



Lighting the way

BY HAYLEY LEATHERWOOD

When high school students walk through the doors of KAMO Power for the first time, some are admittedly just there for the snacks. Many don't know what KAMO is — some think it's a radio station, others assume it's only linework. But by the time they leave the Youth Academy, something clicks.

"We start to see the light bulb come on," said Kerrie Robison, human resources director. "We've piqued their interest — that's where it begins."

And that's exactly the goal. KAMO Power, a transmission cooperative serving northeast Oklahoma and southwest Missouri, launched its Youth Academy two years ago. It's already changing the way students in small towns view their future careers and where they can pursue them.

Revealing what's possible

KAMO Power isn't a household name, even in the towns it helps power. That low profile is by design, since KAMO exists to support local electric co-ops. But when it comes to recruiting homegrown talent, invisibility poses a challenge.

That's what inspired the Youth Academy: if students don't know about the wide range of careers inside electric cooperatives, how can they imagine themselves in one?

In communities like Vinita with a population of about 5,000, students often leave for college before discovering the career paths in their own backyard.

"If they knew what we had to offer before they left, they might actually choose a path that leads back here," said Cassie Floyd, KAMO's human resources specialist.

The Youth Academy brings in high school juniors and seniors from surrounding communities for quarterly sessions

designed to both educate and inspire. The first session introduces them to KAMO's mission and structure, then dives into hands-on assessments.

"They love the hands-on parts," Floyd said. "When they're using real tools, standing next to a transmission truck or watching our technicians demo equipment, they're fully engaged. You can see it on their faces."

But the program isn't just about sparking curiosity — it's about showing students where they fit. The academy includes a reality check, literally. Students explore their personality strengths, do budget exercise and learn how their interests align with actual jobs at cooperatives like KAMO.

"We walk them through what it costs to live the lifestyle they think they want," Robison said. "It becomes a very personal connection."

The goal is full immersion. Robison says it's not just about helping students imagine themselves in a job, but helping them picture a future rooted in their community. They get to experience real life at KAMO — even joining in for employee events like snow cone day.

"We want them to see themselves here — working, raising a family, being part of the co-op family," she said.

More than just electricity

It's easy to associate electric co-ops with linework, and while KAMO employs lineworkers, the organization has a multitude of other positions, ranging from accounting and IT to engineering and HR.

"Many students and even their families are surprised by how many career options exist in our industry," Floyd said. "They've never seen it all up close."

That sense of discovery is what hooked Dillon Bartley, a Vinita High School student who joined the first Youth Academy session.

"I didn't know what to expect — I just knew KAMO was a big company in town and I wanted to learn, especially about IT," he said.

He was struck by the team's warmth.

"Everyone was so welcoming — that's when I knew I wanted to be part of the team," he said. "And when I toured the IT department and saw the massive server infrastructure, I was ecstatic."

That spark led to a 2024 internship. Dillon gave it his all, and in April 2025, he accepted a full-time role as a Computer Systems Analyst I.

"Everyone here is great to work with. I always know who to go to for help, and there's always something new to learn," he said. "KAMO's been a huge opportunity for me."



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A career pipeline built at home

Now in its third year, the Youth Academy is already bearing fruit. Of the students who've completed the program, some — like Dillon — are now working within the cooperative system. Another graduate recently joined Northeast Oklahoma Electric Cooperative (NOEC).

For Daniel Webster, general manager and CEO of NOEC, that hire was a clear sign the program is a worthy time investment.

"When someone applies for a job and we see they've been through the Youth Academy, it grabs our attention," Webster said. "They come in already understanding who we are and what we're about — and that makes a difference. That kind of initiative stands out."

Employees across KAMO are eager to volunteer. Many say they wish they'd known about the industry sooner.

"They've said, 'If I'd known about electric cooperatives at 18, I would've come here straight out of college,'" Robison said. "This is their way of making sure the next generation doesn't miss the chance."

The KAMO Power Youth Academy doesn't promise to steer every student into a utility career. But it does offer something powerful — exposure to a world of opportunity they may not have known existed.

And for students from small towns, the chance to dream big without leaving home can be life-changing.

"This program gives them permission to imagine a future right here," Floyd said. "Not just a job, but a life — one where they can have a career, a family, and a place in their community. That's the heart of what we're trying to do."

To learn more about the KAMO Power, visit www.kamopower.com **OKL**

Editor's Note:

KAMO Electric Cooperative, Inc. (KAMO Power), based in Vinita, Oklahoma, is a generation and transmission cooperative formed in 1941. It provides power to 17 member distribution cooperatives in northeast Oklahoma and southwest Missouri. KAMO is one of six G&T utilities that own Associated Electric Cooperative, Inc. In short: KAMO powers much more than electricity — it powers lives across rural communities.