

HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from WEST MICHIGAN AVIATION ACADEMY

Winter 2021

“I Want to Be the Best Person I Can Be!”

If pressed, many of us could finish a good deal of the sentence that begins, “A Scout is...” For Bridget Kopenkoskey, this Scout Law resonates on a deep level. “When I learned what a Scout stands for... someone who is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent...I wanted to be part of it.”

More than that, she wanted to earn the coveted rank of Eagle Scout. “The Boy Scouts of America changed its name and opened up to women just over two years ago,” she notes. “I joined when I was 15, and you only have up until age 18 to earn the rank of Eagle Scout. I had to fast-track my plans to meet the deadline and be part of the inaugural class of female Eagle Scouts.” And she did it! Bridget earned the highly-respected rank of Eagle Scout on December 1, 2020.

Why was this so important to her? “We talk a lot about being prepared in scouting,” she notes. “You have to demonstrate that you are ready for anything life throws your way. You also have to demonstrate leadership. Being an Eagle Scout fits my personal values very well because I want to be the best person I can be. I don’t ever want to do anything that would cause people not to come to me with a need.”

Bridget’s focus on character and achievement are what led her to WMAA. “I was homeschooled through middle school,” she shares. “My brother was at WMAA, so I added this to my tour of high schools. I liked the organization of WMAA, the staff and the student body, so I chose to come here.”

And she has not been disappointed. “I love that WMAA puts so much emphasis on character. We are taught to treat others as we want to be treated. That’s important. We are all human and we all deserve respect.”

So what did Bridget take away from her Scouting experience? “The experience was cool, and the rank is something to work for, but what you learn is really the most important. I learned that I’m not comfortable being in the spotlight. I’m much more effective leading from behind in a supporting role.”

Bridget is still evaluating her career options as she closes out her senior year at WMAA, but her experiences in both scouting and high school have helped her narrow it down. “I’m leaning towards forensic science,” she shares. “One of the reasons I’m interested in this career is because I would be helping people who can’t help themselves. I would be speaking for those who no longer have a voice.”

“It took 100 years, but I’m glad the Boy Scouts of America decided to open up their program for girls,” Bridget concludes. “Now both boys and girls can have the same great experiences, and cultivate the leadership skills that will help make them good citizens for the rest of their lives.”



Bridget Kopenkoskey: one of the first women in our area to earn the rank of Eagle Scout!



Teachers Bring Our Educational Strategies to Life

WMAA provides active, hands-on, skill-based learning that prepares students for high-growth, high-demand fields in the real world. We also create a culture that promotes responsibility, respect, and self-motivation. Our teachers are essential to this work.

For us, there are at least two intangible aspects to effective teaching. The first one connects to our focus on career readiness. It's one thing to learn facts and theories. It's

another thing entirely to have teachers who can build bridges between student interests and career opportunities as part of the classroom experience. The second intangible links to culture. We want students to learn empathy, respect and good teamwork skills.

We've highlighted three of our fantastic faculty members who deliver both of these intangibles through their classroom work.



Working Through Roadblocks

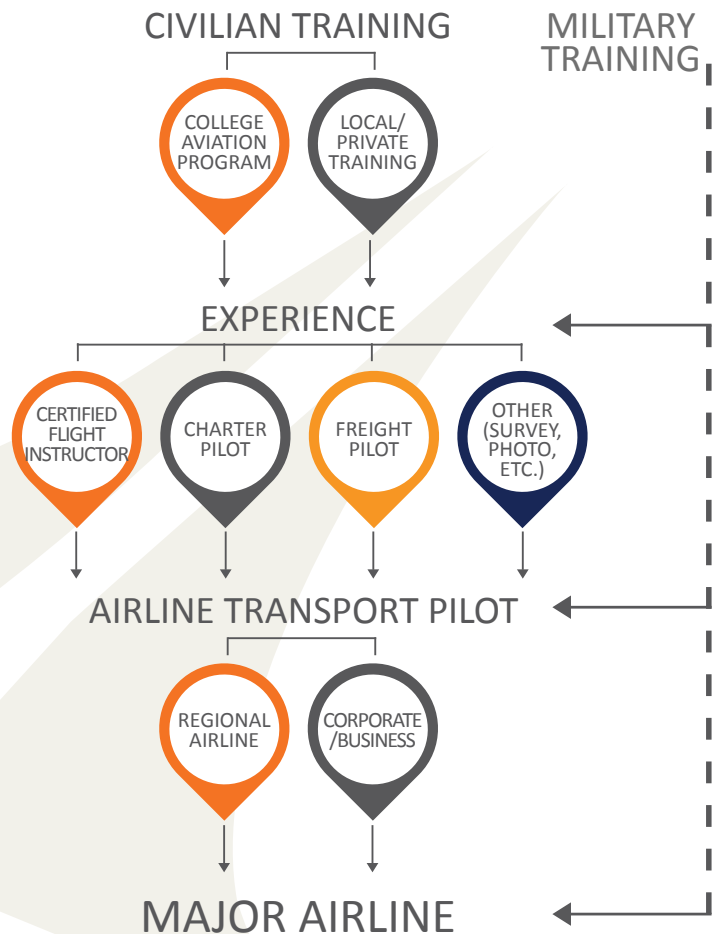


"A big part of my job is helping students learn to overcome roadblocks," says Dave Sebeck, Certified Flight Instructor at WMAA. "Every pilot has a different story of how he or she finally got into the cockpit. I tell all my students how I went through four different strategies to finally earn the aviation career I wanted."

Dave's military experience is a huge benefit for WMAA students, approximately 10% of whom decide upon a military career after high school. "If a student wants to talk about the military, I'm happy to help connect his or her goals to the best-fitting branch of the service," Dave says. WMAA also administers the military entrance exam and regularly invites recruiters to be at the school answering questions.

But Dave also helps students map out other options, and shows them that there are many ways to achieve a dream. "Some students get a little disillusioned when they realize they can't go directly from high school to a major airline!" Dave notes. "I help them understand the many paths available to them, and the work it will take to get there."

The catch? Students have to own the process. "Responsibility is a huge part of what I teach," Dave says. "Being a pilot requires self-discipline and sacrifice. I don't rubber-stamp students to fly a plane. They have to learn to make decisions that support their goals, and be accountable for what they do. And I think that's true for everyone, not just pilots. Many of my students decide not to pursue an aviation career. But I try to teach all of them to make good decisions and have a strong work ethic. They'll succeed anywhere with those skills."



Understanding the options helps students find a path to success.

Building Empathy



If someone asked you to name a helping profession, would you automatically think about engineering? A student in Andrew Abissi's class just might!

"A project that goes beyond the classroom to serve others will teach practical skills while stirring emotions," Andrew observes. "That's a powerfully motivating combination."

Here's a great example. Not too long ago, Andrew's friend posted a Facebook story about Debbie, the family's pet chicken. Debbie lost her feet to frostbite and was going to die if she couldn't walk. This need presented a perfect project for Andrew's mechanical engineering lab.

What seemed like a crazy assignment at first turned into a tenacious crusade for his students. "They created 15-20 design iterations," Andrew recalls. "Some were too stiff. Others were too big. Debbie visited school every week for a fitting, and those kids became attached to her. They were determined

to find a solution that worked. In the process, they learned about mechanical function, sizing, materials, and physiology. But they were committed to this little chicken and her humans for more than just a grade. We cheered like proud parents when Debbie finally stood and then walked on her two new feet!"



Debbie stands proudly on her two new feet!

Engineering. 3D printing. CAD. Persistence. Compassion. All bundled in one project, in one class, by a teacher who perceives his craft through the lens of student motivation.

A postscript to the story: one of Andrew's students put this experience on a resume when he was applying for a job. The interviewers were blown away that he had actually had this kind of practical, real-life experience in high school!



Paying It Forward



"I have to confess that I love wearing a hard hat and steel-toed shoes!" says physics and algebra teacher Wendi Denouden. As an environmental engineer, she spent many years applying her math and science knowledge to ensure the safety of the air we breathe.

The fashion may have been fun, but Wendi admits it was challenging to achieve her career goals. "I was one of four female engineers in my college graduating class," she recalls. "I wasn't exactly a trailblazer, but it was tough. The professors were encouraging, which I appreciated. I didn't have to fight overt bias. But that's not the same as having a female mentor."

Wendi went back to school after having a family and decided to become a teacher. Now she uses her position to encourage all her students, especially the women who are considering STEM careers. "I work hard to build connections with my students, starting when they are freshmen. That way, as students get into their junior and senior years, they're comfortable talking to me about their career goals. I try to

One of Wendi's favorite pieces of advice hangs in her classroom.



give women practical advice about how to succeed in a field that has recently opened up a lot for them."

What's on her list? "Look for a mentoring program," she says. "When you visit a college, attend a class in your field. Connect with a female student to ask questions. A supportive environment makes a difficult path easier."

Why this emphasis on career support? "Everyone needs someone to encourage them," Wendi says simply. "Maybe students have that at home...but maybe they don't. I want to be that person who builds them up and helps them achieve their dreams."



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Register Today!

The 10th Annual WMAA *Leaders of Tomorrow Gala* is coming on Thursday, May 13, 2021. Join us for the reception, where cutting-edge technology will let you “virtually visit” with leaders and school supporters from West Michigan and beyond. Explore the stunning, lifelike displays from our major sponsors. Then sit back and enjoy a brief program presented by founder Dick DeVos, school leadership and staff, community partners, and our amazing students. This will be an exciting and fast-paced event that you won’t want to miss!

Sponsorships are extremely important for this event. Sponsor support allows us to dedicate 100% of the proceeds to enriching WMAA students with the resources that make amazing experiences possible in aviation, engineering and more.

Visit www.wmaafoundation.org
to sponsor or register.

Sponsorship Deadline:
April 16, 2021

Title Sponsor:
Gulfstream Aerospace

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 a virtual or individual in-person tour. Please contact Meggan George to talk about the best option for you.

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