

# Lessons learned

Bluebonnet-area student lays wreath at Tomb of the Unknown Soldier during annual government youth tour to nation's capital

By Lisa Ogle

In a solemn, tearful ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in June, one of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's promising young students laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as the mournful bugle call of "Taps" drifted over the sun-splashed burial grounds outside Washington, D.C.

Jude Rios of Cedar Creek thought of his relatives who served and are serving in the military and Army National Guard as he offered the wreath with three other students from Texas.

Rios and Whitney Whitsel of Ledbetter were selected by Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative to represent the co-op during the annual Government-in-Action Youth Tour. Rios was also chosen for the wreath-laying ceremony based on a short essay he wrote about what being selected would mean to him.

In his essay, he said it would be an honor "to represent my family and country" and "to pay respect to all of the brave Americans who served and sacrificed their lives."

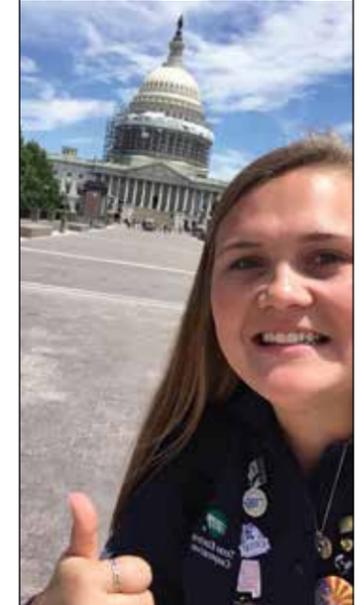
The white marble Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is dedicated to U.S. service members whose remains are unidentified. Army sentries guard the tomb 24/7. Rios was Bluebonnet's first youth tour recipient in recent history to be chosen for the wreath-laying ceremony during the tour.

Arlington Cemetery, which has more than 400,000 graves, was memorable for Whitsel, too.

"That number on paper means nothing till you see all those tombstones, and you see it for real," she said.

Bluebonnet has been sending high school students and recent graduates to Washington as part of the national youth tour for more than 50 years.

Whitsel, a Giddings High School graduate, and Rios, who graduated from KIPP Austin Collegiate high school in Austin, and 125 other Texas students selected by electric co-ops around the state attended this year's tour. The Texas



(Photo above, courtesy Texas Electric Cooperatives, 2016 Youth Tour)

Bluebonnet's youth tour recipients Jude Rios and Whitney Whitsel toured Washington, D.C., in June. Clockwise from top left: Rios is among four Texas students chosen to participate in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery; Whitsel shows her Aggie spirit during a stop at the U.S. Capitol, which is partially shrouded by scaffolding as the historic building undergoes restoration; Rios dances during the farewell celebration in Austin on the last night of the trip; Whitsel meets a couple of Marines who performed in the Sunset Parade at the Marine Corps War Memorial; Whitsel and Rios visit the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall.

Photos courtesy Whitney Whitsel

students joined 1,603 additional participants from across the nation who met in Washington to visit the White House, Smithsonian Institution museums, historical sites and more.

Whitsel, an avid reader, was impressed by the Library of Congress, which she had seen in movies. She was thrilled to get a library card during the visit. She will enter Texas A&M University later

this month to major in animal science. She plans to become a veterinarian.

Rios will enter the University of Texas at Austin as a freshman later this month to study political science.

Learn more about the youth tour program at bluebonnet.coop. Click on Scholarships under the Community tab. Applications for the 2017 tour will be available in the fall. ■

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