

"It was more than I could ever dream . . ."*Grand Ridge senior Jeremy Branch wins national honor*

**The best
and brightest**
WFEC's 2000 Youth
Tour representatives,
Casey Gurganus,
at left, and Jeremy
Branch, at right, meet
with U. S.
Congressman
Allen Boyd while in
Washington, D. C.

One of two winners of West Florida Electric Cooperative's 2000 Youth Tour contest has taken the top honor in a related national speech competition. In Lincoln, Neb., last month, Grand Ridge High School senior Jeremy Branch outshone speakers from 36 other states, earning the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's Youth Leadership Board Spokesperson's Award. Each competitor for the title was required to discuss the experience of attending this year's National Youth Tour in Washington, D. C., in June.

Branch and Graceville High School senior Casey Gurganus served as WFEC's delegates at the National Youth Tour, a week-long annual convention of high school juniors representing electric cooperatives throughout the nation. A three-judge panel had selected Branch and Gurganus from among a dozen students in WFEC's service area vying for the expenses-paid trip.

At the National Youth Tour, a student from each of the participating states is appointed to NRECA's Youth Leadership Board. Branch was named Florida's representative on the Board, qualifying him to compete for the national Spokesperson's Award, which he won. During his tenure as the Board's spokesperson, Branch will speak in St. Louis, Mo., in March at NRECA's annual meeting, one of the nation's largest gatherings of cooperative and rural leaders and consumers.

"In my speech, there's a quote by Mark Twain – 'What we learn with pleasure, we never forget,'" said Branch. "The truth of that statement was very evident during my Youth Tour trip, mainly because of the caliber of the participants."

A long list of supporters were behind his success in winning the YLB award, he noted. He expressed appreciation to Susie Johnson and Terry Mullen, WFEC staff members who escorted all of WFEC's Youth Tour contestants on a Florida

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capital tour; Edie Beiner, Florida Electric Cooperatives Association's statewide services director; Lynn Tish, Quincy, Fla.-based Talquin Electric Cooperative's cooperative education representative, who accompanied the Florida Youth Tour delegates to Washington; Karen Bailey, NRECA Youth Programs staff associate; Grand Ridge High School Principal Patricia Hall; and longtime family friend Dr. Gayle Westbrook. "I also thank Jesus Christ, my Lord and God, for blessing me with a talent, and my parents, Donnie and Debbie Branch, for encouraging me to use that talent," he said.

Fellow WFEC Youth Tour winner Casey Gurganus also recalled an educational but enjoyable trip. "It was my first time flying and being so far away from home," she commented. Her favorite Washington attractions included the play *A Dinner Party*, featuring John Ritter and Henry Winkler, at the Kennedy Center; a visit to the Newseum, an interactive museum exploring the news business; and shopping at the malls.

"I got real close to the rest of the Florida group. I'm keeping in touch with some of them through e-mail," she added. "I could tell our group got the closest because we were around each other the most, I think." Gurganus thanked the organizations and their representatives who coordinated the trip and chaperoned the Youth Tour participants, as well. She is the daughter of Twila Harris, of Graceville, and Tony Gurganus, of Grand Ridge.

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, sponsor of the National Youth Tour and Branch's award, is the national service organization representing the interests of consumer-owned electric utilities, including WFEC, and their consumers. 

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