gave us a sense of national pride and made us glad to be Americans.”

Lindsay Noggles of Janesville, California, sponsored by PSREC, thought of her grandfather, who served in World War II. “It was very emotional for me to think about how he risked his life to help save those in need,” Lindsay says.

Amanda Tran of Sierra Vista, Arizona, Sulphur Springs Valley Electric representative, was moved by the story another visitor told her of leaving the Netherlands right before the deportations began.

“What an emotional experience,” says Monica Castillo, a chaperone for Trico Electric in Arizona. “The trip made me truly understand and completely admire and respect all the brave individuals. You have to be there and witness it to genuinely take it all in.”

Overton Power District No. 5 representative Victoria Magoon of Bunkerville, Nevada, says she will never forget a quote she heard at the Air Force Memorial: “All gave some, but some gave all.”

“My thoughts kept coming back to this quote every time we visited a monument,” says Victoria. “How truly blessed we are to live in a free country.”

The Pentagon/Flight 93 Memorial stood out for Thad Ballard, a chaperone for Wells Rural Electric Co. in Nevada. “All of the other memorials commemorate people or events that happened before I was born,” Thad says. “This memorial recognizes an event that happened in my lifetime. The structure of the memorial is also very personal because you aren’t just looking at it, you are in it.”

At the Vietnam Memorial, he found the name of a man from his hometown. He died the day Thad was born. “I was reminded that this country is founded on rock-solid principles and that there have been enormous sacrifices made that bless our lives still,” Thad says.

Lifelong Relationships
The trip was about much more than sightseeing and patriotism. It also was about building relationships and developing the next generation of leaders.

“The entire trip moved me, but the other students moved me the most,” says Caylin Tibbetts of San Simon, Arizona, sponsored by SSVEC. “They helped me understand that it’s OK to be yourself. “I was also moved by the fact that one person can make a big difference. It showed me to never give up, that I may one day be able to change hundreds of lives. It was a trip of a lifetime. I made friends and memories I will never forget.”

Ashley Standridge of Roseburg, Oregon, sponsored by Douglas Electric, was touched by everyone’s genuineness. “It’s a rare quality to find in people,” she says. “I made friends from 43 states.”

While everyone came from different backgrounds and different cultures, “our personalities and drive for success made us fit together like a big family,” says Savannah Chadwick.

NaRayah Runyon of Elfrida, Arizona, sponsored by SSVEC, says she was told the trip would change her. “I was told that I would bond with the people on the trip to such an extent that I would cry when it was time to go home, but I didn’t believe it,” she says. “I expected to learn more on the trip than I would in a whole semester of school and experience the history and politics of our country firsthand, and I expected to make friends. I did learn more about our nation in one week than I thought was possible and made amazing friends. But I was wrong. I did cry, and I was changed.”

“What surprised me was how real everything becomes when standing at the memorials and monuments. It showed me that the lessons in school about America’s history are more than just words being spoken. It’s what this country was built on.”

—Ty Morley, West Wendover, Nevada, Wells Rural Electric Co.
A Lasting Impression

For many students, the trip provided a fresh perspective of themselves, their country and, in some cases, their futures. “The Youth Tour program is such a spectacular opportunity to acquaint rural kids with the sights and sounds of one of our most important cities,” says Marta Faulkner. “I’ve grown up seeing pictures and stories about the many landmarks in D.C. that really stand for our nation, but seeing them was a whole other story. You can’t understand how the Washington Monument seems to loom over the whole city, wherever you are, or how big and grand the Potomac is, or how hauntingly the rows upon rows of marble tombstones in Arlington protrude from the earth like teeth until you’ve seen it all. It’s just so different in real life.”

Tom Gould of Heppner, Oregon, sponsored by Columbia Basin Electric, says he will never forget the “once-in-a-lifetime experience. All of the artifacts were amazing to finally see in real person and not just on TV.”

Weston Wiltbank changed the way he views the goings-on in the nation’s capital. “When we think of Washington we often think of a bunch of politicians running around in suits and ties telling the rest of the nation what to do, but it is a lot more than that,” he says. “One truth I’ve come to respect a lot is that this nation was built by the hands of hardworking people who had a dream to create the greatest nation in the world.”

Savannah Chadwick gained a better understanding of American politics, and “I learned about religion, culture, our nation and, above all, the importance of American pride. This opportunity has given me hope that one day I will be able to make a positive difference in our nation.”

Lindy Lunt says she now realizes the difference one person can make. “Even though we live in a small town out in the middle of nowhere, it’s nice to know that we still have the power to make a difference and create change,” she says. Ashley Standridge says the trip “changed my heart and mind how so many people have sacrificed so much for our country, and it changed my future, to motivate me to look more into my future then to wait for it to come.”

Marta Faulkner advises future students to “take their time. If you spend your time being in a hurry you won’t see anything. Don’t be afraid to just take a moment and look and listen and let Washington, D.C., swallow you up for a moment and think, ‘Wow, I’m actually here.’ Because if you take a moment to just breathe it all in, there are a lot more people standing next to you than just the tourists.”

A Profound Impact of Youth Tour

By Lindy Lunt

When I found out that I had been selected as a recipient for the Youth Tour trip to Washington, D.C., I was elated at the chance to see all that D.C. had to offer. However, I never anticipated the profound impact it would have on my life. I remember the very first day when we stopped at Fort McHenry. I was expecting to look around, take a few pictures and then skedaddle off to the next site. Instead, I had the opportunity to watch a video that briefly went over the battle that led to Francis Scott Key writing the “Star Spangled Banner,” and at the end of the video they raised the wall up to give us a spectacular view of the flag flying gently in the breeze.

It was then that it hit me. I always knew that people gave their lives for our freedom, but it had never been as real as it was at that moment. As I struggled to keep my emotions in check, I realized how incredibly lucky I was to be born in this great nation.

This was the moment that changed me and how I viewed this trip. It was more than just a chance to look at some cool buildings and get out of the Arizona heat; it was a chance to recognize the blood, sweat and tears that went into making this country what it is today. I had been gifted the chance of a lifetime, and I was determined to make the most of it.

Everywhere we traveled seemed to reinforce these feelings of patriotism. We were able to visit sites such as Mount Vernon, Arlington Cemetery, the Lincoln Memorial, the Smithsonian museums and so many more. With each visit I could feel my pride for our country continue to grow, and by the end of the trip not only did I have many new friends and memories, but a newfound appreciation for my country.

I truly understood what it meant to be proud to be an American, and that is something I will never forget.

Lindy Lunt of Pima, Arizona, was sponsored by Graham County Electric Cooperative.