

## JACOB'S LOG:

# Where I'm Coming From

By Jacob Brooks

**M**y southern accent has given me trouble in the past, leaving people speechless for all the wrong reasons. Once I was at Appalachian State giving a speech, and when I began everyone got real quiet. I noticed them smiling, and I thought, "Oh my gosh! These people are actually buying this stuff!" Little did I know that they didn't care at all about what I was saying, it was how I was saying it.

Later, a group came up to me and a girl said, "We just wanted to tell you that we loved your speech." My ego shot through the roof. I'm standing there and I've lost all train of thought. The little guy on my shoulder was screaming in my ear, "Don't mess this up! Just keep talking, try and look cool. Just breathe." So I asked her, "What was your favorite part of the speech?" She looked at me and said, "I just thought the way you talked was funny."

My accent and I come from the mountains of northwest North Carolina, a small town called Sparta in Alleghany County. I am talking "small." You can cruise Sparta in just five minutes. Go through all three stop lights and you're done.

Back in the 1930s, people in this area formed a cooperative called Blue Ridge Electric, not only to provide affordable electricity to its members, but also to improve their way of life. Today, Blue Ridge Electric serves over 70,000 member accounts. When I say "serve," most think I mean electricity, but that's not all I mean.

You know that one person you run across sometimes who is unbelievably friendly, and you're not sure why? It's that person who becomes a true friend, who always wants to help out no matter what? That's what Blue Ridge Electric is to my community.

Blue Ridge Electric gives out thousands of dollars in scholarships every year to graduating seniors. They send kids on trips like this one to Washington. They host leadership conferences. Their devotion to the community is remarkable. Blue Ridge Electric has two volunteer member committees, the Community Leadership Council and the Member Advisory Committee. Both of these groups meet with the Blue Ridge board and allow for discussion between the community and the board. Because of these groups, Blue Ridge can hear what the community has to say. Blue Ridge employees and board members do tons of volunteer work with civic associations, schools and other local organizations. If lights go out on the baseball field, Blue Ridge Electric shows up to light up the place.



*Jacob Brooks in July was elected to be national spokesman for the Youth Leadership Council. Among other responsibilities, he will speak at the national convention of electric cooperatives in February. Between now and then, he will file "Jacob's Log" each month to Carolina Country. This first entry is from the speech Jacob delivered to the 2009 Youth Tour to Washington, D.C., sponsored by North Carolina's electric cooperatives June 13–19. A total of 34 rising high school seniors representing 18 co-ops made the trip to learn about cooperatives and the nation's capital, and to meet with legislators. The group elected him as its representative to the national YLC, which later elected Jacob as its national spokesman.*

Jay Leno used to say on TV, "Oh, the economy is so bad!" And the audience would say, "Well, how bad is it, Jay?" Then he would follow up with some joke. Well, the economy is so bad that those jokes actually aren't funny anymore. Businesses are shutting down, people are losing their jobs, and no one knows what's going on with this bailout stuff.

In Alleghany County, we're losing jobs every day. I read in our paper a while back that our unemployment rate was almost 15 percent. Blue Ridge Electric is one of the strongest employers in my community, but it also attracts and retains other businesses. Through competitive electric rates, incentives and a welcoming attitude, Blue Ridge Electric has attracted businesses and helped keep the ones we have. You could say that Blue Ridge Electric provides food, shelter, water, clothing and homes to families in my county.

Here is something I read recently: "This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." It's from "The Gettysburg Address." Abraham Lincoln could have been stating our basic principles for a co-op: a business of the people, by the people, and for the people. 📍