

Tomorrow's leaders are D.C. bound

Bluebonnet's student representatives will learn the ropes during annual government youth tour

By Lisa Ogle

Inspired to find a cure for cancer and changed by a mission trip to Guatemala, the winners of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's 2015 Government-in-Action Youth Tour seem ready to take on the world — or at least Washington, D.C.

Isabella Stasulli, a Bastrop High School senior, and Olivia Weiss, a Brenham High School junior, were selected to represent Bluebonnet during the annual tour of our nation's capital June 10-19. This year, winners will start the trip with a visit to the Texas Capitol and the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin. Joel Benoit, a junior who is homeschooled in Cedar Creek, is the alternate and will join the tour if one of the winners is unable to attend.

The three were among six finalists, who each gave an oral presentation to, and were interviewed by, Chamber of Commerce leaders at Bluebonnet's Headquarters on March 2. The winners were determined based on a total score for an oral presentation, personal interview, letter of recommendation and essays about leadership, the biggest influence in their life, their favorite president and how they want to change the world.

Stasulli, 17, has been heavily involved in dozens of extracurricular and volunteer activities, from National Honor Society, student council and Class of 2015 secretary to participating and volunteering in Relay for Life and walking dogs at the Bastrop County Animal Shelter. She wants to become an oncologist after seeing family members battle cancer, she said.

Stasulli wrote that she admires President Abraham Lincoln for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which freed the slaves, and ending the Civil War.

"I am a firm believer that no matter your skin color, who you are inside as a person is what matters," her essay said.

When asked about her interest in government, she said, "It's very diverse and there's so many aspects of it. What they teach us in school is very vague. With this trip to Washington, D.C., I'll be able to see it firsthand and see the history of the United States."

Weiss, 16, has been a player and now manager of her school's volleyball team, serves on student council, has been a Girl Scout for 11 years and has participated in a number of church activities.

During her mission trip to Guatemala last year, "it was a challenge communicating and working in a totally different culture, but it had a huge impact on me," she wrote in her essay. "The exchange of ideas and lifestyles is a big step in changing the world."



Sarah Beal photo

After graduation, Weiss plans to attend Blinn College and transfer to Texas A&M University, where she wants to study business or marketing.

"I have always had an interest in how the government works and in politics," Weiss said after learning she was one of the two winners. She is looking forward to experiencing it firsthand, she said, adding that she's most excited about visiting the Smithsonian, the world's largest museum and research complex.

Benoit, 16, attributed the eloquent delivery of his oral presentation to his Thesis & Rhetoric class, which includes a public speaking component. He is writing his senior thesis on the debate over capital punishment. Benoit was captain of his baseball team last year, tutors in math

Olivia Weiss, left, of Brenham, and Isabella Stasulli, right, of Paige, will represent Bluebonnet during the annual Government-in-Action Youth Tour in Washington D.C. and Austin in June. Joel Benoit, center, of Cedar Creek, was chosen alternate and will step in if one of the other winners cannot attend.

and works part time at a tree nursery. He hopes to attend the University of Texas or A&M and major in engineering or mathematics.

Stasulli and Weiss will be among about 125 young people representing Texas co-ops and about 1,500 teens from across the country in the nation's capital, where they will tour historical sites, visit with members of Congress and attend events hosted by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, an organization that represents more than 900 electric cooperatives across the nation.

The youth program was created more than 50 years ago. A 1957 speech by then-Sen. Lyndon Johnson inspired electric cooperatives to send groups of young people to work in his office during the summer. In 1958, an electric cooperative in Iowa sent 34 young people to Washington, D.C. And in 1964, the NRECA began to coordinate activities to draw even more state delegates, with more than 400 students from 12 states attending that year.

Stasulli and Weiss will each receive a \$500 scholarship and join an alumni base of more than 50,000 — an impressive group that boasts CEOs and U.S. senators. For more information about the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, visit bluebonnet.coop, hover your cursor over the Community tab and click on Scholarships. ■