



*It's Time
to Get Back
to Giving Back*

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By Mike Jones

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This past weekend, my local airport collaborated with E.A.A. chapter #1220 and threw a splendid Young Eagles event. The weather was fine, the kids were excited, the parents nervous and the pilots... well, we're pilots, and we muddle along just fine as long as there's beer in the fridge.

Eight pilots were involved in the event, including a new guy who flies the Golden Knights skydiving team for the Army. Believe me, that guy knows how to fling a wing through the sky. The airplanes themselves were a varied group, ranging from a super-shiny light sport to an older Bonanza, a couple of Cessna 172s and a dowdy Piper of similar performance. There was a jumbo-sized Cessna Skywagon taildragger pointing its nose proudly at the sky. My Centurion was fitted out with all six seats for the first time in years. The biggest crowd-pleaser of the bunch was a pusher-prop Velocity homebuilt, flown by my friend Dick Harpster. When the kids gather around it, they call it the "James Bond" airplane. It definitely looks the part.

How It's Done

Over the years, our chapter has developed a fairly sophisticated system for managing the ebb-and-flow of the Young Eagles events. This is important because from time to time (and very unpredictably) we get huge turnout of kids, sometimes 250 in a day. Here's how it works:

By bribing the local high school's Air Force ROTC cadets with free airplane



The Cessna C-185 Skywagon is a heavy hauler, and a Young Eagles event is a good place to prove that point. Here pilot Mike Cunningham, partially hidden behind the door of his plane, loads his flyers into the plane.

rides, they are willing to work the event with us old geezers. They greet the passengers as they arrive, clump them into groups based on the capacity of each airplane, assign them to airplanes and prepare the logbooks and certificates for when everybody is back on

the ground. With their bright yellow shirts, cheery smiles and healthy hairlines, they're easy to spot.

We fly the kids on a first-come, first-served basis which usually works pretty well. When youngsters and their parents arrive at the airport they complete the EAA waiver form and we assign each child a number. We actually write the number on the back of their hand with a Sharpie. (Previously, we used sticky labels and they would get lost or swapped, so the Sharpie keeps things neatly organized.) The only problem is when friends with widely different numbers want to fly together or when a parent thinks they are overly-entitled. Even on our busiest days, it's rare for somebody to wait over an hour. And while they're waiting there's lots to see.

Everybody gets a preflight orientation during the walk-around, during which the pilot explains the outside and inside of the airplanes. Then there is

the safety briefing, followed by a discussion of the route-of-flight and what they will see. The flights average about 20-25 minutes, and we follow a well-known loop over the Sandhills of central North Carolina. It starts with a straight-and-level cruise to the town of Carthage (the county seat), which gets everybody accustomed to the noise and movement of the airplane. Then we swing south to the famous golf courses of Pinehurst and then east to Southern Pines.

If time allows, many of the pilots try to find homes, schools, churches or other landmarks from the air. One attraction that always engages the kids is the local McDonald's; for some reason they are thrilled seeing the golden arches from the air. Following the flights, each kid is presented with a certificate and Young Eagles logbook that starts with the time spent flying during their Young Eagles ride.



By tapping the energy and enthusiasm of the local AFROTC detachment, the local EAA chapter is able to serve many more pilots and kids. Here, five of them organize logbooks and manage the "flight assignment board" (on easel, behind the two boys standing).

I flew seven flights on Saturday, which is enough to wear out even the most enthusiastic pilot. My best flight was later in the day with five older high school kids. Instead of flying the normal route, we climbed high and away from the airport. In a few minutes, we were at 5,500 feet and looking down on the tops

of the clouds. The kids were engaged and took dozens of photos and selfies, fluffy white clouds in the background.

On the way back to the airport, I ask my passengers “if they like roller coasters.” That always gets them buzzing. I ask them to grab on to their seatbelts as I raise the nose high, way high, higher than they’ve ever seen before. Out the windscreen all they can see are blue sky and clouds. Then, briskly, I push the nose over. The plane drops like a rock. Gravity goes to zero and the kids float out of their seats, along with their cell phones and flashlights and bags of Doritos. Everybody screams. And then it’s over. We’re back in level flight, exactly at pattern altitude, exactly 110 knots. The “roller coaster” experience always is the first topic mentioned when they get back on the ground.

Roland Gilliam, profiled in these pages last month, is the chapter president and was gratified with the turnout and with the support of the pilot-volunteers.

“This was a perfect day for a Young Eagles event,” he said. “Blue skies and gentle winds, it doesn’t get better!”



The Pinehurst airport has a large waiting room, but the Young Eagles crowds fill it completely and the overflow stretches out on to the ramp. On the far right you can see more yellow-shirted AFROTC cadets assigning youngsters to specific pilots and their planes.

In the past twenty years, the Chapter has flown over 6,000 Young Eagle flights out of Moore County Airport. Together, all of those flying experiences make a difference. Gilliam noted that one of his

Young Eagle passengers from years ago now flies the F-35. “That might not have ever happened without the inspiration he found at Young Eagles,” he said.

“People protect the things they love, and they love the things they know.”

— Jacques Cousteau

Of course, no event is without its drama. One pilot pulled the chocks from the wheels of his plane but accidentally taxied over them again as he started to roll. The sudden sideways stress twisted the strut on his

nose-wheel. The “James Bond” airplane passengers had a thrill when one of the brake lines dumped its hydraulic fluid on the ramp as they were taxiing out. Our new guy in the Bonanza was doing great until a hard start drained his battery. Not a problem — the airport linemen ran an extension cord out to his parking space and in a few hours he was back in the air. With airplanes, it's always something!

A Little Background

If you haven't heard about it, the Young Eagles is a terrific program that any EAA chapter can sponsor. It started in 1992, premised on the goal of introducing youths to the science and the artistry of flying. Thirty years later, nearly 2.3 million young people around the world have participated. The EAA itself provides insurance for the event. The EAA member-pilots donate their time and their aircraft to make these flights possible. In our case the good people at the Pinehurst Airport at Moore County donated the fuel for the day-long event.

I also find the E.A.A. to be a bit officious and overbearing. To fly Young Eagle missions these days, there's a lot of paperwork that both parents and pilots have to complete — most of which goes into the E.A.A.'s marketing

system and has little to do with flying. Plus, pilots have to complete the E.A.A.'s quirky "Youth Protection Program" training and get a background check to confirm you're not a child molester. I know it's a crazy world out there, but it just seems terribly heavy-handed. I'm sure the bureaucrats at the E.A.A. have the very best intentions with this program, but it's a little bit insulting, a lot of time-wasting, and does nothing but feed a bunch of over-paid lawyers. E.A.A., take my advice and reconsider this part of the Young Eagles program.



Jim Fisher has been flying for more years than he cares to recount, but his Young Eagle flights are his favorite memories. He and Grayson are in Jim's light sport low-wing Piper for a speedy tour around central North Carolina.

That said, I love flying Young Eagle missions. The opportunity to introduce kids to flying is one of the biggest highlights of my flying all year long; I have now flown well over 700 Young Eagle rides. There is no doubt in my mind these flights help young people to gain new motivation, focus and maturity. It can open their eyes to an opportunity they may never have considered before. For a few of them, aviation becomes a lifelong hobby or career but that's not the

bottom line. They also get a glimpse of the value of science and math, of hard work, of practicing a skill until its perfect. You learn a lot about the kind of person you are and who you want to be, sitting in a spindly chair thousands of feet in the air. A Young Eagle ride may be just a quick lesson about flying, but it's also an introduction to grown-up behaviors that can last a lifetime.



This family of four flew with your reporter, Mike Jones, in a zero-G adventure. From left to right, it's Zeke, Haddie, Pallu, Jonesy, and Salem. When the landed, they told their parents "the roller coaster ride" was the best part.

There are good and bad Young Eagles programs. At another airport I know, they offer one speedy trip through the traffic pattern and the ride is complete. In contrast, at my airport, the rides are all 20-30 minutes and at least one kid gets to put their hands on the controls. In particular, I try to emphasize to the girls that flying is a particularly smart choice for a young lady: travel the world, make lots of money, and get tons of respect in a field where the female gender is still under-represented. I don't know if my suggestion makes a difference to the young ladies, but I still swing the bat.

Which brings me to the point of this saga.

While COVID isn't gone, at least we're over the worst of it. It's time to get back into the cockpit and fly. That's fun, and a worthy goal in its own right.

But even more importantly, it's time to remind all our non-flying friends and neighbors that our local airports are vital resources to the entire community. Airports and airplanes help communities grow and prosper. They generate jobs and create opportunities far beyond just flipping burgers or turning a wrench at the local auto repair shop.

A Young Eagles event is a great example of what we can do together. It



Some kids are just born with flying in their heart. Here, young KeLea channels her inner Amelia Earhart with a World War I-style flying helmet. Her sisters are Michaela (of the left) and Malia on the right, with their parents. I suspect we'll see KeLea in an F-35 pretty soon, or maybe a Mars lander.

reaches the non-flying community. It links kids, schools, STEM programs and airplanes. It demonstrates the professionalism of our training and the allure of our avocation. It is proof that flying is safe and fun. And it brings people to the airport who might otherwise never visit it, never support it, never see how a one flight can change a life.

It's time to give back to those who made it happen for us. Call your airport manager or your airport authority. Get them excited about having events at their field. Get the public involved. And start everybody on the path of reaching out to their community.

There is a saying in aviation, "A mile of highway will take you a mile, but a mile of runway can take you around the world." That's true, but it's misses the point. A more appropriate mantra would

be Jacques Cousteau's teaching: people protect the things they love, and they love the things they know. Once people have experienced the world from high above, they'll work with you to preserve the adventure of flight and to protect those airports which make it possible.

About the Author



Mike Jones is a 30-year Cessna pilot with more than 3,500 hours in his logbooks. He also is the chairman of the airport authority at the Pinehurst Airport and looks forward to learning the ways in which other airports are enhancing their relevancy to their community. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.