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KIDS AND CRITTERS



TOGETHER, WE'RE BUILDING A BRIGHTER FUTURE ONE YOUTH LEADER AT A TIME



By Katie Jagiello

During High School sophomores Ellayna Skarban and Aliya Cox recently represented Oconto Electric Cooperative (OEC) at the 2025 Wisconsin Youth Leadership Conference (YLC), held July 15–17 at UW-Stout.

Over the course of the three-day event, students connected with peers from across the state, experienced college life firsthand, and participated in a variety of sessions focused on strengthening personal leadership skills. The conference featured dynamic speakers, engaging activities, and practical lessons students could take back to their schools and communities.

One of the highlights was a presentation by motivational speaker Craig Hillier, who shared his message on Break-through Leadership. Hillier encouraged students to turn setbacks into comebacks, take ownership of their actions, and respect differences in others. His high-energy workshop featured interactive exercises, storytelling, and group discussions that kept attendees fully engaged.

In another key activity, students were grouped into six cooperative districts to collaborate with peers from other schools. Each group was assigned a cooperative principle

and tasked with creating a TikTok video around it—blending creativity, teamwork, and leadership (748800) in a modern and fun way.

A Life Without a Reset Button

Ben Bella, Safety and Loss Control Manager, delivered a powerful session on the importance of safe driving and sound decision-making. He emphasized the need to be a defensive driver and remain alert to the actions of others on the road.

“How many of you have ever made a bad decision?” he asked. Nearly every hand went up.

“That bad decision—how can it affect your life or someone else’s?” Bella continued. “We never know what the consequences will be. There is no reset button in life. You can’t undo your actions. What you do and say today can have a lasting impact.”

His message left a strong impression on students, reinforcing the value of accountability and careful decision-making in all areas of life.

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Overcoming Trauma — Life After a Plane Crash

My name is Hunter Gillett. Today, I want to share with you a story not just about survival, but about what it means to rebuild your life—piece by piece—after everything falls apart.

I grew up in Cameron, Wisconsin. I was an athlete—dedicated, passionate. I ran track, played football, and poured my



Hunter Gillett was 18 years old when he survived a plane crash. (865701)

energy into being the best I could. In 2017, I visited UW-Stout and saw a future for myself there as a student-athlete. It was starting to feel like a dream coming true.

But then, everything changed.

On May 24, 2017, my friend Owen—an 18-year-old licensed pilot—invited me to go flying. It was a beautiful day.

We took off from a grass-strip airport

near my house. We waved at our friends fishing below. We flew over the river. And then suddenly, we nose-dived into it.

The crash is hard to talk about. I experienced what doctors called a near-death experience—an out-of-body view of the wreck. I saw myself underwater. I don't remember how, but I came to and managed to crawl out of that river with a shattered ankle, a collapsed lung, a broken back, and no real understanding of what had happened. The river carried me 150 yards. I thought about sectionals. About state. About not being able to run again.

Help came. I was in critical condition, in a coma, and then 22 days in the hospital. I missed sectionals. I missed



graduation. I missed a lot.

What followed were 13-hour surgeries, 96 screws in my face because it had been shattered, months of physical therapy, and years of mental healing. My mom was my rock—she took care of everything. I'll never be able to repay her for that.

I struggled with depression, anger, survivor's guilt. I asked, "Why me? Why did I survive and not Owen?"

Therapy helped—but not in the way I expected. We didn't just talk about feelings. We talked about life—sports, the Packers, the news. It got me outside of my own head. And that mattered.

Eventually, I started college at UW-Stout. I had two incredible roommates. I got into the gym. I got my confidence back. I wanted to feel normal again. Three years after the accident, I looked in the mirror and felt like myself again.

I still carry pain—arthritis, a bad ankle, and days where it's just hard. And I still carry Owen with me. I wear a bracelet with his name and number. I have a relationship with his parents that I cherish. I'll never forget him.

I lost faith for a while—but I've come back to believe that maybe I survived for a reason. Maybe I was the only one who could. And now, I try to use my story to help others.

So what do I want you to take away from my talk? You're going to have bad days. Everyone does. And that's okay. Be grateful for what you have. Life is hard—but it's also beautiful. We're young, and we have full lives ahead of us. Don't blink and miss it.

If you're struggling—talk to someone. Share your story. You never know who it might help.



In the beginning of YLC, I was nervous about not knowing anyone, but once I got there everyone was very nice and welcoming. I strongly encourage others to go, because there are lots of fun activities you get to take part in. My personal favorites were the motivational speaker, hypnotist, and meeting new people. — Ellayna Skarban



Aliya Cox makes the YLC 2026 Board

The WECA Youth Leadership Conference (YLC) wrapped with the competitive Youth Board election. Candidates vying for one of the six coveted seats on the board delivered always-entertaining and informative speeches to their electorate. The board is elected by all youth attendees at YLC.

Congratulations to Aliya Cox, she will be representing Oconto Electric Cooperative on the 2026 YLC Youth Board.

The YLC Board members will work throughout the year to educate peers about electric cooperatives and will be invited to travel to the nation's capital next summer for the 2026 NRECA Youth Tour. They will also be instrumental in planning the 2026 YLC.

The date for next year's Youth Leadership Conference is July 14-16. If anyone is hesitant to attend, I highly recommend going!

YLC was an experience nonetheless! I was nervous at first to go because I wasn't sure what we would be doing and what the conference really was about. Then as soon as I met my super awesome roommate I knew it was going to be fun! The conference really was eye opening to hear the guest speakers that came in and I learned about co-ops and how they run their business versus a corporation. I also learned everyone there is willing to talk to you if you just give them a chance! First, my big take away and a big reason for people that are thinking about going is just do it! Every district leader I met said they didn't want to go their first year either, until they met some of the coolest people they will never forget! I encourage the younger classmen to go to the camp because you will find it is a lot more fun when you go and talk to others that you've never talked to before. High school is where you start to make those connections with people and YLC will encourage you more than ever to talk to someone new!! Lastly, at YLC you can be yourself because no one knows who you are, and it never hurt anyone to get a good laugh and have FUN! — Aliya Cox

FARM SAFETY

FOR A SAFE HARVEST

Take these steps to help keep you and everyone on your farm safe during a busy harvest.

Meet Daily

Have morning safety meetings to brief everyone on the day ahead and to discuss potential electrical hazards. Review power line locations, clearance requirements and the proper positioning of extensions for transporting.

Train Others

Train anyone working on your farm, including seasonal workers and family members, on potential electrical hazards.

Use a Spotter

Use a spotter when operating large machinery near power lines or poles. Always keep equipment and extensions at least 10 feet from power lines.

If your equipment makes contact with a power line, pole or guy wire, **stay in the cab, call 9-1-1 and warn others to stay away.**



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Lena Celebrates National Night Out

Oconto Electric Cooperative was proud to attend the National Night Out event in Lena—a wonderful summer evening filled with community spirit and family fun. Lena was one of several communities in our area celebrating this annual event, and we were excited to be a part of it.

We brought along our tabletop safety demonstration display, helping to educate kids and families about the importance of electrical safety. It's always a joy to see young minds engaged and eager to learn, and we had a great time teaching the next generation how to stay safe around electricity.

This event reflects Cooperative Principle #5: Education, Training, and Information, one of the core values we uphold every day. We're grateful for the opportunity to connect with our community and share knowledge that can help keep everyone safe.

Thanks to everyone who stopped by—and to all who helped make the evening such a success!

TIPS TO AVOID ENERGY SCAMS

Solar energy is rising in popularity, and so are solar scams. If a salesperson knocks on your door promising free solar panels at zero cost or that you'll never have to pay your energy bill again, it's likely a scam. If you're interested in solar panels for your home, do your research, get multiple quotes from licensed providers who are reputable, and most importantly, take your time to ensure a smooth process.

Source: Federal Trade Commission



HIDDEN ACCOUNT NUMBERS

Oconto Electric Cooperative hides two account numbers in the local pages of the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News* each month. If you spot your account number, call our office before you receive the next issue, and OEC will give you a \$15 credit on your electric bill or a \$25 credit if you have a load management receiver. The July account numbers belonged to Gregory Archambault, Lena and James Swiecichowski, Krakow.



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