

# HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from  
WEST MICHIGAN  
AVIATION ACADEMY

Fall 2022

## “WMAA Has Crazy Opportunities!”

How many high school students do you know who would be willing to jump to a brand new school their sophomore year because they want to work harder? Meet senior Drew Delvaux.

“I loved middle school and I had lots of friends,” Drew recalls. “But somehow when I got to high school, it was different. I didn’t really like my freshman year. It would have been easy to stay put, and I was thinking about it. But then I had to register for classes. I’m interested in computer science and there was nothing for me. The other classes were boring and generic.”

Drew’s neighbor had attended WMAA and planted the seed that this was a cool place. So Drew took the leap of faith and applied. “Leaving all my friends and everything I knew was totally out of character for me,” he shares. “I’m naturally friendly, and the teachers were awesome and made a specific point of including me. With their help, I started making friends really quickly.”

Drew has given 100% since he became a WMAA student. “I loved my New Student Orientation and I knew I wanted to be a leader. So I’ve done that, along with being a Student Ambassador, a Tour Leader, and doing a lot of student shadows with kids who are thinking about WMAA. I like meeting new people and I’m an entertainer at heart. But I also know that transferring was the biggest and best decision I ever made. I want other students to have the same experiences I am having.”

Drew has seen other transfer students from New Student Orientation blossom like he has done. “One of my students from last year just completed his first solo flight and said it was the best day of his life. I love seeing people do what they want to do because of WMAA.”

“WMAA has crazy opportunities,” Drew enthuses. “Hopefully all these experiences will help me get into Harvard, which is my number one choice. I have taken dual enrollment computer science courses. I’m in the Build a Plane class and will be able to put on my college applications that I’ve done it. How many people can say that? I’m going to look back and say my high school was really sweet!”



Drew is hands-on with Build a Plane.

“I had the typical school experience before I came to WMAA, and I was bored. I don’t take anything here for granted!”

Drew Delvaux

# Living Into the WMAA Culture



Meigan Lanning



New Student Orientation 2022



At WMAA, we intentionally instill a culture of self-discipline, leadership and courtesy. These skills don't always come naturally for high school students. So how and where can we teach them?

We offer a Leadership course that provides a combination of in-class activities, hands-on lessons, and authentic opportunities to engage in civic leadership outside of the classroom. In addition, we create intentional opportunities for students to discover and develop their unique leadership gifts.

Senior Meigan Lanning is learning through hands-on experience. "I never saw myself as a leader," she candidly admits. "But last year, I had the chance to work with another student and Mr. Pavey to start the Red Tail Aviators club, spotlighting minorities in aviation. I started out as more of a follower, but worked with Mr. Pavey and my mom to develop more leadership skills. I have learned that leading sometimes means taking small steps towards a goal and seeing what happens. It also means stepping back to learn from and listen to peers. Leaders don't only do the work themselves. They have to work effectively with others."

The culture education starts with New Student Orientation. Meigan volunteered to be an orientation leader this year. "This is a different kind of leadership challenge," she observes. "You're working with students who don't know each other. I learned that I have to be patient. I needed to participate in the activities because the new students were looking up to me. And I had to keep reinforcing that it's okay to be uncomfortable, because that's where you bond the most. What was cool is that I could see how my work had an impact. Kids who didn't know each other came together through shared experiences. That meant they started the school year as friends, not strangers."

New Student Orientation influences the students, but others also notice the difference. One of the bus drivers who transported our student volunteers left a message saying, "I took a group of your freshmen out to Roanoke Ranch. I just wanted to let you know that they were one of the best groups I've ever taken anywhere. They were polite, they cleaned up after themselves, they shut windows...they were just decent kids who wanted to help out at the ranch. I wanted to say thank you so much for the quality of work they did. Their whole attitude was great."

Many adults are still trying to learn what Meigan has already figured out. "Being a leader requires you to be humbled once in a while. You have to be willing to learn. You also have to acknowledge that everything won't be perfect...that there will be highs and lows. If I can remember these things, they'll help me get through the challenges of my senior year."



2014 WMAA graduate Brian Erhart

## Life Is Not Linear

What were you doing at age 26? Can you imagine saying that you had landed on a dirt runway in a ghost town, had been part of two space flights, designed a “black box” system for aircraft, or flown across the country in your own plane?

These are just a few of the noteworthy experiences 2014 WMAA graduate Brian Erhart has had. “I graduated from Western Michigan with a degree in Aerospace Engineering,” he recalls. “I worked eight months for Gulfstream as an intern. Then I got connected to Cessna, where I installed flight data recorders on the Sky Courier planes. I also earned my instrument rating flying new Cessna 172s.”

But as Brian is quick to point out, “Life is not linear. I met someone else who hooked me up with The Spaceship Company in Mojave, California, where I was part of the operations side of two space launches.” Thanks to his engineering salary, he was also able to buy a 1946 Cessna 120. “I’ve logged 500 hours in that plane, and it has fueled my true passion, which is to fly. So now I’m working on my Certified Flight Instructor Certificate and pondering a host of options, like becoming a bush pilot in Alaska. Eventually I want to become a corporate pilot and fly Gulfstreams.”

Some of those hours included flying from California to Michigan so he could attend the *Leaders of Tomorrow Gala*. “WMAA set me up career-wise,” Brian says. “Engineering allowed me to pay off my student loans, have some cool experiences, and learn from a ton of people who love small airplanes and doing crazy things. And it allowed me to buy my own plane. I love that I was part of something special. It’s good to give back and inspire other students.”

The WMAA Foundation Board has commissioned a Parent and Alumni Engagement Committee to help reconnect with former students. “I think it’s important for our alumni to stay connected to their high school,” says Peggy Koenigsnecht, Secretary of the WMAA Foundation Board. “It is a great way to network and give back through mentoring and volunteering. Graduates can also inspire current students with their career experiences and opportunities.”

Brian knows firsthand that being a WMAA graduate allows him to explore virtually endless opportunities. “You have to be open and say ‘yes’ to whatever comes up. You also have to be available to help others. Aviation is a small community, so staying connected and giving back is important. I’m part of an amazing legacy and I want to see it grow.”

Tell your story and reconnect at [wmaafoundation.org/alumni](http://wmaafoundation.org/alumni).





Kaitlin Peterson is a role model for all students, especially young women interested in the STEM fields.

## “Representation Matters”

Many of us could point to a specific family member, mentor or role model who fueled our career dreams. So we’re excited that Kaitlin Peterson is now the Engineering Chair and the teacher advisor for the Women in STEAM Club.

“My aunt was a driving force in my life,” Kaitlin shares. “She was a middle school science teacher, and she’s the reason I chose science for my undergraduate degree. I have often been the only female in the engineering department. I know how important it is to have those role models. Representation matters. It’s what draws girls into the program. I’m thrilled that Maddie Juliot is also on staff to teach Aerospace Engineering and Drafting.”

The Women in STEAM Club gives young ladies the chance to hear from female engineering professionals each month and form wonderful mentoring relationships. Kaitlin says, “This is a place for like-minded girls to hang out with each other and know they are not alone.”

Student Morgan VanDorp is a perfect example. “In middle school, I didn’t know very many women in STEM,” she observes. “My dad, an electrical and computer science

engineer, got me interested in robotics, which then led me to pursue engineering. It wasn’t until I got into WMAA that I found more female role models. They encouraged me to pursue my passion in a male-dominated field, and not to let the fact that I am often one of the only girls scare me away from doing what I love.”

Approximately 30% of WMAA’s student population is female. They all explore Intro to Engineering, Intro to Aviation, and other STEM-related electives. “We’re seeing more talented young ladies in our engineering classes every year,” Kaitlin notes. “It’s a lot less scary when you’re not the only girl in the class!”

Morgan has blossomed under the guidance of the WMAA engineering department. “In middle school, I knew that I was interested in robotics,” she notes. “Coming to WMAA helped me put a name to my passion and develop crucial skills that I will use throughout my engineering career. My class projects have taught me how to carefully design my ideas and how to implement the engineering process so I can effectively solve any problem.”

“I want to expose our female students to successful role models so they can see themselves in the STEM fields.”

Kaitlin Peterson

# Cultivating Intentional Diversity

A typical public high school draws local students from a system of feeder schools in the neighborhood. That means the student body is a microcosm of the ethnicity and economic levels present around it.

WMAA, as a charter high school, does not have a feeder school system. Nor do we have entrance exams or pre-qualifications of any kind. This means we can (and do) receive applications from students all over Michigan.

The lottery system we use to fill our available seats creates diversity in a number of areas.



The ethnicity of our student body overall very closely mirrors the ethnicity distribution of Michigan.



We have more males than females at WMAA, but continue to work to recruit applicants of both genders.



In the past, 28-42% of our students have qualified for free/reduced lunch.



This year, 19 languages (other than English) are spoken in our students' homes.



Our students come from more than 50 schools, some as much as an hour away.



Approximately 4% of our students have been home-schooled.

## Embracing Diversity

“Creating and maintaining a diverse student body requires intentionality,” says Jaclyn Iacco, Dean of Student Services. “We frame our work to ensure that all students feel both invited to and supported by WMAA. That covers a host of activities, from where and how we recruit to the daily supports we offer.”

We have created, and continue to implement, resources and programs to help all of our students succeed. These include things like:

-  **New Student Orientation** that helps incoming students make friends and learn about the culture prior to starting their WMAA careers
-  **English Language Learning** for students whose primary language is not English
-  Support for **personal needs**, such as hygiene items, school supplies, clothing and food baskets
-  **Student-led clubs**, such as the Red Tail Aviators for minority students interested in aviation, or the Women in STEAM Club
-  **Scholarships** for students who need financial assistance for flight school
-  **Summer School** for those who need additional credits to stay on course for graduation

“Our students are preparing to enter a global workforce,” says Nicole Gasper, CEO. “We know that learning to work collaboratively with people of all different backgrounds and experiences will equip them for future success. We are thrilled to know that WMAA touches a responsive chord in so many different kinds of students. As a school, we are richer because of that diversity.”



## “WMAA Gives Us Faith in the Future”



Tom Whalen (in the pilot seat) got to see WMAA students take their check ride to earn a glider pilot rating.

Tom and Margo Whalen have 30+ years of aviation in their blood. Tom did two tours as a Navy pilot and then moved to commercial aviation, retiring as a United Airlines captain flying B-777s. Margo also chose an aviation career and was a flight attendant for the friendly skies of United. Aviation brought them together, and now they are dedicated WMAA supporters.

“Lou Seno introduced us to WMAA,” Tom recalls. “We toured the school and the Flight Training Center with George Pavey and Meggan George, and were amazed. Every student was personable. They shook hands and looked us in the eye. The place was immaculate. I found myself wishing there had been a WMAA in the Bronx where I grew up!” Margo agrees. “WMAA gives us faith in the future. We are excited to see students moving toward a variety of careers in the field we both love.”

The Whalens wanted to support WMAA but weren’t sure how. Then they found out that the glider program was

going to end because the glider owner wanted to sell the aircraft. Tom and Margo chose to buy the glider and gift it to WMAA. “A glider teaches you to think three or four steps ahead,” Tom explains. “Flying a glider requires situational awareness, which is the most important skill a pilot can have. Good glider pilots flying in the right conditions can ride the thermals and stay aloft as long as they want. It’s the greatest thing in the world when you’re doing it! And you never know when those skills will pay off. Captain Sully used his glider training in the ‘Miracle on the Hudson’ landing to save his plane, passengers and crew. He knew how to get over the bridge and land safely.”

Tom and Margo love the fact that WMAA students can pursue their individual interests. They also know why it matters. “When someone is interested in something, the rate of failure is almost zero,” Tom points out. “These kids are focused and they each have a different goal. It makes us feel good to help students who are working so hard.”

**Thank you to the Whalens and all donors who provide WMAA students with amazing opportunities to succeed in their chosen fields!**



## Thank You, Attendees and Sponsors!



We welcomed a record crowd to our fifth annual Broadening Horizons Breakfast on October 6. This event, along with our spring *Leaders of Tomorrow Gala*, is one of the primary fundraising events to support WMAA students.

After the program, guests could take an optional tour of the Flight Training Center to learn more about how this resource has transformed aviation education at WMAA.

We extend a special thanks to our amazing sponsors: Amway Aviation, RDV Corp, The Rev Foundation, and Beaver Research. Thanks to their support, all gifts given at the event will go directly to support the incredible experiences that WMAA students enjoy.

Using a talk-show style format, WMAA Foundation Board President Terry Russell took participants through a rapid-fire review of key WMAA differentiators as shared by students and staff. These included:

- 
 The comprehensive aviation curriculum that engages students in a broad continuum of aviation careers, including pilot, mechanic, engineer, drone operator, air traffic controller, and much more
- 
 Our comprehensive engineering program that delivers hands-on, project-based learning opportunities
- 
 The focus on a culture of responsibility and self-discipline that helps students develop lifelong skills for success in careers and life
- 
 Our intentional efforts to recruit and support a diverse student body

We invite you to join these donors by supporting WMAA through your gift. You may use the enclosed envelope, or give online at [wmaafoundation.org/donate](http://wmaafoundation.org/donate).



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## Mark Your Calendar



Our 12th annual *Leaders of Tomorrow Gala* on May 18, 2023 will provide an evening of engagement and inspiration celebrating WMAA's impact on students and our community. You won't want to miss this signature fundraising event!

Please visit our website to learn more, or to learn about sponsorship opportunities. Sponsors help underwrite the cost of the event so that 100% of all gifts go to support the amazing opportunities and experiences offered to WMAA students.

## Connect With Us Online



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