

Whitney Whitsel, above, in a selfie in front of the U.S. Capitol during her 2016 government youth tour trip to Washington, D.C. Judges selected her to represent Bluebonnet on the tour, 58 years after her grandfather went on the inaugural trip. **Read about her memories and where she is now, Page 20D.** Esther Dominguez, at right, surrounded by some of the Texas teens in front of the White House in 2018. She is Texas Electric Cooperatives' youth tour coordinator and has been involved with the program since 1994. This year Texas will send 124 teens and 19 chaperones to Washington. *Photos courtesy Whitney Whitsel and Esther Dominguez*



# CAPITAL GAIN

## THE YOUTH TOUR RETURNS

Stories by Melissa Segrest

**AN ANNUAL WHIRLWIND** history lesson that began more than half a century ago for thousands of teenagers from across Texas and the nation is back after a two-year pandemic pause.

This June, the Government-in-Action Youth Tour is returning to Washington, D.C., and hundreds of electric cooperative-funded high school students will swarm the nation's capital to see historical spots and learn how our democracy works.

Texas cooperatives are sending 124 students, who will join about 1,000 students from other states at the nation's capital for an all-expenses-paid deep dive into up-close learning. They will be accompanied by chaperones, program directors and staff. During their weeklong visits, the students will see some of America's most famous landmarks, museums and memorials. They'll also visit their elected officials in Congress, and – for extra credit – some students will create friendships that last a lifetime.

Texas Electric Cooperatives, the statewide organization that represents 76 co-ops, oversees the large Texas teen delegation. Esther Dominguez is ready to go. She has been involved with the program since 1994 and began working as Texas' youth tour director in 2011.

"I'm more than excited," she said. "When you are physically there, it's amazing. The students actually feel that history, see where it all takes place. It's just huge. Seeing and learning about all that helps them bond as a group and as friends. They don't want to leave."

Participants don't just win a competition to take this trip. "These kids earned it," Dominguez said. "They had to write

essays, be interviewed by judges, compete against other students. They compete because they want it."

The youth tour will resume this year for cooperatives nationwide, according to Beth Knudsen, youth programs manager for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. She said 28 states are participating, down from the 43 states represented on the tour before the COVID-19 pandemic. The two-year break was the only time in program history that co-op teens had not gone to Washington, D.C.

In addition to coordination and support, NRECA offers courses for students on the tour and helps with Youth Day rallies. There may be some changes to the 2022 activity schedule, but Knudsen said it will still be an "incredible, life-changing experience" for all.

Jim Matheson, NRECA's chief executive officer, is also enthusiastic about the return of the teens. "After two years of not having our youth tour groups out in Washington, D.C., we are excited to welcome back so many of our participating states this June," he said. "The theme for this year is 'Charge On!' — and that is exactly what we intend to do!"

Although the tour became official in Texas in 1965, the first version of it occurred in 1958, when then-U.S. Senate majority leader and future President Lyndon B. Johnson selected six high school students from three Texas cooperatives to spend six weeks shadowing him in D.C. Those students represented Bluebonnet (then called the Lower Colorado River Electric Cooperative), Pedernales and Sam Houston electric cooperatives. Bluebonnet records show that the cooperative has sent 112 high school students to Washington, D.C., since 1958.

We caught up with one of those original six touring Texas students as well as other Bluebonnet youth tour participants from previous decades.

**Read their stories starting on Page 23 and meet Bluebonnet's 2022 Government-in-Action Youth Tour ambassadors, Page 20B.**

The Government-in-Action event, a storied tradition offered by electric cooperatives, is back after a 2-year hiatus. Meet Bluebonnet's next winners, and alumni sharing D.C. memories.

In 1958, before the Government-in-Action Youth Tour was official, six Central Texas teens spent time in Washington, D.C., helping in the office of then-Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson. Below, they posed with him on the Capitol steps. On the front row, from left: Marilyn Dallmeyer of Burton, representing the Lower Colorado River Electric Cooperative, which would later become Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative; Mary Price of Bertram, representing Pedernales Electric Cooperative; Sen. Johnson; Mary Francis Slett of New Waverley, representing Sam Houston Electric Cooperative; Mrs. C.H. Wallace of Gatesville, group chaperone. On the back row, from left, are Gordon White of Cleveland, representing Sam Houston, Mike Simmang of Giddings, representing LCREC (Bluebonnet) and Jimmy McBride of Leander, representing Pedernales. **Read Mike Simmang's memories of that trip and the years after, Page 20D.**



# High school seniors to represent Bluebonnet at 2022 youth tour

By Alyssa Dussetschleger

**A 4-H LIVESTOCK** Ambassador who plans to be a policy analyst for agriculture and a budding entrepreneur who hopes to become a real estate agent will head to Washington, D.C., this summer as recipients of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's 2022 Government-in-Action Youth Tour awards.

Keely Mikolajchak, a senior at Brenham High School, and Jada Martin, a senior at Cedar Creek High School, will represent Bluebonnet on the tour that has been an annual event for many decades. Creed Whitfill, a senior at Bastrop High School, is the alternate representative and will join the tour if one of the winners is unable to attend.

The recipients will each receive a \$1,000 scholarship and tour the Texas Capitol and the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin before flying to Washington, D.C. The tour dates are June 12-21.

The two recipients and alternate were among eight finalists who applied and submitted a video on the topic: "What is the greatest energy issue facing your generation, and how can youths be a part of the solution?" Recipients were selected based on video presentations, extracurricular involvement, and school and community service.

Mikolajchak, 17, of Chappell Hill picked up the political bug after participating in an oratorical speech contest. It challenged her to discuss the role of the U. S. Constitution in her daily life. She became interested in agriculture economics and policy after visiting with state representatives at the Texas Capitol.

She is also involved with youth agriculture organizations, including 4-H and FFA. Mikolajchak has served in leadership roles as state 4-H Livestock Ambassador, Washington County 4-H president, and vice president of Area XI Future Farmers of America, which represents high schools in southeast Texas counties. She is also Brenham High School's FFA president. In the fall, she'll attend Texas A&M University and study agriculture economics.

During her video presentation, Mikolajchak discussed the potential of young people's impact on innovative renewable energy resources. "As youths, we are the next leaders of our communities, nation and world," she said. "We must take a stand and empower our society to look beyond traditional energy sources and look into the future of sustainability."

Martin, 18, of Cedar Creek volunteers



for the holiday Adopt-a-Family program in Cedar Creek as part of her involvement in National Honor Society. She also volunteers at the Bastrop Animal Shelter and at a City of Bastrop vaccine clinic. She held leadership roles for school organizations, including the National Honor Society, student council and LEO club, a youth organization of Lions Clubs International. Martin also played volleyball, tennis and ran track for the Cedar Creek Eagles. She plans to attend the University of Texas at San Antonio in the fall and major in business. After college, she plans to return to Bastrop County and open a real estate firm.

Martin became interested in government after meeting City of Bastrop Mayor Connie Schroeder while volunteering at the city's vaccine clinic.

"I loved seeing our local politicians out in the community helping the citizens, and I

realized there is a lot of good done behind the scenes," she said. "When I heard about the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, I thought it would be a great opportunity to learn even more about the great things that are done for my generation at a higher level of government."

Whitfill, 18, of Bastrop, is involved with Peer Assistance and Leadership at Bastrop ISD, as well as mentorship programs at his church. He has been involved with fundraisers, including the Peer Assistance and Leadership basketball fundraiser and Cougar Moats fishing tournament, which raises money for graduating high school students in Bastrop County.

Whitfill has also participated in community service projects, picking up trash and recyclables in Bastrop County and collecting canned foods for Thanksgiving meals for families in need. He plans to attend the

Representing Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative this June on the youth tour will be Jada Martin, below left, a senior at Cedar Creek High School, and Keely Mikolajchak, below right, a senior at Brenham High School. Creed Whitfill, below center, is the alternate. He is a senior at Bastrop High School. *Sarah Beal photo*



Bluebonnet's representatives on the government youth tour in 1972, at left, were Roxanne Caperton and Paul Ehlert. Paul, of Brenham, went on to the University of Texas and its law school. He practiced as an attorney with his father, William J. Ehlert. He joined the staff of Germania Farm Mutual Insurance Association in 2004 and today is the president and CEO. *1972 photo courtesy of Paul Ehlert; photo of Ehlert now by Sarah Beal.*



Paul Ehlert

## Paul Ehlert, 1972

**IT'S BEEN 50 YEARS** since Paul Ehlert of Brenham gave his speech to government youth tour judges in an attempt to win a chance to visit Washington, D.C.

"I remember I'd incorporated a poem," he said.

"The Bridge Builder," by Will Allen Dromgoole, was that poem, about an older man, near the end of his life, who crossed a chasm and, once on the other side, decides to build a bridge he no longer needs. A younger man who followed him questions his decision.

"You've crossed the chasm, deep and wide, / Why build this bridge at evening tide?"

The man explains that he is building the bridge for future travelers.

"He, too, must cross in the twilight dim; / Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!"

In his speech in Giddings on that day five decades ago, Paul likened the message of the poem to the role of Bluebonnet and other electric cooperatives in bringing light to those who came after them, in helping others to build lives in rural areas like his hometown.

"The public speaking part of it was a good experience for me as I went forward. I built a lot of confidence in myself and, truthfully, opened up some doors that I probably wouldn't have had opened," Paul said. "I really enjoyed it."

Paul was 17, a student at Brenham High School in Washington County. He remembers how he and the other Bluebonnet-sponsored winner in 1972, Roxanne Caperton of Caldwell in Burleson County, joined the other Texas teens traveling for days on buses. It was Paul's first trip to Washington.

"I think we may have stopped in Tennessee. When we got to D.C., we went to some of the landmarks, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial," he said. "I definitely remember the Smithsonian. We saw the Wrights' airplane." That was brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright's 1903 Flyer, the first powered, heavier-than-air flying machine that introduced the flying age at Kitty Hawk, N.C. on Dec. 17, 1903.

After high school Paul went to the University of Texas at Austin, then UT law school. After graduating in 1978, he began his practice as an attorney in Brenham with his father, William J. Ehlert.

Paul began representing Germania Farm Mutual Insurance Association in Brenham, then joined the Germania staff in 2004. He became the company's president and CEO in 2011. "Last year, the company celebrated its 125th anniversary of providing insurance protection to Texans. Germania now insures 200,000 families across the state," he said. "We have over \$900 million in assets and provide \$77 billion in insurance protection."

Paul and his wife, Rhonda, whom he met in Brenham before going to law school, have two children and four grandchildren.

Paul has traveled extensively for Germania and has done plenty of public speaking since 1972. "We would go up to Washington, D.C., to meet with Texas congressmen and senators to talk about insurance issues," he said.

His advice for the government youth tour winners of today: "The relationships you build with the people you go with can't be beat. And by all means, take in the breadth of history that's there and be thankful that you are able to do it."

## MIKE SIMMANG, 1958 and WHITNEY WHITSEL, 2016

**BEFORE IT WAS** officially called the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, before hundreds of teens descended on Washington, D.C., every summer from across the country, Mike Simmang of Giddings and five other teens from rural Central Texas towns were on a working trip to the nation's capital.

It was 1958, and Mike was 16. One year before, Lyndon B. Johnson, then U.S. Senate majority leader, spoke at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's annual meeting in Chicago. The future U.S. president said, "If one thing comes out of this meeting, it will be sending youngsters to the national capital where they can actually see what the flag stands for and represents." LBJ's words sparked a movement. Almost 60 years after her grandfather Mike's journey to Washington, Whitney Whitsel, who grew up in the community of Ledbetter, also attended the government youth tour — in 2016. Although their experiences differed, both learned history and came home with a lifetime of memories.

Mike recalls that Johnson got things rolling in 1958 by asking three Central Texas cooperatives to send two teens to spend time in D.C. with him. The new program was called "Government in Action" scholarships. Mike and Marilyn Dallmeyer of Burton represented Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative (then named the Lower Colorado River Electric Cooperative). Pedernales Electric Cooperative and Sam Houston Electric Cooperative also sent local high school students.

It wasn't exactly a tour. Mike's trip was an immersion into the daily workings of one of America's most persuasive and powerful politicians, an insider's look at how things worked during the decades of Democratic control of the U.S. House and the Senate, when Texans held some of the highest seats of government. The Texas teens spent six weeks on the trip, helping out in Johnson's Senate office and in the office of Homer Thornberry, the U.S. congressman from the 10th congressional district at that time — LBJ's former House seat. They read through Texas newspapers looking for articles that might be of interest to Johnson and helped with mail and routine office duties for both lawmakers. "I met Sam Rayburn, the speaker of the House of Representatives. Texans ran the country then. Johnson knew who to talk to and what to tell them," Mike said. Johnson "was very tall. I never saw him lose



Mike Simmang, above at left, with his father, Judge John S. Simmang. Father, then son, served as general counsel for Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative. Undated photo from Bluebonnet archives

his temper, though folks said he had a bad temper. He had a sense of humor. I didn't feel intimidated."

The six teens saw historic sites, and they saw sights not on today's youth tour agenda.

"In the afternoon we had LBJ's limousine and driver. He took us here and there," Mike said. "We went to the Supreme Court and met some of the justices.

"We went to Philadelphia and saw the Liberty Bell and all the things you see there," he said. "Like 'American Bandstand.'



Mike Simmang still lives in Giddings today, 64 years after being part of the inaugural youth tour.

"We got to dance, and Jimmy McBride from Leander talked to Dick Clark," Mike said. Someone handed the famous TV host a Texas-sized cowboy hat, which he briefly wore.

Rural Texas teens dancing in front of more than 8 million viewers on what would become America's most popular daytime TV show was quite a feat.

The most popular bands in America played the show, usually lip syncing their hits to an adoring crowd of "teeny-boppers."

But that's not all. The six teens from Texas also went to New York and saw a Broadway play. They also saw and listened to a meeting at the United Nations. "There were headphones at every seat and they were broadcasting in five languages," he said.

Mike was inspired by everything he saw. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, followed by law school at the University of Texas in Austin. He completed his law degree at St. Mary's School of Law in San Antonio, then followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and father, both lawyers. Mike's father, John Simmang, was Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's co-counsel for 27 years. He also served as Lee County judge and served five months as a district judge. After his father died, Mike served as Bluebonnet's assistant counsel for about 7 years, then became general counsel in 1976,

he recalled. He retired in 2011.

The 1958 inaugural youth tour "led me to believe and continue to believe that this is the greatest country in the world . . . and that voting is not a privilege. It is a duty," Mike said. "I learned that those people up there are real people, and that is why it's so important to know who they are and know about them so you can make an intelligent vote."

Mike is 80, still living in Giddings on the same family land he grew up on. He's been lucky, he said. He and wife Mary Ellen have been married almost 59 years. They had six children, although two have died. One of his daughters is Mary Ellen Whitsel, who works at Bluebonnet in the new service department. Whitney Whitsel is her daughter.

Like her grandfather, Whitney was also a student at Giddings High School when she was selected for the government youth tour in 2016, after her senior year. She was 17 and it was 58 years after her grandfather Mike Simmang's trip to Washington.



Whitney Whitsel, Simmang's granddaughter, is working on her master's degree in San Angelo.

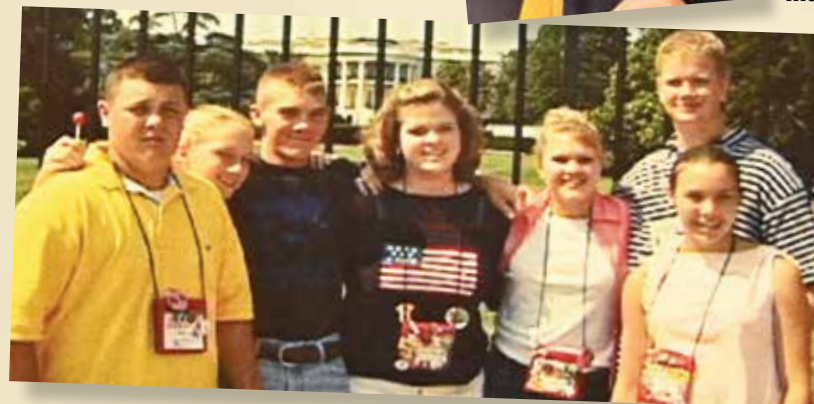
"I'm a very outgoing person, so I wasn't super nervous," she said.

"It was a very eye-opening experience for me. I had not traveled out of Texas very much, so getting to go to the Capitol and all of those things, I probably would never have

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Shayne Markwardt Kirts, above, with some of her students at Giddings Elementary School, where she is principal. Back row, from left, are Brandon Villegas, Katelyn Snyder and Robert Nicks; second row, from left, are Adalyn Christiansen, Noah Villegas, Hudson Adams and Nolan Adams; front row, from left, are Wyatt Irwin, Emery Adams and River Anderson. At right, Shayne in her high school senior portrait, and below, with other members of the 2002 tour. She is third from right. Sarah Beal photo above; other photos courtesy Shayne Markwardt Kirts



## Shayne Markwardt Kirts, 2002

**TWENTY YEARS AGO**, Shayne Markwardt made her first trip to Washington, D.C., and it took her breath away. She was 18, had graduated from Round Top-Carmine High School and was one of two students selected by Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative for the Government-in-Action Youth Tour.

She had traveled to other states before, but this was different.

"You always learned about it in textbooks, read about it, but to see it firsthand was a completely different experience," she said. "It brought it to life for me."

Shayne's last name is Kirts now, and even though it's been two decades, she clearly remembers going to see the White House, seeing "a huge flag at the Smithsonian that had been flown at the White House," spending time at the U.S. Capitol and watching members of Congress go about their work.

One of her most vivid memories is of watching the solemn ceremonial laying of the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. "When you just hear about the numbers there, it doesn't really have an impact on you. But seeing all of those graves, all these people who had fought for your freedom, it's a huge experience and made me proud to be an American and to live where we live." Today, there are more than 400,000 graves on Arlington's 639 acres.

Shayne also made plenty of friends during the trip, which consisted of multiday bus rides (with stops in between) from Texas to D.C. and back. "I encountered some of them again in college and connected with some of them in my professional

life," she said. "Those relationships started (on the youth tour)."

She went to Blinn College in Brenham to earn an associate degree in science and art, then to Texas A&M University for a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies focused on education. She earned a master's degree from Lamar University.

Shayne taught science to fifth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in La Grange in Fayette County, working there for 11 years before becoming assistant principal at Giddings Intermediate School in Lee County, then at Giddings Elementary.

Today, she is the principal of the elementary school.

"I love children and always wanted to make an impact on their lives, but after going to Washington, D.C., you're so proud of what other people have sacrificed for you. It made me want to be a leader, to be that positive impact on kids' lives," Shayne said. She wanted to teach, but realized she also wanted to do more. "I want to be a superintendent at some point," she said.

Shayne met her future husband, Bryan, early in her studies at Blinn. They've been married almost 14 years and live in Round Top. They have two children, 9-year-old Kooper and 2½-year-old Kollyns.

Always active in her community, Shayne wants to teach her children the importance of giving back. "The experience I had (on the youth tour) helped ensure that I stayed on the right path and continued my education," she said, adding that she hopes her children get a sense of that and apply for the Government Youth Tour when they are old enough.

## Madison Iselt, 2018

**THE BIGGEST THING** about Madison Iselt's 2018 trip to Washington, D.C., was just how big it all was.

"There was so much. We were there seven days and I didn't get to see all the things we were planning to see," she said. "That surprised me the most."

There were other surprises for Madison when she represented Bluebonnet on the government youth tour four years ago. She was 18 then and had just graduated from Lexington High School in Lee County.

"We got to take pictures in front of the White House. We held the Texas flag there . . . We got to meet a congressman," she said. She enjoyed a murder mystery play and ate dinner aboard a big boat on the Potomac River.

Madison also remembers two moving and vivid moments.

One was attending a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, where she could watch the precise steps and solemn protocol of infantry members who guard the tomb 24 hours a day, every day of every year.

"You have to be silent the whole time. You see the guards walking back and forth, which they have to do all day. It was really amazing," Madison said.

Her other vivid memory is a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The museum's exhibits reveal scenes and stories of the murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children by the Nazi regime and its allies during World War II.

"It was so very emotional and sad. The stories and pictures were really telling. It left an incredible impact on me," Madison said.

The government youth tour helped her learn what America's flag and Washington's memorials represent. It also helped her become more of a leader. "I interacted with so many people. Learning everything about them helped me with my speaking skills and in making relationships," she said.

She went on to Blinn College in Brenham for two years to complete nursing school prerequisite courses, then entered the nursing program at Concordia University Texas in Austin. She graduated in April at age 22.

"My plan is to work in a hospital as an RN. If I really love it, I'll stay, although I've also thought about travel nursing, or getting my master's and becoming a nurse practitioner, maybe at a women's services center," she said. Madison plans to take a job at Ascension Seton Williamson Hospital in Round Rock.

Madison equates seeing the remarkable Washington, D.C., tour sites in person to going from studying nursing to working as a nurse. "You learn in high school about government, but it's hard to understand some of these things just by reading a textbook." She said. "Nursing school is hard, and you learn as much as you can, but once you get to work on the (hospital) floor, that's where you really learn."



**Madison Iselt, above, recently graduated from Concordia University in Austin with a nursing degree. At left, on the youth tour in 2018, Madison, on the right, and Gillian Nietsche, left, were Bluebonnet's representatives. Madison graduated from Lexington High School and Nietsche from Giddings High School. On the youth tour, they were joined by 147 other Texas teens. Sarah Beal photo and photo courtesy of Madison Iselt**

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done that on my own," she said.

She was struck by the size and population of Washington, "especially when you come from a small town," she said. Whitney recalls the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian museums, their nice hotel and most of all, making new friends.

The Texas delegation outnumbered any other state, as it often does, and she enjoyed seeing the Texas teens all wearing the same type of shirts. "We were easy to see," she said. Whitney participated in trading pins with teens from other states, an old youth tour tradition. "You definitely meet people from all over Texas. I still connect with people in

my group. I went to A&M with some of the people who were on the tour with me. I still keep up with them," she said.

At Texas A&M University, Whitney earned a bachelor's degree in animal science in May 2020. In college, she worked with the AgriLife Extension program, which sponsors Texas 4-H. She served on the reserve national championship team for 4-H wool judging, helped coach the next year's team, helped organize events for Texas 4-H Livestock Ambassadors, and held two internships with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

She traveled beyond Washington, D.C., to study in Scotland, England and Ireland during her sophomore year. She will finish work in August on her master's degree in animal

science while working at the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension center in San Angelo. Whitney plans to continue working there for a few years, she said.

Whitney also plans to stay in the agriculture industry and, as her experience shows, she enjoys working with and teaching children about the importance of raising animals.

Her experience on the government youth tour was eye-opening and helped prepare her for college. Whitney's advice for this year's tour participants: "Take advantage of everything that's being offered to you. This is probably something you'll never be able to do on your own again. We would never have gotten to go to all of those places in five days without this trip."



**An impressive sight: the Texas contingent on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour in front of the White House in 2019. Photo courtesy of texasyouthtour.com.**

- Texas teenagers start their youth tour with a trip to Austin to tour the Texas Capitol and the Bullock Texas State History Museum.
- Texas youth tour teens fly on a chartered plane to start their Washington, D.C., adventure. Before 2004, they traveled for several days on buses.
- More than 1,100 teens from 28 states, including Texas, will participate in the government youth tour this summer.
- See videos of past years' youth tours at <https://www.texasyouthtour.com>

## Michael Willette, 1993

**ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO**, Michael Willette took his two teenage children, Erin and Connor, to Washington, D.C., to see the monuments, history, ceremonies and all the other symbols of patriotism.

He wanted them to see what he saw when he represented Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour almost 30 years ago.

"The kids were 15 and 13 at the time," he said. "The youngest one was only about 3, too young to understand. We did a tour of the Capitol, the monuments, the Smithsonian."

He used his experience from the Youth Tour to guide them. "I remember how much it impacted me," he said.

Michael was selected by judges to represent Bluebonnet on the tour in 1993, after he finished his junior year at Lockhart High School. He was 17.

He laughed at the memory of his essay

strategy. "In the true spirit of Michael Willette, I waited until the night before to write it," he said. "I ran in to type it up and turned it in just in time. Several weeks later I was told I was a finalist." Michael was interviewed later by judges at Bluebonnet's headquarters, then in Giddings, and he got their votes.

His essay theme featured the importance of knowing and understanding history, and how it helps people make better decisions. He recalls referencing the famous saying attributed to multiple political leaders: "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Michael and the large Texas contingent of students rode in two commercial buses for two days to get to Washington. "We stayed in hotels at night," he said. "It was like a camp — everyone was having a great time. You got to know everyone on your bus."

Even though Michael grew up as a "military brat," he said, "I'd never been to a town like D.C." He enjoyed talking

with then-U.S. Rep. J.J. "Jake" Pickle, who represented Texas' 10th congressional district for 32 years. Michael remembers seeing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the precision of the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

He tried a variety of jobs after high school and then went to college, graduating in 2002 from what is now Texas State University in San Marcos with a degree in mathematics and computer science. A few years before, he had taken a computer programming course and "it kind of clicked," he said. "I knew this is what I want to be doing for a living."

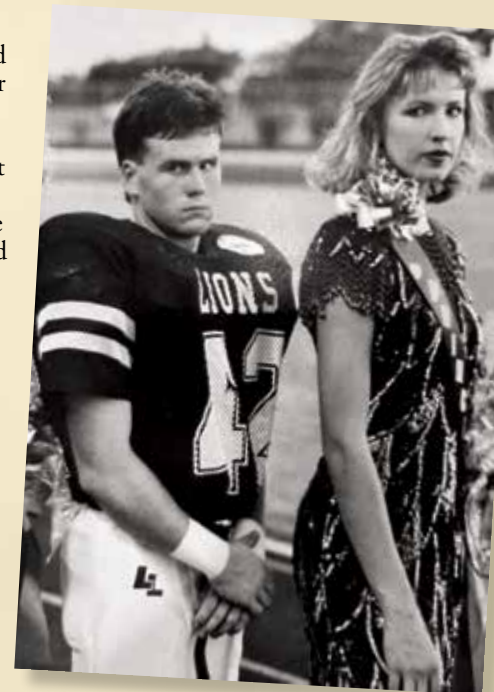
He started working from his home in Lockhart for San Antonio-based USAA, the massive financial and insurance company with services that are available only to members of the military and their families. He started as a software engineer for marketing systems and worked his way up to become a senior executive of data and analytics.

He's still married to his high school sweetheart, Kathy Rodgers, and they stayed in Lockhart until 2013, when they moved to San Antonio. "We may move back to Lockhart someday," he said.

Michael thinks back on his trip with his children to Washington and the things they learned there. He hopes the symbolism of the monuments, museums and historical buildings stick with them. Today, daughter Erin is 18, and sons Connor is 15 and Nolan is 6.

They went to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, too, which left a deep impression. "I wanted them to ask about why we put people in harm's way, and about the nature of evil," Michael said. He recalled another famous (and often misattributed) quote: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

His advice for this year's youth tour participants: "Be a sponge. Set aside any preconceived notions, just enjoy it and use the opportunity to meet a lot of diverse people with diverse views of the world. It's not often you have an opportunity like that at that age," he said. ■



**At left, teenagers Michael Willette and his future wife, Kathy Rodgers, at their Lockhart High School senior homecoming in 1993. Willette had gone on the youth tour that summer. Today, he is a senior executive of data and analytics for USAA in San Antonio, and he and Kathy have three children.**