

CO-OP CONNECTIONS



Virginia
Cooperative Council

Quarterly newsletter of the Virginia Cooperative Council

Spring 2023



Nearly 30 high school students and FFA state officers, took part in the Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education, held March 24-26 at Graves Mountain Lodge. Photo by Jim Robertson, VMD Association of Electric Cooperatives.

Students excel at VICE conference

Held March 24-26, this year's Virginia Institute of Cooperative Education at Graves Mountain Lodge included nearly 30 participants from across Virginia who had each profiled a local cooperative in their applications.

Beginning on Friday, Carroll County ag educator Sarah Jo Jones led the "True Colors" exercise to help students better understand their personalities and those of others. After the "Welcome to Cooperatives" test, students formed teams for the "Who's Minding the Store?" business simulation.

Making financial decisions over five quarters, teams were presented with operating statements and learned to interpret the results as they sought to increase their store's net worth. After a long day inside, skies cleared just in time Saturday afternoon for the teens to enjoy a hike around Graves Mountain, with several casting a line in the nearby trout pond.

Following two days of learning, teamwork, fun activities and great food, scholarship winners were announced. Ruth Haile of Mechanicsville, who profiled the King William Southern States, was top scorer and earned \$2,000; Jill Reiter of Dinwiddie profiled Southside Electric Cooperative to earn a \$1,500 scholarship; Savannah Goodwin of, Mineral profiled EverGRO Cooperative to earn a \$1,000 scholarship. These three are among the top 10 students who have been invited on an expense-paid trip to the Georgia Cooperative Leadership Camp in July at Covington, GA.

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MEC President & CEO to headline Co-op Month event

John C. Lee, Jr., who has served as President & CEO of Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative (MEC) since 2008, will serve as keynote speaker at the Council's Co-op Month breakfast on Thursday, October 5 at the Olde Dominion Agricultural Complex near Chatham.

After earning his B.S. in business from Mississippi State University, Lee began his electric cooperative career in 1992 as community relations specialist for Old Dominion Electric Cooperative's (ODEC) Clover Power Station, located in Halifax County. He went on to serve as ODEC's director of economic development, then manager of administration and finally vice president of member and external relations before becoming MEC's leader.

Lee has long championed issues that bring value to co-op members, working to provide resources for economic development across Southside Virginia. He currently serves on the board of ODEC and the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives. A co-founder of the Southside Virginia Community College Power Line Worker Training School at Fort Pickett, Lee also has been a leading force in forming EMPOWER Broadband in 2018.

Mark your calendars for Oct. 5 to help us celebrate Co-op Month at a new venue! More information will be emailed to Council members this summer.



John C. Lee, Jr., President & CEO of Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative

Members in the news

On April 1, **Rockingham Cooperative** announced transition of its CEO from Norman Wenger, who has retired after 48 years of service. Since becoming CEO in 2004, Wenger had played a pivotal role in the growth and success of this co-op, leading it through a period of significant expansion and innovation. As Rockingham Cooperative implemented new technologies, it developed strong relationships with its members and partners and expanded its reach from a local to regional cooperative. New CEO Sam Liggett brings a wealth of experience to this role, having previously served as Chief Operating Officer, with more than 38 years of experience at the cooperative.

"I am honored to lead Rockingham Cooperative into the future," he said. "I look forward to building on the strong foundation Norman established and working with our talented team to continue serving needs of our members and the agricultural community."

The Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association (MDVA) recently honored sixth generation dairy farmer Thomas French of Woodstock, VA as 2023 Outstanding Young Cooperator. As part of this recognition, he will represent the cooperative at national-level meetings focused on the next generation of U.S. dairy farming.

"I'm looking forward to serving my fellow young cooperators in this leadership role," Thomas said. "I appreciate the trust our members have placed in me as I learn about our cooperative business and represent MDVA in national dairy events in the coming year. There's no doubt these experiences will come home to the farm with me."

MDVA also partnered with local environmental groups to support planting of 220 trees in Orange County that will create a riparian buffer along a creek located on J Team Dairy, LLC. The trees will help improve water quality by reducing the amount of nutrients and sediment entering the Rappahannock River watershed.

Have news from your co-op? Email mary.howell@sscoop.com or send a message via the Council's Facebook page.

CoBank's Sharing Success Program Can Double Donations

If your co-op is a CoBank customer, you've probably heard about their Sharing Success program, which doubles the contributions of customers to charitable causes. These include the Council's Virginia Foundation of Cooperation, which provides educational scholarships to students pursuing agricultural fields. To take advantage of this program, apply at www.cobank.com/citizenship/corporate-giving/sharing-success. Over the past decade, combined donations total over \$76 million! For any questions, please contact Ashley Macy, amacy@cobank.com.



VICE participants: where are they now?

This column profiles past attendees of the Virginia Institute for Cooperative Education, as well as Scroggs-Raper Scholarship recipients. Please contact VCC if you'd like to suggest someone to feature in an upcoming issue!

Jacob Lewis Agricultural Educator, Fort Defiance High School

What did participating in VICE mean to you? VICE was definitely a “Top 5” experience from my high school career! I not only learned new things about cooperatives and how they operate, but also gained life skills that can be applied anywhere. This event started new friendships that I have to this day! Making connections and networking is a huge benefit of participating in VICE. You never know who you are going to meet or how they are going to play a role in your life. Since I participated as an FFA member, I will relate it back to that. There is not another event that accomplishes more in teaching content to students, while allowing “down” time to relax and let loose with fellow participants.

Do you have any favorite memories of this event? I have two to share! The first was during Casino Night. As a participant, we had a blast while deciding how many beans to bet at various games throughout the evening. It gave us a chance to unwind and have some fun. It was a chance to get to know everyone in a non-academic setting when we were not learning about cooperatives or running a feed store. My second memory is experiencing Graves Mountain Lodge food. It may sound silly for a memory, but if you have ever eaten at Graves Mountain Lodge, you will understand where I am coming from. The dining room was just a great place to pick new people to sit beside and get to know.

Please share how participating in VICE influenced your career. I've known that I wanted to be an agriculture teacher and FFA advisor since I was a freshman in high school. However, what VICE influenced me to do has been marketing this program to my students and encouraging them to go as well. This year, I had hoped to have five of my students attend. Only one ended up being able to go, but that is ok. I ended up helping out as a team leader, and get to rate the participation by each student on my store team. As a big supporter of what VICE offers, I'll always encourage my students to attend this enjoyable, educational program!



Executive Secretary's message: Trying something different!

Not long after Dustin Francis of Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative became chair of our Co-op Month Committee, he suggested that we use the Olde Dominion Agricultural Complex (ODAC) off Route 29 in Pittsylvania County to host a Council event. Supported by a nonprofit foundation, this multipurpose facility offers 8,000 square feet of conference space and a 53,000 square foot indoor arena ideal for all types of events, including musical performances, rodeos and more! ODAC is also home to three museums: the Funeral Museum and Tobacco Museum (both open by appointment) and the AFF Tank Museum.

Given these resources, our board suggested expanding the typical Co-op Month event to include a Student Expo that will increase young people's awareness of co-ops in their communities and promote the Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education (VICE). So as to not overlap with the State Fair of Virginia, the Student Expo will get underway at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 4, with the Co-op Month breakfast the following morning and a group room block available at nearby Hampton Inn in Gretna.

Virginia agricultural educators received a “save the date” email and RSVP form to let us know how many students each plans to bring. We've offered all VICE scholarship sponsors free booth space at ODAC, and welcome all member cooperatives to consider taking part in this event. Be watching your inbox and our Facebook page for more information. During this event, we'll also recognize this year's Leadership Award recipient—nominations are needed by Aug. 15 if you know a good candidate!

Before closing, I need to recognize those who helped this year's VICE run so smoothly. Experienced adult leaders included Adam Shiflett, Marty Harris and Cheyenne Rhodes of Farm Credit of the Virginias, Eric Stogdale of Massanutten Technical Center and past VICE participants Jessica Harris and Jacob Lewis. Ag educator Sarah Jo Jones received rave reviews on the “True Colors” personality self-assessment, and board members Mike Cannon, Dustin Francis, Brian Wolfe, Gerald Anderson, Jim Robertson and Adam Ford all played a role. FFA state officers and the Graves family lent their talents to make this year, our 32nd at Graves Mountain Lodge, so memorable. Mark your calendars for next year's VICE, set for March 22-24, 2024. - Mary Howell

New Member Profile: Park View Federal Credit Union



In 1969, eight individuals on the campus of Eastern Mennonite College (now Eastern Mennonite University) each deposited \$5 into savings accounts. With that \$40, Park View Federal Credit Union was born as a savings program whose assets were available for other employees to borrow. Thus, one member's savings became another member's loan.

During Park View FCU's early years, all staff and board members were volunteers, with an individual's character and integrity serving as the basis for evaluating loans. By 1984, membership expanded to include Mennonite churches in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. This enabled members to channel funds to assist one another in areas of mutual aid and financial concern.

The credit union continued to grow, now including numerous partner organizations, including member businesses and many churches. Financial services were added to meet members' needs and expectations, resulting in a one-stop financial resource that provides savings, loans, investments and insurance.

Today, Park View FCU has grown to become a full-service financial institution serving over 14,000 members, with \$350 million in assets available to many church denominations, co-ops and employee groups. Throughout this growth, it has remained a not-for-profit cooperative, governed by a volunteer board, with professional staff managing the operations.

"It would have been beyond our founders' wildest dreams to imagine that their little savings program would become the thriving and successful credit union it is today," says CEO John Beiler, adding, "We continue to be a values-based organization, striving to live out our legacy of 'Neighbors serving Neighbors®'."

VICE conference, continued

"An outstanding group of students made this year's VICE scores especially close," said Mary Howell, VCC executive secretary. She added, "We are very grateful to our members who donate \$350 VICE scholarships so that we can continue to offer this event free of charge, as well as to all our volunteers who contribute their knowledge and talents to serve as adult leaders." Next year's VICE will be March 22-24, 2024. To see photos from this year's event, visit <https://vmdaec.smugmug.com/Vice-2023/>

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The Virginia Foundation of Cooperation, Inc. welcomes tax-deductible contributions to support our educational mission.

Virginia Cooperative Council

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