

YOUNG EAGLES

Flight Program Lets Kids Soar

BY SUSAN USHER

A group of Union Elementary School students recently took to the skies, experiencing the exhilaration of flying first-hand, of seeing earth and sky from a new angle.

The individual flights were made possible through the EAA Aviation Foundation Young Eagles Program and the services of volunteer pilot Jim Stoveken.

For Stoveken, Eagle Flights are an opportunity to share with young people one of his loves—the freedom and excitement of flight—with the hope of piquing their interest in aviation.

"If it makes a difference to one of the kids who flew it's worth it," he said. "Some of them said they would like to come back."

Based on reactions of the 18 third and fourth grade students who went on demonstration flight: May 27 or June 11, guidance counselor Gail Novello thinks it was a mission accomplished. "I have never seen such faces," she said.

For the Buddies who chose to go up, the program offered more, she said, a boost to their self-esteem and a chance to "experience something they might never otherwise experience."

Stoveken said the short demonstration flights are a chance to introduce children to new possibilities, among them, knowledge that it doesn't take genius to fly an aircraft, that "an average person can learn to fly."

The EAA Aviation Foundation was created by the Experimental Aircraft Association, an international organization for homebuilt and other aviation enthusiasts. The aim of its Young Eagles Program is to introduce young people to the world of aviation. By the year 2003 the Foundation wants its members to take 1 million kids up for free air flights, says Stoveken, a local pilot who has been flying since 1966 and has been an EAA member since 1978.

Since moving to this area Stoveken has taken up about 10 other children in addition to the Dolphin Buddies.

"We're trying to stimulate interest in aviation in kids," says Stoveken, a retired Johnson & Johnston surgical needle-maker who moved to the Ocean Isle Beach area from New Jersey. "So far we (EAA members) are about half-way to our goal. We've just past the 50,000 mark."

"Aviation is kind of dying in the United States, partly because of product liability concerns." For example, the cost of liability insurance that must be set aside by manufacturers has contributed, he said, to Cessna no longer building a single-engine plane.

An Eagle Flight begins with a flight kit that briefs youngsters in advance on what to expect. It describes the parts of an airplane, the four basic forces of flight and discusses flight safety and preflight procedures.

At the airport, Stoveken usually tells youngsters about his plane, a Cessna 172 four-seater, notes reference points on a chart to look for during flight, and takes students on a "walk around" preflight inspection.

But the Dolphin Buddies were so excited about the prospect of flying, he said, that Stoveken skipped the preliminaries and took straight to the air, one child at a time.

The actual flight may be the most memorable experience of the Young Eagles Program, but it isn't the end of it. Each child receives an Eagle Flight certificate and is registered as an Eagle Flight member. Names are listed in the world's largest logbook on display at the EAA Air Adventure Museum in Oshkosh, Wis., and student receive two issues of Sports Aviation For Kids magazine, which introduces them to aviation personalities and activities, and information on Foundation scholarship programs and aviation organizations in their area.

Novello learned about the Young Eagles Program in a round-about way, through Union's school advisory council chairman Earl Andrews, who had met Stoveken and learned about the program.

"One of the things the school is trying to do with the Dolphin Buddies is to stir their interest," said Andrews. "This looked like a good way to do it."

While Stoveken has no desire or intent to compete with the fee-charging tour services based at the Ocean Isle Beach and Brunswick County airports, he's willing to take an interested child up "anytime I'm available," he said. "It's my way of giving something to the community for letting me keep my plane here."

Children ages 8 through 17 are eligible to participate in Young Eagles, with their parent's or guardian's written permission. Stoveken prefers for each child to be accompanied by a responsible adult in addition to himself. Groups of children must be accompanied by a group leader.

Community programs that serve children ages 8 through 17 or individual parents interested in their child taking part in Young Eagles may contact Stoveken at 579-8197.



DANNY WINNANS and Sarah Jackson display their Eagle Flight certificates after a demonstration flight with pilot Jim Stoveken.

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