

# HORIZONS

## Views and Perspectives from WEST MICHIGAN AVIATION ACADEMY

Summer 2017

### FUELING AMBITION

Picture a young man born in the Democratic Republic of Congo who finds himself fleeing political persecution. He lands at Gerald R. Ford Airport with his family, speaking next to no English. He's 15, and will be a freshman in high school.

What would you look for if you were him? A school close to home? A place where there are people from your country who speak your native language?



Paul Dusabe (left) excelled at his first team sport, cross country.

Not Paul Dusabe! Paul is powered by ambition and a drive to succeed. He didn't even consider taking the easy route. Instead, he sought out a challenge, and found West Michigan Aviation Academy. He graduated this past spring, and will be attending Albion College in the fall. He's the first person in his family to achieve this goal.

"It was hard," Paul admits frankly. "I knew I had to speak and read English well in order to succeed. I was so happy to get into WMAA, because I knew I could get a great education here."

Paul is incredibly grateful for the help he received at WMAA. "This school welcomes everybody," he says. "It doesn't matter where you're from. I had an ESL teacher who really helped me with my writing and speaking, and that's one of the reasons I was able to learn so quickly."

Paul challenged himself in his studies, but also outside of the classroom. "I never participated in sports back in Congo," he notes. "Mr. Fisher saw me running with a friend one day, and encouraged me to join the cross country team. Team sports were a new experience for me, and I loved it." Paul earned an All State ranking as a runner, further proof that he meets every challenge head-on.

So what's next for Paul? He's headed to Albion in the fall, and debating between a career in family medicine or business.

"I am so grateful that this school is open to everyone," says Paul. "It is a place that helps students reach their dreams. I learned to be who I am and to work with others because of my experiences here."

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Paul Dusabe



“What has been built is incredible. The teaching staff here is amazing, and these kids are learning life skills. This truly is a ‘miracle on 44th Street,’ and we want to support it.”

Al Smith

## Miracle on 44th Street

Al Smith understands respect. He flew for the Air Force in Vietnam, then for the National Guard, and retired as a pilot from American Airlines in 2008.

So when this man, who has “been there, done that,” is impressed by a group of high school students, it makes you stop and take notice.

“My first encounter with WMAA was tagging along as ‘wing man’ when a friend of mine gave a motivational speech at WMAA,” says Al. “Jim started talking, and you could hear a pin drop in the auditorium. I sat there asking myself, ‘What have they taught these kids? Six hundred kids, and they’re all listening attentively.’ That’s when I realized WMAA was something special.”

Al and Brenda Smith started coming to the annual WMAA Leaders of Tomorrow Gala with these same friends, Jim and Janice Platzer. At this year’s event, Al got a chance to chat with students Dawit Aklilu and Anthony Tran. He was just as impressed up-close with the students as he had been in the auditorium. “It takes courage for two teenagers to walk up to a group of unfamiliar adults and start a conversation,” Al comments. “They were polite, respectful and engaging. You just don’t see that every day. They also shared amazing personal stories. Their achievements, and those of many other students here, are really nothing short of miraculous.”

The students made such a strong impression that Al decided to invite them to the special breakfast he won during the silent auction. The next day, the four adults and the two



Pictured (L to R): Pat Cwayna, Dawit Aklilu, Anthony Tran, Al Smith, Jeff Skiles, Brenda Smith, Jim Platzer and his guide dog Mica, Janice Platzer.

students heard the captivating story of Jeff Skiles, co-pilot to Captain Sully of “Miracle on the Hudson” fame. The boys were somewhat awestruck to be invited, and very quickly said “yes!” Al says, “We were all thrilled to hear Jeff’s story and talk with him. Speaking as a pilot, I hope I would have done as well as he and Captain Sully did!”

The breakfast was great, but Al really resonates with the mission of the school. “We have carved out the third Thursday in May for the rest of our lives so we can attend the Gala,” Al confirms. “What has been built is incredible. The teaching staff here is amazing, and these kids are learning life skills. This truly is a ‘miracle on 44th Street,’ and we want to support it.”

## Your Support Can Help!

Want to learn more about how your support can help our students? Join us for a morning tour. Please reserve your spot at least one week in advance.

**Upcoming  
Tour  
Dates**

**September 14 and 26**  
**October 19 and 31**  
**November 7 and 20**  
**January 11 and 30, 2018**



WEST MICHIGAN  
AVIATION ACADEMY



“Students of all backgrounds and abilities have the chance to achieve their dreams at WMAA.”

Larry Fisher  
Dean of Students



## No Assigned Seats Here! WMAA Is Open to Everyone

Airline passengers typically sit in assigned seats. If they want first class, or a bit more leg room, they can purchase an upgrade.

West Michigan Aviation Academy does not function like the airlines! We welcome every student, even those who don't exactly know which “seat” (career) they are going to choose. There is also no “first class” here. All our students are here because they want to be, not because they earned or bought their way in.

“This is a charter school,” explains Larry Fisher, Dean of Student Life. “Our building was built to accommodate 155 students per grade. That’s it...that’s all the space we have! So when the number of applicants plus returning students exceeds our capacity, we employ a lottery system. We draw names from the completed applications to determine which new students will join us the next year. That’s it. There’s no testing or other qualification required.”

### We have a rather interesting student body mix, thanks to our lottery system. For instance...

- WMAA includes students from public schools, private schools, and those who have been home schooled.
- Approximately two-thirds of the students intend to pursue a career outside of the aviation industry.
- Our students represent 42 school districts, and roughly 15 different native languages other than English.
- Approximately 90 students ride the public bus system to get to school each day.
- 75 students enrolled in summer school this year because they needed extra academic support.

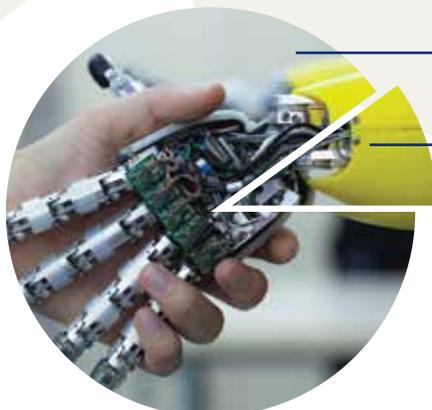
WMAA opened its doors in September 2010, and it has already reached maximum capacity per grade. Why do so many students and their parents choose this school?

“We expect more,” Fisher says. “Our students must achieve a 70 percent score to pass, not 60 percent. Traditional public schools require 22–23 credits to graduate. Our students must earn 26. We set a high standard for what is acceptable in terms of behavior and performance, but we also provide every bit of support we possibly can to help students find their avenue to success. Those standards attract parents and students who are looking for something different in their high school experience.”

There’s a sign in our lunchroom that says, “The higher your altitude, the broader your horizon.” We want students to rise to their highest potential, and see the possibilities spread out before them. Everyone, from our teachers to our students, embraces that challenge. In the process, we are equipping students to fully achieve their potential and prepare for life’s next step.

## What’s Our Flight Plan?

We are passionate about WMAA and proud of our innovative approach to educating and building student leaders. In order to provide a rich curriculum in aviation, STEM, and robotics we must raise additional funds to support our students. Join us today in broadening our students’ horizons.



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

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

### The Development Office Role:

- Fill the gap between state funding and actual cost
- Secure additional funds to advance our quality and mission



WEST MICHIGAN  
AVIATION ACADEMY

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Grand Rapids MI 49512

## Rising Higher Starts with a Good Takeoff

Orientation is the takeoff to a high school career. Most high schools spend an hour or two with incoming students so they can find their classes. That's the equivalent of "throw them in the air and hope for the best!"

WMAA takes a different approach. "We're bringing students together from hugely varied backgrounds, and they all have different perspectives," says Jaclyn Timmer, Dean of Academic & Student Services. "Orientation helps incoming students understand our expectations and form relationships before the year starts."

Orientation focuses on important tenets of life at WMAA: creating relationships with other students, learning appropriate behaviors for ladies and gentlemen, and investing in community service. "We have seen a dramatic improvement in the first month of school as a result of this program," says Dean Timmer. "The students understand what is expected, and we don't have to spend valuable teaching time on these basic skills."

The students also think the orientation has value. Student Julianna Wilson notes, "It really helped me get to know other new students as well as meet the teachers before school officially started. This made the first day of school more enjoyable and stress free!"

Upper classmen benefit from orientation, too. "We need about 22 student leaders for orientation," continues Timmer. "This year, I had 80 applicants for those jobs." The student leaders practice communication skills, receive diversity training, and learn how to be role models. It's a great opportunity for older students to share insights while building their own skills.

"Culture isn't built by accident," Dean Timmer notes. "If we want to maintain our culture, we must teach it deliberately. Orientation creates a community and brings students together for a strong start to their high school careers."



Students learn that teamwork means using everyone's strengths and working through challenges.