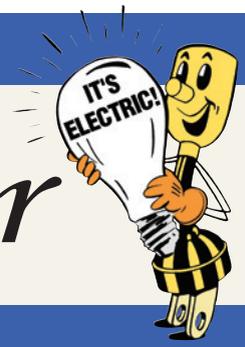




The Cooperator



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2016 Washington Youth Tour Delegates

BY BYRON McCOMBS

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC's three delegates for the Washington Youth Tour (WYT) are preparing to descend on Atlanta and the nation's capital. In the 51st annual WYT, sponsored by electric cooperatives in Georgia, they will join more than 100 of the best and brightest students from across the state in a unique leadership experience.

Ashley Smith, of Towns County, Ga.; Joanna Irvin, of Union County, Ga.; and Hillary Owens, of Clay County, N.C., were chosen to represent BRMEMC on the Youth Tour, set for June 9-16. We appreciate the high school counselors for their support in administering the selection process and providing us with wonderful students.

The WYT exposes students to the fast-paced world of politics, leadership and agenda-setting. Each year,

the delegates are challenged to consider the part they play in government and the cooperative movement, to become involved citizens and to consider careers in public service.

It's a tremendous opportunity for them to experience the nation's capital, to see the monuments and memorials honoring those who made sacrifices so we can live and worship in a free society, and introduce them to students who share similar hopes and dreams but also come from a variety of backgrounds and different parts of the state and country.

EMC leaders and former delegates emphasize that the Youth Tour provides young Americans an invaluable experience that will stay with them the rest of their lives. BRMEMC agrees and is proud to continue the tradition of providing this opportunity to our local students.



Blue Ridge Mountain EMC's Washington Youth Tour delegates are, from left, Ashley Smith, Hillary Owens and Joanna Irvin.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC's Wa

Ashley Smith

Ashley, a junior at Towns County High School in Hiawassee, Ga., is the daughter of Jason and Shellie Smith. She enjoys zip lining, traveling and all genres of music.

An honor roll student, she is a member of the Towns County LEO Club, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, FBLA, Beta Club, National Honor Society, varsity tennis team, yearbook staff, prom committee and The United Community Bank Junior Board of Directors.

Ashley won the VFW Voice of Democracy essay contest for her school and region in 2015. In the spring of 2016, she had the opportunity to travel to Costa Rica with her Spanish and honors biology class.

After graduating from high school with a dual diploma in business entrepreneurship and journalism, Ashley will attend Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va. She plans to earn a bachelor's degree in business administration, with a focus on marketing and sales management.

"The Washington Youth Tour is a perfect example of a distinguished learning opportunity, and I feel honored to have been selected as a participant," Ashley says. "I hope to gain knowledge of our country's rich heritage, as well as leadership skills that will be beneficial to me in the future."



Ashley, second from right, helps host the annual Valentine's Sadie Hawkins Dance for the Towns County LEO Club. The event raises money for the Leader Dog Program, which provides seeing-eye dogs to the visually impaired.

Hillary Owens

Hillary, a junior at Hayesville High School in North Carolina, is the daughter of Danny and Angel Owens. She enjoys reading, writing, hiking, playing softball, volunteering with her church youth group and working with animals.



Ashley Smith, left, with Towns County High School counselor Lana Parker.



Hillary Owens, left, with Hayesville High School counselor Karen Nicholson.

Washington Youth Tour Delegates

Hillary is ranked No. 1 in her class. She is a member of the National Honor Society, National Technical Honor Society, Beta Club and Health Occupation Students of America. Hillary is also dually enrolled at Tri-County Community College.

After graduating from high school, Hillary plans to attend Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C., and then veterinary school at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, N.C.

Hillary says, "I believe the Youth Tour will not only make me a better student but also a better person by interacting with people from many different backgrounds. I look forward to seeing the monuments and visiting the historic landmarks that represent the foundations of our nation."

Joanna Irvin

Joanna, a junior at Union County High School in Blairsville, Ga., is the daughter of Mark and Tracie Irvin. She enjoys playing soccer and attending Wednesday night youth group activities at her church.

At school, she is a member of Beta Club, Student Council, Key Club, chorus, yearbook staff and The United Community Bank Junior Board of Directors. Joanna loves to travel, visit new places and have new experiences.

Interested in the fields of English/journalism, engineering and chemistry/physics, Joanna is undecided about a college choice.

"I am thrilled to be joining my peers on a life-changing journey and the friendships it will shape in only



Hillary's love of animals has led her to pursue a career in the veterinary field. This spring, she had an opportunity to shadow Dr. Kirk Vardeman at his veterinary office in Hiawassee, Ga., allowing her to gain real-life experience working with animals.



Joanna Irvin, left, with Union County High School counselor Rick Silver.

seven days," Joanna says. "These bonds will be created in one of the most breathtaking and historically rich areas of America. I greatly anticipate learning and experiencing the cultures that are the building blocks of our great nation."



Joanna has participated in several mission trips with her church. During a trip to Israel, she poses with the Mediterranean Sea in the background.

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