



Plugged in to Altamaha EMC

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Serving Toombs, Montgomery, Emanuel, Treutlen, Laurens, Johnson and Tattnall counties

The 2023 Washington Youth Tour was a huge success

By Lindsay Penticuff

Georgia's 104 Washington Youth Tour (WYT) delegates were among nearly 2,000 students from across the country who visited Washington, D.C., last year for the annual Washington Youth Tour.

With 34 electric membership cooperatives (EMCs) in Georgia participating, the 2023 event held June 15-22 was the Youth Tour's 58th year in Georgia.

Once a year, high school students are selected by Georgia's EMCs to represent Georgia as delegates on the Youth Tour. This top-notch leadership experience and tour of Washington, D.C., includes meetings with state and national leaders, leadership training and visits to many major sites.

"This year's tour was a huge success!" says Andy Paul, WYT director and public relations representative with Tucker-based Georgia EMC. "I would describe it as a connection-making trip, as students from rural areas of our state connected with students from urban areas, and they made lifelong friendships."

During the 2023 trip, delegates visited many national memorials, including the National Mall, Lincoln Memorial,



Georgia's 2023 WYT delegates meet with U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.) on the Capitol steps.

Smithsonian Institution and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and they participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

"It was so great to see students connect their local EMC with opportunities like this for learning and success for their local communities," Paul adds, "and all on a trip that is at no cost to the students!"

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Serving as a WYT chaperone

Electric membership cooperatives (EMCs) have been a part of Tonya Jones' life for as long as she can remember, so it seems only fitting for her to chaperone and represent Georgia on the Washington Youth Tour (WYT).

"My grandmother Sarah Sirmons worked as the cashier at Middle

Georgia EMC [MGEMC] in Vienna for 28 years [1972-2000], and my husband, Chipper, is now in his 21st year at MGEMC," Jones says. "Chipper has worked with the team-building session of the Youth Tour for 15 years, so I am able to help as well."

Jones, who is the community relations manager at Sumter EMC in Americus, chaperoned her first WYT in 2007. She also chaperoned in 2008, 2011, 2016 and 2023.

"Watching students learn and grow is my passion," she says. "Before joining Sumter EMC, I was in education for 23 years. Tucker-based Georgia EMC is always looking for couples [to serve as chaperones], and they also encourage teachers to apply, so Chipper and I were a perfect couple when we first signed up in 2007."

Jones and the other 14 chaperones on last year's trip helped make sure that every student was safe and cared for while on the trip.

"Many of the students will take their first flight or have their first trip without family, so the chaperones are

there to provide direction and provide comfort when needed," she says.

Her favorite part of the trip? Watching delegates form long-lasting friendships.

"They begin the week as strangers and end the week as a family," Jones says. "It is truly amazing that we experience this same feeling each and every year. Both of our sons were delegates—Joseph in 2014 and Bo in 2019—and they returned with the same feelings Chipper and I have had for the Youth Tour."

In order to chaperone the Youth Tour, a person must be either an EMC employee, an educator or a WYT alumnus. Candidates submit applications detailing their involvement with cooperative programs and youth development. The applications are reviewed by Youth Tour staff.

"Georgia EMC does a phenomenal job with this program, but it is not possible without chaperones, so take the step and apply," Jones adds. "You will not regret it!"



Tonya Jones, Sumter EMC

Where are they now?

Doster Harper, a 2017 Washington Youth Tour delegate from Covington, says his favorite experience during the trip was the group's private tour of the chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court.

"That was a surreal moment to be in the highest court of our country, where so many cases have been heard to interpret our nation's Constitution and federal law," he says. "I will never forget that!"

He was inspired to apply for the Youth Tour by Scott Fuss, Snapping Shoals EMC's marketing and public relations coordinator.

"[Fuss] has always done an incredible job of serving and being
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Doster Harper (left) poses with fellow Washington Youth Tour delegates in 2017 at the Lincoln Memorial, which overlooks the National Mall and Washington Monument.

Where are they now?

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involved in our community in many ways,” Harper says. “I wasn’t accepted the first summer I applied, but he encouraged me to try again, and, thankfully, I got the opportunity [to attend the next year].”

The trip sparked a lifelong curiosity about U.S. history and government for Harper, which led him back to Washington, D.C., last summer. He served in Rep. Austin Scott’s office as a Congressional Agricultural Fellow for 12 weeks after graduating from the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens in May 2023.

“I had the opportunity to work as an intern while focusing on agricultural policy in Rep. Scott’s office. He serves on the House Agriculture Committee, so I attended committee hearings, prepared Rep. Scott’s binders and other material for committee meetings, wrote briefs, conducted research on current agricultural issues and met with constituents,” Harper says.

Harper studied agriscience and environmental systems at UGA, which he says helped him with his role in Scott’s office, as his district is home to a lot of agriculture, primarily row-crop operations in South Georgia.

Today, Harper is the corporate sustainability director at Rose Acre Farms, the second-largest egg producer in the country with 15 farms in eight states. He oversees the company’s sustainability program and department.

“One of the leading environmental concerns for layer poultry housing is energy use and conservation, so I’m grateful for the experience the Washington Youth Tour provided—not only in helping me find a passion for rural community development but also in educating myself and the other delegates on rural electrification,” he says. “The lessons [the] WYT taught me are still pertinent in my life and career today in very many ways.”

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Meet the 2023 Altamaha EMC delegates

Altamaha EMC’s Washington Youth Tour delegates are carefully selected through a rigorous application process. Any junior or senior who attends a high school in the cooperative’s seven-county territory is eligible. School counselors from our seven-county territory nominate students for the Washington Youth Tour. The nominated students are first brought in for a preliminary round of interviews with our Washington Youth Tour coordinator. Candidates will then move on to the final round of interviews in front of a panel of judges from three different electric membership cooperatives in the state. The top three students are then selected by our Washington Youth Tour director and judges to represent Altamaha EMC on the Youth Tour.



Bralie Carey, a high school senior at Vidalia High School, is the proud daughter of Haley Carey. Bralie is a dynamic individual actively engaged in various extracurricular activities, including Future Business Leaders of America, Beta Club and HOSA. As a valuable member of the softball team, she has contributed to multiple region championships and state playoff adventures. Bralie’s future is set in the medical field, with aspirations to become a radiation oncologist. Her journey reflects a commitment to academic excellence and athletic achievement.



Darrius Knight, a freshman at Kennesaw State University, is the son of Brandy and Derrance Scott. He is majoring in international affairs and brings a rich background of high school involvement. During his high school years, Darrius was an active member of the marching band and drama club. Notably, he served as mayor in the Dublin Youth Council and represented youth as a National League of Cities youth delegate. Additionally, Darrius was a dedicated member of Young Democrats, showcasing his passion for civic engagement and political involvement.



Raymond “RJ” Florez, a senior at Toombs County High School and the son of Bertha Florez, has been actively involved in various facets of high school life. RJ has dedicated his time to memberships in FFA, Beta Club, Future Business Leaders of America, 4-H and the Student Advisory Council, and he assumed leadership roles in FFA, Beta Club and 4-H. Beyond academics, he contributes to the school’s athletic spirit as a member of the tennis team, and he is the Friday night football game mascot. RJ looks forward to continuing his education at the University of Georgia, where he plans to pursue a law degree with a specialization in corporate and real estate law.

A Washington Youth Tour love story

Tyler Day and Sarah Kate Miles Day met during the 2012 Washington Youth Tour trip, but little did they know that they were meeting their future spouse.

"I remember first talking to Tyler on one of our many bus rides on the trip," says Sarah Kate, who is from Alma and represented Satilla Rural Electric Membership Corp. on the trip.

"But we really became close friends on day five during the riverboat cruise," says Tyler, who represented Rayle EMC on the WYT and is from Maxeys.

They talked daily for the first few months after the trip.

"Eventually, we decided that we could try to make a long-distance relationship work," Tyler, 29, says.

Tyler and Sarah Kate, who lived about 175 miles apart at the time, had a long-distance relationship through the rest of high school and undergraduate school. Sarah Kate attended Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, and Tyler attended the University of Georgia in Athens, which are about 160 miles apart.

"He proposed our sophomore year of college, and we got married shortly after undergrad and before we moved to Birmingham for me to attend optometry school at the University of Alabama at Birmingham," Sarah Kate, 28, says.

The couple married on June 10, 2017, and they now live in Alma.

Nearly 12 years later, the Days still have very fond memories of the Youth Tour that brought them together.

"[The] WYT is an awesome trip, not just because of the sites in Washington, D.C., but because of the friends that you'll make as well," Tyler says. "I also feel like it is important at that age to get out of your comfort zone and



Top: Sarah Kate Miles Day met her now-husband, Tyler Day, during the 2012 Washington Youth Tour. **Right:** The Days got married in 2017 and now live in Alma.



spend a week away from family with a taste of independence. Getting to spend a week immersed in the sites and museums of our nation's capital is just a bonus."

For Sarah Kate, it was an incredible opportunity to meet students from all different backgrounds and form a network of colleagues from throughout Georgia.

"Also, the trip is crafted and coordinated so beautifully that you feel like a VIP the entire trip!" she adds.

Today, Tyler is beginning a new career as a financial planner after working as a research analyst for a commercial-development advisory firm for many years. Sarah Kate is an optometrist in her hometown, practicing with two other doctors.

"It has been an incredible honor to help care for the community that invested so much in me growing up," she says. ☺



Apply for the 2024 Washington Youth Tour

Each year, Altamaha EMC selects three local students to represent our cooperative on the Washington Youth Tour. The dates for the 2024 Youth Tour are June 14-21. All high school juniors and seniors interested in the opportunity can obtain information by contacting Altamaha EMC's Washington Youth Tour Coordinator Will NeSmith. He can be reached at (912) 526-2173 or will.nesmith@altamahaemc.com.