

# HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from  
WEST MICHIGAN  
AVIATION ACADEMY

Fall 2021

## “WMAA Poured Gasoline on the Coals of My Fire!”

Do you ever wonder what happens to WMAA alumni? We do!

We recently caught up with Garrett Willsea, a 2021 flight program graduate. He’s of those incredible students we know is going to make a tremendous impact on the world. Garrett came to Michigan from Portland, Oregon and lived with his grandparents so he could attend WMAA.



Garrett and mom on their first flight together!

He shares, “I wanted to start WMAA as a freshman, but my parents weren’t sure about having me on the other side of the country. My dream of an aviation career seemed to be slipping away. Coming to WMAA as a junior reignited that dream. It was like pouring gasoline on the coals of my fire!”

### Where Is He Now?

Garrett is a freshman at LeTourneau University in Texas, majoring in Professional Flight with a Maintenance Concentration. “I originally wanted to attend a larger university,” Garrett explains. “But I really liked the people at LeTourneau. That’s a good thing, because this program is even tougher than WMAA! Thanks to my high school experience, I am more prepared for this level of work than many of my classmates.”

Garrett thinks that the personal aspect of a business aviation career appeals to him. “I want to greet passengers, load bags, fly the plane, and make it a great experience,” he says. More than that, Garrett also wants to make an impact. “I’m also looking into a volunteer or nonprofit option, like Air Ambulance. I want to use my skills to serve others and my community.”

### What Does Mom Have to Say?

*“I thought you would enjoy knowing Garrett flew his dad and me for the first time yesterday, up the Columbia Gorge in a Cessna 172. On the ascent, I kept thinking, ‘I’m trusting Mr. Pavey and those WMAA flight instructors!!’ The flight was nice and smooth, as was the wonderful landing. A good first flight for mom!”* (excerpt from an email sent by Holly Willsea to George Pavey)

We’re inviting our alumni to reconnect and share their stories.  
Visit [wmaafoundation.org/alumni](http://wmaafoundation.org/alumni) to get involved!



## “It Is an Individual Sacrifice to Serve a Higher Calling”

At WMAA, we are very focused on helping students build career pathways while also building character. That combination leads a certain number of students to gravitate toward military service each year.

We start working with students in 10th grade to provide career and college support. Military service is a deeply respected career choice at WMAA. If students are interested in the military, we offer great resources:

- We offer the military entrance exam twice each year.
- We have military recruiters on site several times per week.
- We have staff members with experience in several branches of the armed services.

For some students, like Colton Holmes, the military offers the right combination of incentives and skill building. “When I came to WMAA, I was initially interested in aerospace

engineering,” Colton recalls. “I still love knowing how things work, but now I’m leaning toward more of a forensic psychology degree. However, what I really want is to get out of college without debt! I was thinking about the National Guard already, and then was able to talk to Mr. Vandenberg about his experience in the Guard. I’m planning to enlist with the goal of doing small arms and artillery repair, which fits with my engineering interest. I’m committing for six years to earn the maximum college funding. Depending on how things work out, I will do my first two years of college at GVSU or GRCC to keep the cost down.”



## The Military Needs Students Like Ours

The Defense Department estimates that just 2% out of 20.6 million 17- to 21-year-olds have the desired combination of strong academic credentials, adequate physical fitness and an interest in serving. In contrast to this, approximately 10% of WMAA seniors indicate their interest in a military career after graduation.

“Choosing to serve your country right out of high school is something you will never regret,” says George Pavey, a former Marine who is now our Dean of Aviation & Engineering. “It is an individual sacrifice to serve a higher calling. And while we are not recruiting students specifically for military service, I think those of us who have served are role models. The kids see the kind of people the military attracts, and they want to be part of it.”

## Honoring Military Service

WMAA is installing an Honor Wall to recognize students, faculty and staff who have served their country. Joan Secchia provided a lead gift for this project in honor of her late husband, Peter, and he will be commemorated for his Marine service on the wall as well. George Pavey simply says, “Once a Marine, always a Marine.”



## WMAA Staff with Military Experience



Drew Collette  
U.S. Army



Brian Forney  
U.S. Marine Corps



Nick Hill  
U.S. Navy



George Pavey  
U.S. Marine Corps



Dave Sebuck  
U.S. Marine Corps



Peter Vandenberg  
U.S. Army



# Gaining Altitude With Our New Flight Training Center!



We welcomed students to the Flight Training Center in September.



Dick DeVos received the latest in aviator sunglasses to celebrate the dedication!

September 17, 2021 was a gorgeous, sunny, warm day... perfect weather for dedicating our new Flight Training Center! Approximately 100 donors, board members, volunteers, vendors and community leaders celebrated with us as we honored all the hard work that went into making this expansion project a reality.

The Flight Training Center is a milestone for WMAA, and a central part of our continued growth in aviation and engineering opportunities for students. This building offers us many strategic benefits:

- Permanent, owned hangar space that will reduce operational costs for our flight program and eliminate the vulnerability of renting
- Room for a third plane so more students can earn private pilot licenses
- An aviation lab with room for hands-on classes like Build a Plane and Unmanned Aerial Systems (“drones”)
- Options for engaging alumni and community members in flying programs
- It frees up much-needed space in our main building for additional STEM courses



“Thank you to everyone who has helped us create this amazing resource for our students!”







Room for our two planes, plus a new one gifted by Peter and Joan Secchia.



Presentation of the commemorative placque.



Devon Christner, senior flight student

### “I Have to Do This!”

Devon Christner candidly admits that she wasn’t even thinking about aviation when she came to WMAA. “I received an ACE incentive flight as a freshman,” she recalls. “I took the controls for just a minute during that flight, and I was hooked. I remember going home and telling my parents, ‘I have to do this!’”

Devon is working to earn her private pilot license by the time she graduates. Then she plans to pursue a four-year degree in Aerospace Engineering or Civil Engineering. She says, “For us as students, this is more than a building. It’s everything we dream about and are working toward.”



Cooper Marcukaitis, senior flight student

### “This is an Unbelievable Opportunity!”

If you ask Cooper Marcukaitis what drew him to WMAA, the answer comes back quickly. “All I’ve ever wanted to do, ever since I can remember, is be a pilot.” When he toured WMAA in 7th grade, he knew this was the place for him to start working on that dream. “To be able to finish my high school career in a building where I’m surrounded by aviation is unbelievable. This facility is awesome...it brings my dream to life.”




Cooper plans to attend the Air Force Academy, with hopes of becoming a fighter pilot. “I know I will be prepared because I’ve learned that discipline at WMAA. The teachers here expect you to study and be ready.”

# The FLIGHT PLAN Campaign is on Final Approach!



WMAA is an innovative, academically rigorous high school with a focus on aviation and STEM. We are intentional about building career pathways, as well as building access and opportunity for all students.

We have been working for the last three years to secure funding for our *Flight Plan* campaign. This campaign will accomplish three important objectives for our school:

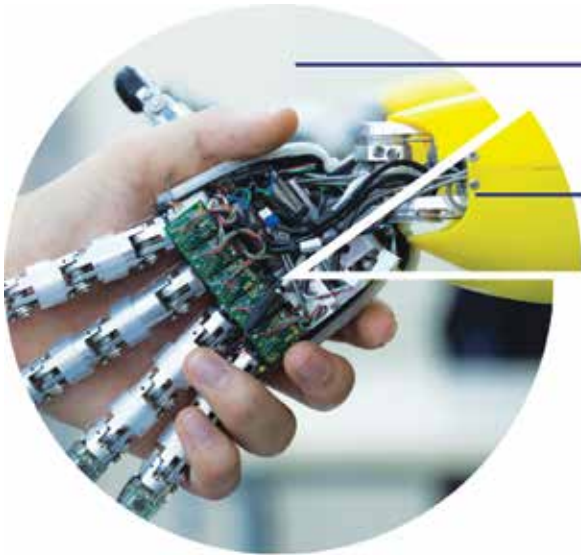
-  **Expand** our flight training capacity with our own hangar, a third plane and classroom/lab space for aviation. (See story on pages 4–5 about the recently completed Flight Training Center.)
-  **Reconfigure** our existing building to make room for our popular and growing engineering course offering.
-  **Provide** supportive resources related to aviation scholarships, teacher retention and student services.

We have just under \$600,000 left to raise out of the \$6.2 million project total. We will be inviting all of our friends and supporters to get involved with this campaign very soon. In the meantime, please visit [wmaafoundation.org/flight-plan-project](http://wmaafoundation.org/flight-plan-project) if you would like to learn more.

We look forward to celebrating with you as we wrap up the final phase of campaign fundraising.







➔ **90%** State funding for core subjects

➔ **10%** Philanthropy to fund advanced programs

As a public charter school, WMAA receives a per pupil stipend from the State, which covers the traditional courses. However, we provide educational opportunities above and beyond what can be found in other high schools. Those opportunities require an investment of approximately \$1,500 per year, per student.

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## “This Will Change the Trajectory of Their Lives Forever”

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In our eleven years of service, we have learned that when doors open, amazing kids walk through them. The staff at WMAA cares deeply, and the students are driven to succeed. WMAA helps eliminate barriers, and that allows students to soar to careers they only dreamed about. The culture and approach of WMAA resonates deeply with the students for whom it is the right fit.

- “I love that WMAA puts so much emphasis on character. We are taught to treat others as we want to be treated. (Bridgette Kopenkoskey)
- “This is an unconventional place. The teachers really encourage students to explore and try things. I never had thoughts of going anywhere else!” (Jaden Gani)

Our donors make it possible for us to fling open the doors of opportunity. Gifts from generous donors who believe in our mission help us provide extras such as:

- Student-operated school airplanes
- Certified Career & Technical Education classes such as Build a Plane and Flight School
- Remote Control Airplane course and club
- Multiple flight and aviation-related classes
- Competitive VEX robotics teams
- Additional investments in Biomedical Engineering and Computer Science (above what State funding would cover)

Our donors receive the same thrill as the students do, as they see their dollars working to enrich and engage students on their path to a career. Terry Russell, one of our WMAA Foundation board members, offers a unique perspective as a parent. His three children chose WMAA for the culture and its drive for excellence, although all of them have interests that lie outside aviation. He says,

“I think it’s hard to find causes to support where you feel you are really making a difference. With WMAA, you can see the unique things the kids are doing each day, and you know right away — this is stuff that will change the trajectory of their lives forever.”



WEST MICHIGAN  
AVIATION ACADEMY

FOUNDATION

5363 44th St SE  
Grand Rapids MI 49512



## Make a Gift That Makes a Difference

We need and deeply appreciate the support that donors provide to WMAA. You can partner with us by giving a gift toward our annual operating fund. We invite you to visit our website and learn more about two special programs for donors:

- **Partners for Innovation:** commit to an ongoing, monthly gift via our website. Just choose “Monthly” under the Donation Schedule.
- **Soaring Together:** become a member with your annual gift of \$1,000 or more.

Thank you for your support, which allows us to provide the hands-on experience and education that helps students build strong career pathways.



[wmaafoundation.org](http://wmaafoundation.org)



[fb.com/WestMIAviationAcademy](https://fb.com/WestMIAviationAcademy)



[@wmaafoundation](https://@wmaafoundation)

## Interested in a Tour?

### See What Your Support Can Do!

Want to learn more about how your support can help our students? Join us for an in-person tour. Please visit our website and click About to register online.

Upcoming tour dates:

- Thursday, November 11, 2021
- Thursday, February 10, 2022

### WMAA Foundation Contact Information

(616) 446-8886

5363 44th St SE | Grand Rapids MI 49512

Meggan George (ext. 1112)

Director of Development & Marketing

[mgeorge@wmaafoundation.org](mailto:mgeorge@wmaafoundation.org)

Stephanie Taylor (ext. 1168)

Development & Special Projects Coordinator

[staylor@westmichiganaviation.org](mailto:staylor@westmichiganaviation.org)

