

Tomorrow's line workers are training today at Bluebonnet

Cooperative's program hires and prepares the next generation

By Will Holford

Tristin Lagrone first heard about working for Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative at a Lexington High School career day when he was a sophomore.

"I didn't think about working for Bluebonnet that day," said Lagrone, 22. Until a few months ago, he had worked for three years as a commercial electrician.

"But after three years of driving to Austin for work, I was burnt out and ready for a change when I saw the opening for this internship."

Lagrone was among the second group of interns that Bluebonnet recently hired for its apprentice line worker program. The co-op wanted to find applicants from communities in or near its service area, which was perfect for Lagrone, who lives near Lexington.

It takes a lot of training, time and specialized skills to become a line worker. Bluebonnet, along with electric utilities across the country and state, are facing two challenges: replacing experienced line workers who are near retirement and the boom of economic growth and low unemployment in Texas. Bluebonnet is growing rapidly, having topped 100,000 meters this year. Add to that the fact that it takes years to learn how to be an electric line worker, a trade that is difficult and potentially dangerous.

To face these challenges and prepare for the future, in 2018 the cooperative launched an internship program to hire and

train the next generation of line workers. Seven interns were hired in 2018 and seven more were hired this year. Bluebonnet wants to give area residents opportunities to learn the trade and get a head start toward a long, rewarding career close to home.

"Our goal is to find motivated, talented people and help them enter into the trade," said Matt Bentke, Bluebonnet's general manager. "We have hired a great group of young people who are from here or have ties to our communities. When they successfully complete the program, they'll be certified journeyman line workers, ready to earn a good living and serve their communities in critically important jobs. That's a win for everyone."

All of the interns are from Central Texas and grew up knowing about Bluebonnet. Another five new employees are line workers who have had prior training and are ready to step directly into the cooperative's four-year apprentice program.

"Several of the interns we hired were referred to us by employees and others in our communities," Bentke said. "And that's not unique to this most recent group. That's true nearly every time we hire for any job. That is one of the greatest compliments and surest signs that we have the right culture in place."

The new interns will participate in a six-month program of classroom instruction and field observation. Those who successfully complete that training will step into Bluebonnet's four-year apprentice program. Bluebonnet employees administer and teach that program, which consists of classroom instruction and on-the-job training. During their internships and apprentice training, the new line workers will receive full-time pay and benefits.

"We will provide constant communication throughout the process," said David Tobola, Bluebonnet's manager of operations and a homegrown line worker from Giddings who currently lives in Bastrop. "During their



six-month internship, we'll be patient, bring them along at the right pace and give them the instruction and feedback they need along the way to be successful."

The interns and new apprentices will work with crews out of the Bluebonnet service centers in Bastrop, Brenham, Giddings and Red Rock.

The new line workers took different paths to get here, but they have a common thread woven into their decision: Bluebonnet's service and values.

Joe Scheid is an apprentice candidate who

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Photo by Ralph Barrera

lives near Independence today, but he grew up in East Texas, and was looking for a good career to follow his service in the Air Force. He entered Kilgore College's electric power technology program at age 32. After completing the 10-week course, he was drawn to Bluebonnet because of the area and the cooperative.

"I talked to some of the guys I know at my home co-op," Scheid said. "They liked the work. I like being challenged and being outside, so I thought I'd like it, too. When I started looking at co-ops, I was attracted to

Central Texas and was really drawn to Bluebonnet because of its values. They are what set Bluebonnet apart from everyone else."

Out of 50 applicants for the jobs this year, more than 30 were interviewed. Lagrone remembers the moment he found out he got the job. "I got the call when I was working in Austin. I was so excited, I was ready to go home and start working for Bluebonnet right then," he said.

He and six of his fellow interns are on the job now, making each day a career day serving Bluebonnet's members. ■

Many of Bluebonnet's new interns and apprentice candidate line workers are from the cooperative's service area. From left, Brent Ellis, Trey Townsend, Eric Cobb (apprentice candidate), Ryan Smith, Tristin Lagrone, Nick Baker, Preston Vaughn, Caleb Clay and Joe Scheid (apprentice candidate). Not pictured are apprentice candidates Cade Courtemanche, Ryder Lane and Nick Scott.