

Bluebonnet's
new internship
program is training the next generation of line workers

Learning *the* ropes



The first participants in Bluebonnet's 30-week line worker internship program are, from left, Dylan Dussetschleger of Lexington, Zackary Handrick of Somerville, Brooks Kasper of Giddings, Tra Muston of Rockdale, Isaac Mills of Lockhart, James Flores of Elgin and Ty Duesterheft of Maxwell. (Sarah Beal photo)

By Will Holford

It takes years to train an electric line worker, and Bluebonnet just gave a head start to seven interns — residents of our area — along that rewarding career path.

Electric utilities across the country are facing the challenge of replacing longtime, experienced line workers who are retiring. Texas utilities are particularly impacted because the state's low unemployment rate and robust economic growth are increasing the demand for skilled labor.

Bluebonnet's new internship program targets future line workers from communities in or near Bluebonnet's service area to encourage motivated, talented residents to

enter the trade.

"One of the greatest things about Bluebonnet is the personal relationships that exist between our employees and members," said Matt Bentke, Bluebonnet's general manager. "A key reason for those relationships is that nearly all of our employees were raised in the communities we serve. Our employees and their families go to school or church, or play sports with many of our members. It's natural to hire people who want to work close to their friends and families."

It is not uncommon for siblings or multiple generations of a family to work for Bluebonnet, Bentke noted. "That is one of the greatest compliments and surest signs that we have the right culture in place," he added.

Bluebonnet is counting on those local and family ties to create and retain a stable workforce for years, perhaps generations, to come.

"The intent is to hire and develop home-

grown line workers who have roots in the communities we serve," said David Tobola, Bluebonnet's manager of operations and a homegrown lineman himself. Tobola, who grew up in Giddings and has lived in Bastrop for many years, has risen through the ranks at Bluebonnet. "We want people who want to make a career here and retire from Bluebonnet," he said.

The interns participate in a 30-week program during which they alternate weeks between the classroom and the field. They learn together in the classroom, but during those weeks in the field, each intern is paired with a mentor who is an experienced line worker or crew supervisor. While in the field, the interns apply the knowledge they learn in the classroom, and, with the help of their mentors and other crew members, hone the skills necessary to be successful journeyman linemen. They work full-time hours and receive pay

"By bringing the training in-house, we can provide constant feedback to the interns every step during their path to becoming journeymen."

— David Tobola

BLUEBONNET'S MANAGER OF OPERATIONS

and benefits from Bluebonnet.

Each month, mentors, instructors and assistant superintendents formally review the interns to give them feedback on how they are doing in the program and on the job.

"We provide constant communication and feedback throughout the process," Tobola said.

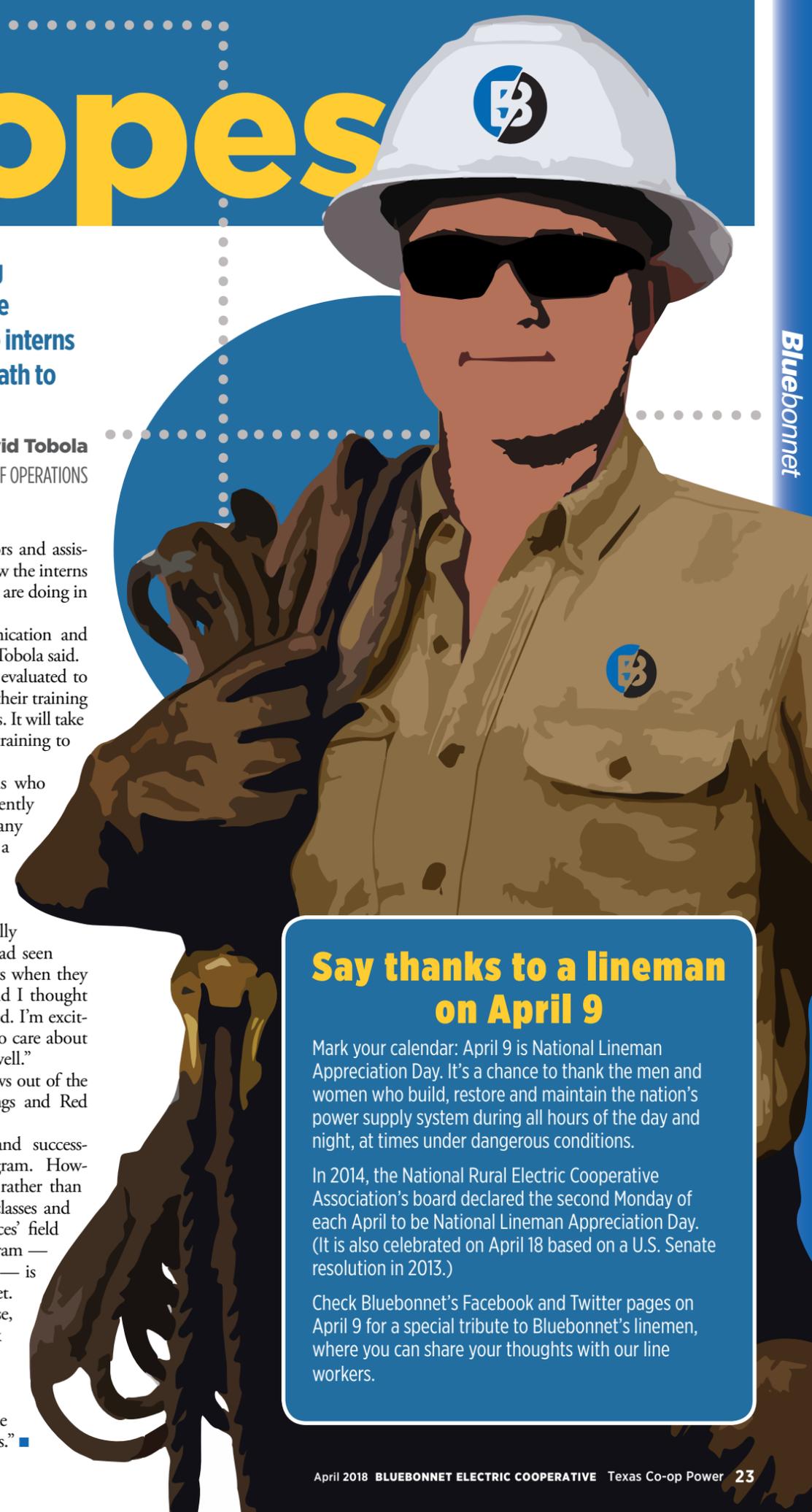
After 30 weeks, participants are evaluated to determine if they should continue their training to become journeyman line workers. It will take them an additional three years of training to become journeymen.

James Flores, one of the interns who lives near Bastrop and until recently worked for a remodeling company in Austin, said he was looking for a more stable career closer to home when he saw that Bluebonnet was hiring. "I wanted to branch out and start a career that I hopefully can retire from," Flores said. "I had seen and talked to the Bluebonnet guys when they were working on our property and I thought that looked interesting, so I applied. I'm excited to get to work with people who care about what they do and treat people so well."

The seven interns work with crews out of the co-op's Bastrop, Brenham, Giddings and Red Rock service centers.

Bluebonnet has an ongoing and successful journeyman apprentice program. However, trade and technical schools, rather than Bluebonnet personnel, teach the classes and conduct portions of the apprentices' field training. The new internship program — a precursor to apprentice training — is administered entirely by Bluebonnet.

"By bringing the training in-house, we can provide constant feedback to the interns every step during their path to becoming journeymen," Tobola said. "That's a definite advantage for the interns, the co-op and, ultimately, our members." ■



Say thanks to a lineman on April 9

Mark your calendar: April 9 is National Lineman Appreciation Day. It's a chance to thank the men and women who build, restore and maintain the nation's power supply system during all hours of the day and night, at times under dangerous conditions.

In 2014, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's board declared the second Monday of each April to be National Lineman Appreciation Day. (It is also celebrated on April 18 based on a U.S. Senate resolution in 2013.)

Check Bluebonnet's Facebook and Twitter pages on April 9 for a special tribute to Bluebonnet's linemen, where you can share your thoughts with our line workers.