

# Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

## VALLEY RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.

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## Teamwork – the ‘Drive’ Behind Valley REC’s Success



**DOUG ROLES**

**I AM GLAD TO BE BACK** to work at Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) after another nearly year-long deployment with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. As was the case following my 2018 mobilization, I’d like to thank Valley REC’s employee team for filling in for me in my absence.

As not-for-profit utilities, electric cooperatives tend to run lean on personnel, especially in special staff departments. It’s not uncommon for employees to pitch in by stepping into new roles as needed. When I’ve been called away for duty, my responsibilities have been divvied up between multiple staffers, while they continue to accomplish their own tasks.

As this deployment was winding down, I traveled through a base in Kuwait to catch a plane back to the U.S. Having some downtime, I went to the post’s United Service Organizations facility to look for a book to read on the flight. Pulling donated books off the shelf at random, I came across a sports autobiography, “Drive,” by Larry Bird.

If you’re not familiar, Bird is considered one of the greatest basketball players of all time. Beginning in 1979, he played 13 seasons, leading the Boston Celtics to five NBA finals appearances and three championships. I remember watching Larry Bird on TV and rooting for the Celtics (don’t hate me, Lakers and 76ers fans). I was intrigued by his book, as well as the lore of this storied hardwood franchise.

Bird wrote at great length about teamwork and how various Celtics players (center Robert Parish, power forward Kevin McHale, and shooting guards Danny Ainge and Chris Ford, to name a few) would step up at different times. He remarked on the importance of the role of each player and how they sometimes had to step into other roles if players were injured, such as when he missed much of the 1990-92 seasons due to a back injury. He gives readers a glimpse into the inner workings of a professional team and the dynamics of shifting starters and bench players to create the best team effort. The big take-away was that everyone can contribute, and any one teammate could become the go-to player.

When I was “out for the season,” quite a few teammates (CEO Rich Bauer, Executive Assistant Liz Morocco, Special Projects Coordinator John Bookwalter Jr., Energy Specialist Travis Kuhstos, Office Services Clerk Terri Brumbaugh, Vice President of Operations Todd Ross, Vice President of Finance Ethan DeVore, Utility Forester Kevin Detwiler and Vice President of Technical Services Ben Gorman) stepped up by writing columns and articles for our *Penn Lines* pages, planning our district and annual meetings, and keeping up with a myriad of other member services department tasks.

I’m grateful for the co-op’s support of those who serve and particularly appreciate Valley REC’s staff. We could give the 1980s-era Celtics a run for their money in the teamwork category. 🏀

### DOUG ROLES

VICE PRESIDENT, MEMBER SERVICES

# Mountaintop Classroom

## Academy trains new utility lineworkers at Blair County ski resort

**DOUG ROLES**, VICE PRESIDENT, MEMBER SERVICES

### A SPECIALIZED SCHOOL IN BLAIR

County continues to teach the fundamentals of utility line work to new recruits as the industry faces a shortage of qualified employees. Blue Knob-based Global Powerline Academy (Global) is in its 13th year and runs three, 10-week courses annually.

The founders and instructors are longtime utility lineworkers, supervisors and safety instructors who use their years of experience to teach traditional young adult students as well as older adults who are making a career change. The staff is proud that Global is helping set students on a path to a family-sustaining career.

"It's 10 weeks of lineman boot camp," says Ken Bilek, president and owner of Global Live Line, Inc., an electric utility training and safety consulting business. "We started in 2011, and the school was licensed in 2012."

Ken, a Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) member, has 50 years of experience as a lineworker, trainer and consultant. He was a union journeyman lineman for 21 years for the Pennsylvania Electric Company. He then served as a job safety and training specialist for the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association, the statewide organization for the 13 co-ops in Pennsylvania and one in New Jersey.

The academy's website details the history of the school and the needs it meets. The school traces its beginnings to discussions between Ken and his mentor, Fred Fritz, about a lineworker training program. The pair saw a lack of new candidates as many lineworkers were preparing to retire.

Ken partnered with the Keystone Development Partnership for a 2010 lineworker's boot camp, and the success of the program led to curric-



DOUG ROLES

**CLIMBING TO THE TOP:** Global Powerline Academy students go for a morning climb Sept. 14 on the grounds of Blue Knob All Season Resort.

ulum approval by the Pa. State Board of Private Licensed Schools in 2012. Fred died in 2013, but the foundation he helped build has launched hundreds of students into their careers.

More than 400 students have come through the academy. Global reports 93% of their graduates are employed in the trade.

"Some of the students here are from Vermont and New Hampshire," Ken says. "The farthest we had people come was a student from the South Pacific island of Tonga. We've had two female students."

Students should have no complaints about the setting. Not everyone gets to learn a new trade at a mountaintop resort (served by Valley REC). Ken had a cabin at Blue Knob All Seasons Resort and realized the grounds were ideal for the academy, offering plenty of space for pole climbing, line construction and outdoor activities for students when not in training. The academy operates from the former snow tubing area, which moved to another part of the complex. The resort provides

student housing and dining.

"This place treats these students like family," Ken says.

But work comes before play. Students are taught the skills most critical to employers, such as climbing, rigging, digger and derrick training, basic electrical theory, and grounding for personal protection.

"We tell students to take it seriously," he says. "You can't hide here."

Students try their hand at climbing — a first attempt for many, if not all — under the watchful eye of the instructors. The staff creates a low-stress environment to give students time to feel comfortable with the process of climbing using gaffs and belt.

"It takes about three weeks for students to become comfortable climbing," Ken says. "No one is an expert at three weeks."

The fall class started Sept. 11. Students arrived Monday and spent the first day meeting instructors and receiving their tools and climbing gear. Part of Tuesday and all of Wednesday

were spent climbing poles, but each day at Blue Knob involves climbing.

"We do five ascents and descents at the start and end of each day," Ken says.

Global accepts up to 16 students at a time and runs three classes a year. Typically, classes begin the second week of April and end in mid-November. Ken says typical schools have an instructor to student ratio of 20 to one.

"Here, it's just about five to one, and never above eight to one," Ken says. "We're VA approved and approved by CareerLink. We've had tons of veterans come through here."

Students are motivated by the busy days and the hope of joining a line crew. Austin Recio, a Levittown, Pa., resident and Mississippi native, spent six years in the Marine Corps and then worked in carpentry and as a truck driver. Married with an infant at home, he is using the GI Bill as a springboard to a new career as a lineworker.

"This has always been a dream of mine," Austin says.

He found the school through an online search and came to the course ready for a challenge. In the Corps, he was involved in technical rescue, using ropes to conduct rescues in multi-story buildings.

"We're learning a lot already," Austin says at the end of the first week of school. "The knots for this are kind of second nature. And I've jumped out of planes and helicopters. It's a family

tradition. My dad and my grandfather did, and now my younger brother is."

Mason White, a Valley REC member from McVeytown, decided to pursue a career in the utility industry after working on a farm and for a crew setting modular homes. A 2021 Mifflin County High School grad, he too found Global through an online search. He took a firsthand look during the summer class.

"I came up and visited and really liked the guys," he recalls. "It's hands-on work, outside. I really like the school. The instructors are awesome."

The course includes CPR and first-aid training. Students learn line construction by doing it.

"We have a three-phase line that we built, which stays up," Ken explains. "Then we build a two-phase line and set the transformer."

Students build a line extension to a consumer's house as the final project, according to Clair Ciaverella, who has 37 years of lineworker, supervisory and management experience.

Clair, who retired in 2009 as general manager of operations at Penelec, works with another veteran lineworker, Perry Miller. Perry has 50 years of experience. He worked for Penelec, Blattenberger Contracting and Somerset REC. He was a lead lineman and instructor at Penelec's Powerline Pro Line School.

The instructors enjoy working with the students at Global and preparing

them for a career in linework. Global has had two female students. One got a job as a cable splicer with Henkles & McCoy, a utility infrastructure and engineering contractor, and the other works for Pittsburgh-based Dusquene Light Company. The academy has also served adult students, one age 42 and one 43.

"Both of them did well," Ken says.

Students enrolled in Clarion University's electrical degree program receive credits for their time at Global. Clarion students spend an additional two weeks at the Blue Knob facility.

According to [linemancentral.com](http://linemancentral.com), more than 21,000 lineworker jobs had openings this year with 8% demand growth predicted. Factors impacting the shortage include the retirement of Baby Boomer and Generation X lineworkers, decreasing enrollment in technical and vocational schools, and an increasing number of transmission and distribution projects as the government looks to strengthen the grid.

Learn more at [globalpowerline-academy.com](http://globalpowerline-academy.com).



DOUG ROLES

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**LEADING LINeworkERS:** At left, instructor Ken Bilek addresses the Fall 2023 class. Above, Jonah Mertz (on ground), a pole-climbing instructor for utility tool supplier Bashlin, talks a student through use of a Patriot fall restraint device. Mertz graduated from Global Powerline Academy in 2013.

# Retired Crew Leader Stays Busy with Farming, Gardening and More Line Work

**DOUG ROLES**, VICE PRESIDENT, MEMBER SERVICES

**A LONGTIME VALLEY RURAL ELECTRIC** Cooperative (REC) employee is staying busy after retiring from the co-op. Mike Williams of Blacklog, Huntingdon County, retired from the co-op Dec. 30, 2021, as a crew leader, after 28 years of service.

As a lineworker, Mike braved all kinds of weather to keep the lights on for Valley REC members in the Shade Gap district. Fittingly, it was a snowstorm that directed him to a co-op career.

Mike recalls he started with Valley REC May 3, 1993, “right after the blizzard.” He had been traveling to Scranton to work with a line crew near the New York border on a job he held for 10 years. His schedule and the drive time had him leaving home at midnight on Sundays to ensure being at the Scranton facility.

“I’d sleep in my truck and sleep until starting time,” Mike recalls. “I had my own crew.”

He remembers, on many occasions, coming home at the end of the week outrunning winter weather as he traveled back to southern Huntingdon County.

“I didn’t outrun it that night,” he says of the March 1993 blizzard. “It took me nine hours to get home.”

Tired of the travel, Mike stopped by Valley REC’s Hustontown office in Fulton County the following week.

“I asked, ‘You wouldn’t happen to have any openings, would you?’” Mike says of how he was hired onto a right-of-way maintenance crew. “I guess you’d say I lucked into it. I started on the brush hog crew.”

At that time, the co-op had its own tree-trimming crews. The Hustontown office closed in 2003 as Valley REC opened a new and larger Shade Gap district office.

After three years on the trimming



**WISHING YOU THE BEST:** Retired Valley Rural Electric Cooperative Lineman Mike Williams shows off a watermelon from his garden in Blacklog Valley, Huntingdon County. Mike retired at the end of 2021 with 28 years of service to the cooperative.

crew, Mike began doing line work for the co-op. He noted the biggest change in his time was the closing of the Hustontown office and the upgrading of infrastructure and equipment.

“Back years ago, we didn’t have the equipment they have today,” Mike says. “We have track machines and a lot better and bigger trucks.”

Mike also recalls when the co-op replaced the copper-weld wire in the area served by the Three Springs substation with aluminum. He was also involved in the Reeds Gap substation rebuilding, which changed lines there from 7,200 volts to 14,400 volts.

Mike says what he liked most about working at Valley REC was working with the crews and being out and about in co-op territory.

“I met a lot of people,” he says.

Mike has always been one to stay busy, including part-time military service. He served nine years in the U.S. Army Reserve, drilling in Greencastle, Pa., and Hagerstown, Md.

“When I got out, I had five different MOSes (military occupational specialties),” Mike recalls. “I was able to work on five different helicopters.”

Though he left the co-op, Mike occasionally still finds himself in a bucket truck. He used his Valley REC retirement as an opportunity to go to

work for his brother’s Shade Gap-based fiber optic business, Williams S&L Services. Installing telecommunications line in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, the company does directional boring, cable plowing, trenching, and aerial work.

Mike enjoys gardening, tinkering and tending to his 30-head beef herd around his farmstead. He has long been involved in 4-H and has a granddaughter who shows animals at the Huntingdon County Fair. He also enjoys spending time with family and camping. We wish Mike a long and productive retirement. 🍷

## Energy Efficiency Tip of the Month

The holiday season is upon us, and that means we’ll be using more energy in the kitchen. When possible, cook with smaller countertop appliances instead of the stovetop or oven. Smaller appliances like slow cookers, air fryers and Instant Pots consume less energy.

When using the oven or stovetop, match the size of the pot to the heating element and place a lid over the pot while cooking. The food will cook faster, and you’ll use less energy.

Source: Dept. of Energy