



Staff photo illustration by Fuller Royal

TWBers, from left: Katie Ward, Paige Stanley, Lillie Royal, Holley Norris, Trey Nealey, Collier Savage, Katti Caraballo, Kelly McPherson and Emory Ward.

Local teens go west

By FULLER ROYAL
Staff Writer

What takes 23 days, passes through 22 states and covers more than 8,500 miles?

A Teens Westward Bound (TWB) trip.

This year, nine high school students from Columbus County joined 73 others on a journey that few citizens will ever undertake, seeing sites in a combination that the vast majority of Americans will never see.

South Columbus High School junior Kelly McPherson joined Whiteville High School seniors Paige Stanley and Holley Norris, juniors Lillie Royal, Katie Ward, Emory Ward, Katti Caraballo and Trey Nealey and sophomore Collier Savage on the trip, which all nine say left them with "incredible memories and new, lifelong friends."

"I would have to say that my trip was the absolute best," said Caraballo, 16, the daughter of Bert and Beth Caraballo. "I learned so much about the United States and saw sights I never thought I'd see. We had something to look forward to every day and got closer to everyone as the days went on."

"I thought it was amazing opportunity to see America and meet a ton of new people," said Emory Ward, who along with 16 year-old twin Katie are the daughters of Ernie and Kayla Ward.

"TWB was an amazing experience for me because I got to see and learn about the beautiful parts of the USA that I would probably never see otherwise," said Katie Ward. "I made friends and memories that I will remember for the rest of my life."

"TWB was a once-in-a-lifetime chance," said Stanley, the 17-year-old daughter of Greg and Lynette Stanley. "We went to places that most people will never get to see with their own eyes. We made so many memories and met the best people. Also, we not only learned so much about the friends we made, but we also learned a lot about ourselves."

"The trip was a great experience to see and learn about the



Climbing rocks in Yosemite National Park.



Trey Nealey and fellow TWB member try to burst a balloon.



Mt. Rushmore was just one stop on the trip.



TWBers visited Michael Jackson's star.



Preparing to enter Disneyland in Anaheim, Cal.

son of Dean and Carol Nealey. "We got to see parts of our country that many people will never get a chance to see. I met amazing people and went to amazing places. What could be better than that?"

"The TWB trip was a life-changing experience," Savage, 15, said. She is the daughter of Robert and Suzanne Savage. "I was able to see this beautiful country that God created. I got a far better education about this country than I will ever get by sitting in a classroom. The TWB trip is one of the greatest experiences ever. I met and made a lot of wonderful friends."

"TWB has made an impact on my life I thought unimaginable," McPherson said. She is the 16-year-old daughter of Mark and Terry McPherson. "It has helped me to see America for what it really is: God's creation. I may never see some of these sights again but they will linger in

my heart forever. Also, the people are unlike any I have ever met before. I made true friendships that I know can, and will, last a lifetime."

"In the beginning, I was absolutely terrified to go on TWB," said Norris, 17, the daughter of Sonya Blackmon and Terry Norris. "Reflecting back on the experience now, it is by far the most amazing thing I have ever done. It is definitely one of the highlights of my life and I would do it all over again if I had the chance to."

"It was the best thing I have ever done," said Royal, the 16-year-old daughter of Janet and Fuller Royal. "It was definitely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The people you meet, you could never meet anywhere else. They are all amazing, including our awesome bus driver/hero David."

The TWB trip actually began last winter with a pre-

sentation by trip organizer Dennis Deaton at the Columbus County Arts Council.

Deaton, who recently retired as a public school teacher, has operated TWB every summer for 35 years. He and his sons, who will take over the operation when Deaton retires in 2013, oversee two trips around the nation each summer. The trips, with 80-plus high schoolers each, leave two days apart.

Deaton flies back and forth at crucial points in each trip, such as the hike into and out of the Grand Canyon.

Staff members for the trips are former TWBers who have completed four-year degrees at universities.

TWBers can only go on one trip, unless they are accepted as a staff member.

Potential TWBers must be recommended by students who have completed the trip.

The nine who went from Columbus County had been

recommended by the three who participated the year before.

On Saturday, June 20, a bus and two custom vans pulling trailers departed from Davidson College. The college serves as a central location for the travelers since most come from the towns along U.S. 74 from Wilmington to Gastonia.

"Well, all 82 of us were split into five different groups consisting of Dopey, Bashful, Sleepy, Sneezy and Grumpy," McPherson said. "We were assigned different jobs that we would have for about three days then we would switch off. We had to do everything from being tent setters to cooks and then even dish washers. If there was one thing I learned, I know now that I can cook a yummy grilled cheese."

"We had all these weird but fun competitions or games," Royal said. "For example we did the balloon-hugging game

where we had to hug someone to pop a balloon between us. We had to make up skits, and songs and perform them, which was really fun."

"At the beginning of our trip, we played all kinds of games to get to know each other," Savage said. "We faced lots of challenges along the way. We had campfires where we all sang together. We had to do all the cooking and cleaning. We played games against the other groups and even had a dance competition against each other."

"We would have group relay races, and we would sing around the campfire, and roast marshmallows," Stanley said.

At night, the TWBers camped under the open skies in state parks and on college campuses. Few nights were spent indoors. The only hotel nights were in Los Angeles.

"We cooked, cleaned, stayed organized the best we could, played games every spare minute, visited many beautiful places and we were all always giving and receiving hugs and 'I love you's,'" Norris said.

During the course of the first week, the TWBers visited Auburn University; toured New Orleans, where they enjoyed Biegnetts at the Café Du Monde; toured the Alamo; cooled their feet in the Riverwalk of San Antonio, Tex.; visited Roswell, N.M.; toured Carlsbad Caverns; and hiked through the Petrified Forest and Painted Desert.

"The hardest part of the trip was the first week," Stanley said. "We were getting to know people and we had to get over being homesick."

The biggest test of the trip occurred on day six when the TWBers hiked into the Grand Canyon and back out.

Most of the campers chose the six-mile route - three in and three out. The more daring of the group chose the six-mile in and six-mile out route.

"The hardest part of the trip was hiking the Grand Canyon," Savage said. "It took all the energy I had to finish the hike, but I was determined

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to say I hiked all the way and I did.”

Nealey agreed. “The hardest part for me was the 12-mile hike in the Grand Canyon,” he said. “It took 10 hours, but in the end it was worth it.”

Katie Ward said that, for her, hiking the Grand Canyon was toughest “because it was such a long distance and blazing hot. But, the most incredible sight was the sunrise at the Grand Canyon, even though we had to get up at four in the morning to see it.”

Norris said the worst for her was the night they stayed at the Grand Canyon.

It rained. “Some of us had hiked 12 whole miles in the Canyon and it only rains once every 10 years at the Grand Canyon,” she said. “It just had to be the night we stayed there. My belongings, along with many others’, were soaked. The only things I had that were dry were the clothes I had on and my pillow. Half way through the night, Paige Stanley and I shared her sleeping bag. I have never been so miserable, cold and uncomfortable in my life.

“I do believe that if a jet plane had been available that night, I gladly would have taken it back to Whiteville,” she said. “Looking back now, I’m glad that jet plane was not handy.”

“The sunrise at the Grand Canyon was the best,” Emory Ward said. “It was the most amazing sight I’ve ever seen.”

Caraballo agreed. “The most incredible sight would have to be the Grand Canyon,” she said. “I had never seen anything so enormous. It had the absolute best view ever. I never knew something that big existed.”

“For those who hiked the 12 miles to Plateau’s Point in the Grand Canyon, they are able to say they saw the most astonishing sight on the whole entire trip,” Norris said. “Words cannot even begin to describe how beautiful this sight was.”

“The best part of the trip for me was finally reaching Plateau Point in the Grand Canyon,” McPherson said. “I remember I had been dreaming the hike in the Grand Canyon all week because I didn’t know if I could make it all the way down or not. The feeling of knowing that I had reached that point gave me a sense of accomplishment and the energy I needed to make it all the way back to the top.

“A view that I think of constantly is the sun rising over the Grand Canyon at dawn,” she said. “It is a beautiful, breath-taking sight. The sky was mixed with every color from the gold of the sun to the blue of the sky.”

“The most incredible site I saw was the sunrise at the Grand Canyon,” Savage said. “I would get up at 4 o’clock a.m. any time to see the sunrise at the Grand Canyon.”

“The most incredible site was the Grand Canyon. It was so breathtaking,” Royal said. “It was hard to believe that it was something that was created by God for us to enjoy. I’m glad I took it in the night and morning before we hiked it because I was too busy hiking to just look at it.”

After the Grand Canyon, the TWBers were allowed to call home for the first time. Cell phones were not allowed on the trip.

The next stop was Las Vegas at night. “The most incredible sight was the beautiful lights of Las Vegas,” Stanley said. “That was my favorite place that we went.”

The next morning, the campers arrived in Santa Monica to spend the day on the beach swimming in the Pacific.

“The best part of the trip was the beach in Santa Monica,” Nealey said. “I came closer with everyone from the trip on that day and I swam in the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean.”

On day nine, TWB arrived at Disneyland, where it spent the day.

The next day, the campers went to the Hollywood Bowl where they rehearsed their annual prank.



Emory and Katie Ward maintain U.S. Air Force Academy traditions by kissing a cadet.



Mealtime TWB style.



TWB honcho Dennis Deaton prepares “Deaton Stew.”



Kelly McPherson with Jamie Foxx's star in Hollywood.



TWB “celebrity” English Tsumas signs an autograph.



On the beach in Santa Monica, Calif.



The hiking trail from the rim of the Grand Canyon.

One of the counselors, English Tsumas, would pretend to be a cast member of the “Twilight” movies as well as television’s “The O.C.”

She had to use her real name during the prank in keeping with California law. McPherson was chosen as the “lead screamer” while other TWBers were assigned the jobs of “manager” and “body guards.”

The campers traveled to Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Hollywood.

Tsumas entered Grauman’s courtyard with her entourage. McPherson started screaming and the other 80 TWBers rushed the “celebrity” for her autograph.

Within minutes, hundreds of tourists were caught up in the frenzy, asking for autographs and posing for pictures.

After the prank, the TWBers visited the Hollywood Walk of Fame star of Michael Jackson, who had died just days earlier. Dozens of satellite news trucks were parked in the area and thousands had left flowers and memorabilia on the site.

The night was spent camping by the Pacific Ocean in El Capitan State Park.

The next day, the group headed up Highway One to Monterey, Calif. And then on to San Francisco.

The group walked across the Golden Gate Bridge and enjoyed authentic Chinese Food in China Town. They also visited Fisherman’s Wharf.

The next day found the TWBers in Yosemite National Park in California’s High Sierras and its giant Sequoias where they fished and climbed rocks.

“The place that stood out to me the most was Yosemite National Park,” McPherson said. “Even though the night we stayed there I nearly froze to death, it had an unique beauty about it that you couldn’t help but notice. And when we had a lake with snowcapped mountains as our backdrop we couldn’t help but notice”

“The best part of the trip was California,” Stanley said. “I think that I made the most memories there than anywhere. You also got to go to the beach and that is the only time



The start of the Grand Canyon hike.



The TWB invasion of the Alamo in Texas.

that we got to tan.”

For Royal, the best part of the trip was its middle, “because everyone just started getting close to each other and bonding more and more. Also, we got to experience the more fun places during the middle of the trip with our huge 80-some family.

She said the hardest part had been the first week, “when we couldn’t call anyone, and some were still a little homesick. We weren’t really that close to each other because we were still figuring out how everyone acted.

“Also, the hardest thing was hiking the Grand Canyon. I probably would never do it again but it was a wonderful experience, and it was easier with everyone motivating each other to get out of there.”

At the beginning of their third week, the campers arrived in Salt Lake City where they toured the Mormon Tabernacle and celebrated the Fourth of July.

The spent the night at Bear Lake State Park in Utah.

The next day they arrived in Jackson Hole, Wyoming and shopped before heading through the Grand Tetons.

They toured Yellowstone National Park where they saw elk, moose, buffalo and Old Faithful.

The night was spent in Cody, Wyoming.

The next day, the TWBers went white water rafting on the Shoshone River. That night,

they attended a western rodeo in Cody.

“Wyoming was the best part of the trip because it was so beautiful and I loved going to the rodeo,” Savage said.

On day 18, the TWBers traveled to Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota.

“We experienced an amazing sight as we saw Mt. Rushmore illuminated at night,” Savage said.

They camped among the rocks of Rushmore National Park.

The group traveled through the Black Hills of South Dakota before arriving at the United States Air Force Academy in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

After a visit to the United States Olympic Training Center, the TWBers spent the day crossing Kansas.

On day 21, they group went to Kansas University and then to St. Louis where the bravest rode to the top of the 600-foot Archway to the West, which stands on the east bank of the Mississippi River.

TWB finished the week watching horse races at Churchill Downs in Kentucky.

“We toured the Kentucky Derby and spent the last and saddest night of our trip,” Savage said. “It was the last night we would all get to be together before meeting our parents back in North Carolina.”

On day 23, TWB arrived back at Davidson College.

“I would have to say the hardest part of the trip was telling everyone goodbye on the last day,” Caraballo said. “Don’t get me wrong. The Grand Canyon was really tough. We were like one big family by the end and just knowing we couldn’t be with each other everyday made it even harder.”

“Definitely the hardest thing I have ever done in my life was saying goodbye to the amazing 82 people on the trip,” McPherson said. “It still amazes me how I knew them for a mere three weeks yet I feel like I had known them for a lifetime. The bonds that you share are truly incredible.”

Their accomplishments

“I can honestly say that I have hiked the Grand Canyon,” Norris said. “We all had the option of going three miles, six miles, nine miles or 12 miles. Many of my friends stopped at the six mile mark. I began to, but looked at the others who were pushing themselves to make it to the bottom. Thanks to Kelly McPherson and Trey Nealey and many other TWBers, I made it to Plateau Point. It was the most difficult thing I have ever done and probably will ever have to do. However, the bonds I made with people and the beautiful sites were well worth the pain and exhaustion.”

“I believe I accomplished the ability to work well with other people,” Katie Ward said.

“I accomplished a lot throughout my TWB experience,” Nealey said. “I made friends who will last a lifetime and it is also satisfying to know that I was able to contribute to the success of my group. I also am glad to get to see so many great places that I can tell friends and family about everyday.

“I learned that I can accomplish anything I set my mind to,” he said.

“I accomplished making many friends and memories I will never forget,” Stanley said. “And not to mention I have been all around the whole country.

“When I went on TWB, I learned that I was most certainly not made for camping, but I did have so much fun,” she said. “You will learn to be more open with people if you are shy, you kind of have to be, being that 82 people are living with you for a whole month.”

“I accomplished a new appreciation of my country and I experienced things I’ve never done before,” Emory Ward said. “I learned that I can function without that much sleep.”

“During these 23 days I learned a lot about myself,” Caraballo said. “I learned to be more open with people and I learned to appreciate what I have. I also learned being with 82 teenagers for 23 days, you shouldn’t care what you look like.

“The best part of the trip was bonding and getting closer to all 82 people,” she said. “We were together 24/7. We couldn’t help but become closer friends. The best part about it all was by the end of the trip, everyone knew all 82 names.”

“I feel like TWB helped me achieve a confidence I otherwise wouldn’t have,” McPherson said. “It helped me to just let all my barriers down and to get to know people for who they really are.

“I learned a lot about myself,” she said. “I learned that I have more patience than I ever thought I could have. But most of all I learned just how to open up to people in a way I never thought I could. I just feel like I appreciate things a lot more now and have realized how blessed I really am.”

“The greatest accomplish-

ments for me were learning how to do things on my own, hiking the entire Grand Canyon and learning to work together as a team to make things happen,” Savage said. “I learned that I am not very outgoing and tend to be shy. And at the same time, I learned that you can accomplish what you are determined to accomplish.”

“I learned how to be independent and responsible,” Royal said. “Also, I hiked the Grand Canyon. I learned that I couldn’t be an outdoors person 24/7. I could take maybe a week of camping and that’s it. Also, I’m not as dependent on others as I thought.”

Final thoughts

“If you ever get the chance to go on this trip or your children do, then don’t pass it up,” McPherson said. “TWB is an ‘experience’ where you can explore our great nation and along the way you discover yourself in a way you never thought possible.”

“I would encourage anyone who gets the chance to travel with TWB to go,” Savage said. “It will be one of the best experiences of your life. I feel honored to say I have traveled across the United States and back with lots of people I didn’t know before we left on our trip.

“I thank God for not only this experience, but also for this beautiful country that we are privileged to live in and all the wonderful friends I have made through this experience,” she said.

“I strongly recommend each and every teenager who has the chance to go on TWB to definitely go,” Norris said. “It will be something you will gladly remember and keep close to your heart for forever. Consider the opportunity to go on TWB as a blessing.

“There were four special moments that were, of course, the best part of the trip,” Norris said. “I am not allowed to speak of these special moments to anyone who is not a TWBer. But I am allowed to say they were the highlights of the trip because they brought each and every person closer together.”

“The best part of the trip was meeting new people, seeing America and making great memories that we will remember for the rest of our lives,” Katie Ward said. “TWB was an eye-opening experience that made me really appreciate my country and enjoy its natural beauty.”

“I am so glad I had the opportunity to go on this trip,” Royal said. “I have 82 lifelong friends to depend on. I strongly recommend this trip to anyone who wants to meet new people and find out who they are.

“Also, to see the United States,” she said. “Oh, you have to be able to try new foods, especially Deaton Stew.”

Deaton stew is traditional stew with pretzels added.

“TWB has been the greatest experience I’ll ever be a part of,” Caraballo said. “Experiencing God’s greatest creations was the biggest highlight of the trip. Words can’t even describe the adventures we had. I know I’ll never be able to go out West with the same people again but I’ll always remember the good times we’ve shared. We laughed, we cried and we made memories that we’ll cherish for a lifetime.”

For more information or to read the daily TWB blogs, visit www.teenswestwardbound.com.

Fuller Royal
910-642-4104, ext 228
fullerroyal@whiteville.com