WEST MICHIGAN
AVIATION ACADEMY

For Immediate Release
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Grand Rapids, MI – August 4, 2020: Despite the challenges of COVID-19, West Michigan Aviation Academy (WMAA) is pleased to announce that 13 students have completed the work to earn their private pilot license this year.

WMAA, like all other schools in Michigan, closed in April to comply with Governor Whitmer's Executive Order. For seniors who were pursuing a private pilot license, this was a tough blow. "The private pilot license is the capstone of our aviation program," notes George Pavey, Dean of Aviation and Engineering. "These students took on the additional challenge of remote learning to complete their studies and prepare for the licensing test. Although we could not complete their oral exam and check ride before graduation, my team committed that we would find a way to get them in the air as soon as we could, even if it meant flying all summer."

That commitment did not go unnoticed by the students. "The staff at WMAA is like family," notes Triston Mayton, one of the students who successfully completed the capstone program. "They don't just do their job to get paid. They made personal sacrifices of family time and of their summer to help us get through this program despite the ongoing pandemic. I am so thankful that they were here for me. It was a challenge to take on this work, but they gave us all the tools to succeed. All we had to do was put them to good use."

The aviation staff has been busy since the middle of June, working with the students to complete the requirements for licensing. This year's cohort of successful pilot candidates includes:

- Sierra Barna
- Kiehl Dahnke
- Drew Daugherty
- Nick Gutowsky
- Taylor Hall
- Zach Herrera
- Matias Martinez
- Triston Mayton
- Vixie Moore
- Nathan O'Droski
- David Rozelle
- Joe Skrycki, III
- Ford Yates

(more)

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This was an unusual way to cap WMAA's 10th anniversary year. "I've seen a lot of firsts in my career at WMAA," Pavey says. "We saw our first students graduate with their private pilot licenses in 2013. Josh Nienhaus, one of the freshmen in our inaugural 2010 class, became our first certified commercial airline pilot in 2019. Tori Gann was the first female student to earn her private pilot license in 2015, and Taylor Hall was the first African American female to accomplish the same milestone this year. For the first time, two of our students received college scholarships from AOPA and the EAA. But in spite of all our firsts, I can honestly say this is the first time I've been grounded by a pandemic!"

WMAA is a tuition-free public charter high school serving a diverse group of students in grades 9-12. It's one of the few high schools in the nation where a high school student can earn a private pilot license as part of the curriculum. A total of 94 students have done so since WMAA opened in 2010. Students come to WMAA from all over West Michigan, drawn by the school's hands-on aviation focus as well as its heavy emphasis on STEM classes.

Many of the students plan to pursue a career in the aviation industry. Others, like Triston, get exposed to aviation through their coursework and discover a previously undiscovered passion for it. "After I completed Ground School, I found myself really excited about the idea of earning a pilot license," Triston says. "My lifelong dream is to become an orthodontist, but I plan to keep flying and eventually earn my instrument rating."

Students can complete the coursework required to earn a private pilot license as part of their WMAA career. However, the flight hours and FAA test must be paid for out of pocket. Starting in the fall of 2020, scholarships will be available to help offset these costs. "Our goal is to broaden the horizons of students who come to WMAA," says Nicole Gasper, CEO of WMAA. "Thanks to support from generous donors, we can take steps to make aviation accessible for anyone, regardless of their financial status."

About West Michigan Aviation Academy: WMAA is a tuition-free public charter high school located on the campus of the Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, MI. WMAA is one of only a few high schools in the nation where a student can earn a private pilot license as part of the high school curriculum. With a curriculum rich in aviation, STEM (science, technology, engineering, math), and robotics, WMAA provides a unique educational opportunity for students to focus specifically on high-growth employment fields during their high school education. This better equips them to pursue higher education or technical degrees, and find employment in their chosen field. Learn more at www.westmichiganaviation.org.

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