

WCEC Summer Intern Wins \$61,000 for QHS

During the summer of 2008, Macie Rushing, a 2007 graduate of Quitman High School (QHS) and current student at Texas A&M University, worked in the communications department at Wood County Electric Cooperative. As part of her duties, she helped develop various communications campaigns and also worked on community relations assignments. It's one of those latter tasks that has happily led to a significant technology award for QHS.

Samsung's Hope for Education, Microsoft Corp., and DIRECTV, Inc., sponsored an essay contest with prizes to be awarded to schools nominated by the essayist. According to Samsung, thousands of teachers, parents, students and principals submitted essays hoping to give back to their respective schools.

This year's essay question covered a complex topic regarding technology and how it has helped educate people and/or change behaviors to those that are more environmentally friendly. There were also key points that were expected to be addressed, but the essayist had a mere 100 words to do it in. This exercise took

exceptional word craft and was a perfect challenge for a communications major.

Macie was up to the challenge and conveyed those points clearly and concisely enough to grab a big prize for QHS.

That's a pretty good feat, since there were only 30 first-place awards. The value of Macie's award for QHS includes more than \$60,000 worth of technology, software, cash grants and educational television programming packages.

"Macie is a great example of the type of student that QISD is known for," QHS Principal Denny Lind said. "We were beyond pleased with the work that she did on our behalf, and we thank her for her continued commitment to her hometown and our community. Additionally, we are also grateful for our community leaders such as Wood County Electric Cooperative that always find value in supporting our youth. Paige Eaton of Wood County Electric Cooperative has gone above and beyond in helping our students of QHS realize that they can give back to their school and community in a variety of ways. We could not have won this generous contribution without the support and commitment of Paige Eaton reaching out to our students and educating our students in the importance of giving back to their school."



Quitman High School Principal Denny Lind stands with Macie Rushing, who won a significant prize for QHS through her essay-writing efforts.

DEVICES HELP KEEP CRITTERS FROM CAUSING OUTAGES

Got squirrels?

Chances are that if you are reading this, you do, and plenty of them. East Texas is a haven for all types of wildlife—some very welcome and others, not so much. Squirrels fall into both of those categories, depending on who you are.

Many people enjoy watching the lively antics of squirrels and consider them welcome furry friends.

Others have had experiences that color their view of the animals more darkly. Possibly they've experienced some of the damage that the creatures can do. Squirrels have a record of committing many a sin by chewing their way into home attics, wreaking havoc at bird feeders and even gnawing insulation off house or car wiring.

Another "crime" that squirrels are responsible for is hundreds of thousands of electrical outages

annually throughout the United States. For example, the Wood County Electric Cooperative (WCEC) distribution system just last year incurred 657 outages due to squirrel interference. These outages affected 5,342 members and caused more than 591 outage hours. Those numbers only included outages positively confirmed to have been caused by squirrels. Of the 587 unknown outages, as many as 50 percent can also be attributed to squirrels.

That's why this past year WCEC crews have stepped up the pace in installing animal guards to try to prevent these outages and are trying a new type of guard. This distribution transformer guard is lightweight and weather-resistant and is easily removable when crews need to make repairs. These guards can be mounted on bushings and arrestors and help keep them free from animal interference to

avoid outages.

"Right now, any time we touch a transformer pole, we retrofit it with an animal guard, and we also add insulated wire," said Operations Director Rusty Mask. "But, we've also been aggressively attacking areas where we have seen more numerous incidences of animal interference. For example, we identified a rural circuit that was having numerous animal-related issues, and the men installed over 300 guards there.



WCEC Serviceman Gary Wilcox holds one of the guards used to prevent animal intrusion and subsequent outages caused by them.

We've seen a marked decrease in outages there. As evidenced by that success, as we progress through our system, we expect to increase these positive results."

Friend or foe, depending on your outlook, squirrels will no doubt be local residents for many years to come. With more safeguards in place along our distribution lines, it should make life easier for our human inhabitants, as well as the furry ones.

An East Texas Valentine

The foster care system and the challenges that come with it have almost always been a part of Denice Grugle's life. Grugle's parents, a carpenter and a caterer, had two girls and a busy lifestyle, but were also dedicated foster parents for many children. One of those foster relationships turned permanent, and when Denice was 2, she acquired a 13-year-old sister, Leslie.

wards of the state until age 18. So, Denice feels that her family, parents Linda and Glenn Barton, and sister Elena, were very lucky to get adopted by Leslie.

Having been raised in a compassionate home that embraced foster care, Denice saw firsthand the difficulties that these children face. So, back in 2005 when she happened across an

convicted than ever that this was her calling. Initially, she was referred to the Dallas organization, but she quickly realized the great need in East Texas and also felt her time would be best used working closer to Wood and Smith Counties.

The concept behind Heart Gallery is simple: Professional photographers are asked to donate time to shoot portraits of adoptable children. The mission is to capture the spirit and personality of each child. The results are miles away from the more institutional photos of years past, and they serve up a much more compelling story. These portraits, along with brief descriptions of the children, are then developed into a forceful traveling exhibit, and the faces of these children break out of the confines of state filing cabinets and into public forums. And it's here that they stir the hearts of thousands. Ultimately, the goal of the Heart Gallery is to increase the number of adoptions by raising awareness in a compassionate and thought-provoking way.

"Heart Gallery pulls children out of the shadows," Denice said.

Heart Gallery focuses on children 8 years or older who are in minority or sibling groups, because these are the children who have the least chance for adoption at only 30 percent. Annually, in the United States, more than 19,000 children "age out" of the system. This means they've spent their childhood as wards of the state and in foster homes, never finding their "forever family." Denice says for the children featured in the East Texas Heart Gallery the rate of placement is 53 percent—but 47 percent still age out.

Even though the concept was already in place and working well in Dallas and across the rest of the country, building a Heart Gallery for East Texas became a journey of red tape and resistance. When Denice first approached state workers, she was told they'd never consider participat-



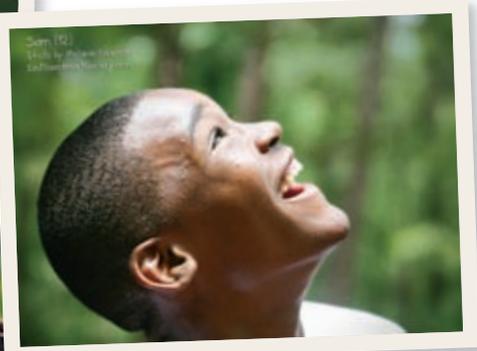
Denice Grugle works in her garage to build the East Texas Heart Gallery exhibits that are used to gain visibility for adoptable children who hope to find permanent homes.

Or, as Denice says, "I was adopted by my big sister when I was 2."

Typically, the only thing kids in foster care really want is a family—simply other people to belong to and people who belong to them. They hunger for a sense of place and long for the completeness of family. For many older children, returning to birth families will never be a reality, and they remain

article about Heart Gallery, an initiative to give visibility to the more than 150,000 foster children in the U.S. awaiting adoption, she said, "I knew I was supposed to be doing something with this."

Denice's work started with a phone call to New Mexico to learn about Heart Gallery at the place of its inception. From that call, she was more



Some of the portraits taken by professional photographers of children in the adoption system.

ing in something like this, fearing privacy issues for the children.

Denice said that although she was discouraged, she just kept telling them, and herself, that she had just not reached the right person yet. Finally, Denice was put in touch with Julie O'Brien, a caseworker with the Texas State Department of Family and Protective Services, who was receptive to the idea and helped Denice through the bureaucratic maze.

Other hurdles Denice had to jump included learning about how to run a nonprofit group and the process behind becoming incorporated. She cites United Way as a tremendous resource for those efforts.

Then, drawing on her own talents as a publisher, Denice started reaching out to photographers as well as managers of possible venues where portraits could be taken. She also needed to gain financial sponsors, seek businesses to donate materials for the displays and find people to build them, as well as secure printing services. With time and hard work, she's developed a tremendous support system, for which she is thankful, for the East Texas Heart Gallery, which now serves children in 23 East Texas counties. But, Denice says, there's still plenty of need for donations of time, materials and money.

Right now, the gallery has eight displays, each able to hold 24 portraits. Coordinating exhibits and setting

them up and taking them down is time-consuming and laborious. There

are three extremely dedicated regional volunteers who help, but there are many more tasks to be accomplished. Denice says a volunteer coordinator would be invaluable, and she's hoping that as others read about these children and the effective efforts of the Heart Gallery, they will consider donating their time and talents. "The only way we survive is through local donations and volunteers," she said.

In addition to running the program, Denice also works as an advocate for smoothing the adoption system. The qualifying process for prospective parents is now easier than ever with all types of parents, including single and divorced people, or couples gaining eligibility to adopt. However, many children will live in foster care for years before they are even eligible to be adopted. The causes behind this are many, including the difficulty in terminating parental rights, as well as worker shortages in social services. Denice is trying to work with state lawmakers to shorten the time children are in the system because the older these children get, the less likely they are to be adopted.

Like others in foster care, many of the children highlighted by the East Texas Heart Gallery have lived there for years. But, gallery kids have finally progressed to the point that all biolog-

ical parental rights have been terminated. Thus, every gallery child is eligible for adoption. Most are 8 years and older, unless they are part of a sibling group. And many are like Timothy, who described his dream family in an interview for the Heart Gallery by saying, "I want them to care for me. I mean, really love me. Not just take care of me, but play with me, too."

Denice wants families for Timothy and for Kenneth and Kelinda and Destiny and Raina and Lisby and Shawn and Colton and Angel and countless others, and she is doing everything she can to help lift them out of the shadows. She's now president of Texas Heart Gallery Association, serves on the national foundation's board of directors and is also a director for the Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas region. Denice sums up the Heart Gallery by saying, "These kids need to be noticed, and they are going to bring joy to someone."

To see some of the beautiful portraits of the Heart Gallery kids, prepare to be mesmerized and then log on to www.easttexasheartgallery.com. Or, contact the Heart Gallery for more information, to arrange for a display at your church or event, or to inquire about volunteerism opportunities. You can e-mail easttexasheartgallery@yahoo.com or call 1-866-787-ADOPT (2367).

Denice Grugle and her husband Tim are members of Wood County Electric Cooperative.