



Jennifer Young, front, and from left in back, Holly Shyrer, chaperone Nancy Van Sickle, Rebecca Maxwell, Jeff Markman and Kathi Springer pose with the Albert Einstein Memorial on the grounds of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C.

Capital Experience

OTEC sends students to Washington, D.C., for learning adventure

By Debby Schoeningh

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.”

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative (OTEC) echoes the sentiments of America’s 32nd president by send-

ing students to Washington, D.C., this year to help prepare them for challenges they might face in the future.

Nearly 1,500 young people from across the United States, including four sponsored by OTEC, attended the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour June 7 to 14.

The tour gives participants an opportunity to learn about the political process and see government in action. They visit the historical places in Washington, including Capitol Hill and the

Library of Congress.

OTEC selected students in its service territory through an essay competition on why they would like to go to Washington.

Rebecca Maxwell of Union, Holly Shyrer of Burns, Kathi Springer of Prairie City and Jennifer Young of Baker City were chosen.

“All our youth were outstanding and represented OTEC admirably,” says Nancy Van Sickle, OTEC member services representative in La Grande, who chaperoned the girls on the Youth Tour.

Nancy says the four girls, plus

Jeff Markman from Wasco Electric Cooperative based in The Dalles, who also was under her charge, bonded almost immediately with other students on the tour.

"One thing all of the 1,500 youth at the NRECA tour had in common is that they came from rural areas, not the big city," says Nancy.

"It was fantastic," says Holly. "It definitely opened my eyes to how big an impact the electric co-op has on our everyday activities and the influence it has on Americans."

Holly says visiting the Smithsonian Institution was "the best adventure," although the National Gallery of Art was probably her favorite. She also enjoyed visiting with Oregon Rep. Greg Walden of Hood River and Sen. Gordon Smith of Pendleton.

"We did so many things, but I think what I enjoyed most was the bonding experience made between other kids who came from all over the U.S.," Holly says. "I hope every year that other students will be able to have a good experience and the opportunity to learn like we did."

Jennifer's favorite part of the tour was visiting the war memorials.

"The Iwo Jima War Memorial was the neatest," Jennifer says. "I also liked the Air and Space Museum, where they had some of the national movie treasures on display, like Dorothy's slippers and Kermit the Frog. It was a great experience. I had a lot of fun and learned a lot."

"D.C. is the most incredible place," adds Kathi. "The kids—meeting so many awesome people—it's an experience I'll never forget."

Kathi says attending a legislative session was interesting and visiting D.C. gave her a better understanding of how the world works.

Rebecca not only qualified for the tour, but was selected to represent Oregon on the Youth Leadership



Kathi, Holly, Rebecca and Jennifer get a kick out of T-shirt Day during the NRECA Youth Tour in the nation's capital in June. Photo by Nancy Van Sickle.

Council at its annual conference. She returned to Washington in July for the conference.

Leadership Council students were chosen by the statewide Youth Tour directors from each participating state based on how they interacted with other students and adults during the initial tour.

Rebecca says getting to know people from all over the country was a rewarding experience.

"I was amazed by how much we all had in common," she says. "I'll be friends with them forever. We've been e-mailing each other already."

Rebecca says she met Glen English, NRECA's chief executive officer, and visited with Rep. Adrian Smith of Nebraska, who is also a former Youth Tour chaperone.

"On the first tour, Congressman Walden was very interesting to talk to because he knows this area (Eastern Oregon) and the issues, but on the second trip we had more time to sit and talk with the

Nebraska Congressman," Rebecca says.

Rebecca made the second flight to D.C. by herself. She was chaperoned by four previous Youth Leadership Council members and in three years, she will have the opportunity to participate in that capacity.

She also will go to the NRECA Annual Meeting in Anaheim, California, in February 2008. The Leadership Conference and annual meeting trips are funded by NRECA.

There was no touring of the area on the second trip, but Rebecca says the five-day adventure was packed with activities geared toward building leadership and public speaking skills, and discussion of the energy industry and cooperatives.

Some Youth Tour alumni are working on Capitol Hill and a few have gone on to serve in the U.S. Senate.

Rebecca says she learned a lot about the inner workings of the government and it gave her an opportunity to explore these areas for a possible career.

"The experience made me think twice about my career options—there's so much out there I could do—but I'm still leaning toward being an elementary schoolteacher," she says.

Rebecca says she definitely will encourage others to participate in the Youth Tour and plans to write an article for her high school newspaper to let others know of the opportunity.

"It's hard to put into words," she says. "I never thought about rural co-ops before when I lived in the big city. I just thought everywhere had electricity. Nancy gave me a book to read before I went to D.C. on the history of the electric co-op and how it started. I think it's great how co-ops are continuing to give to the community with programs like the Youth Tour." ■