

HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from
WEST MICHIGAN
AVIATION ACADEMY

Winter 2020

The Newest Entry Point to Aviation

Glamour shots for real estate. Power line inspections. Amazon home deliveries. Studying wildlife. What do all these things have in common? You guessed it...they all involve drone usage.



“New drone applications are popping up everywhere,” says Eric Fillingner, Aviation Department instructor. “As the technology advances, there are constantly new opportunities to commercialize and use it. We have consistent student interest in our Introduction to Radio Controlled Aircraft class, and a strong RC club. It seemed like a logical next step to offer an Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) class for our students.”

The Federal Aviation Administration controls drone usage through licensing. “Some of the larger drones can go 400 feet up in the air, and can be flown from a quarter of a mile away,” Eric notes. “You can wreak a lot of havoc if you don’t know what you’re doing! You must be licensed by the FAA as a commercial unmanned pilot if you want to generate revenue with drone footage.”

No surprise: WMAA students flocked to the new class! “We have 24 students in our first full year of class,” Eric notes. This yearlong class covers flight preparation and ground school. The capstone project involves creating a film from drone footage. “After successfully completing this class, a student can take the FAA licensing test,” Eric explains. “That license is good for two years, and it provides immediate income potential. Students might use it for a summer job, or might move into a career immediately.”

This class builds upon WMAA’s strong aviation curriculum. “We’re creating multiple points of exposure and entry into aviation,” Eric notes. “Some kids are interested in being pilots. Others excel at the mechanical or engineering aspects. This class is yet another way for students to explore a career path in aviation.”

Who wouldn’t want to fly this Inspire drone? It’s cool!



Nathan O’Droski pilots the Inspire drone on a practice run in the gym.



Jaden conquered a lot to earn his ACE Award flight!

“It’s Not All Butterflies and Flowers Here”

Students love awards, especially when they involve a cool reward. So the WMAA Aviation Department decided to use planes as an incentive that would expose students to the thrill of flying. And thus the ACE (Aviation Competitive Excellence) Award flights were born.

“We want students to get excited about actually flying, in addition to learning about it,” says Josh Bakker, aviation teacher and flight instructor. “We award an ACE flight to one student from every class each month to get kids up in the air.”

Those awards start with teacher nominations. “I thought the ACE Award flights were for the stand-out students,” notes Megan Henning, 9th grade English teacher. “After talking with the Aviation Department and my 9th grade teaching partner, I realized we could use these flights to reward behavior and fuel student ambition. That made them powerful tools for the classroom.”

Enter freshman Jaden O’Gilvie. “I was always in trouble at my other school,” Jaden confesses. “I was bullied and picked on, and I didn’t have the best grades. I felt like I couldn’t do what everyone else could do. I didn’t have a dream to achieve.”

“This place is different. Bullying is not tolerated. Even the environment is unique. Everyone comes from a different background. They don’t all have a lifestyle of butterflies and flowers.”

-Jaden O’Gilvie

Fortunately for Jaden, he snagged a spot at WMAA through the lottery. Jaden landed in Megan’s freshman English class just as she was starting to leverage ACE Awards in a new way.

Jaden had come to WMAA looking for a fresh start. His teachers embraced that ambition, and enfolded him with the support he needed to succeed. “Our team poured a lot of energy into him because he showed a willingness to learn. In response, Jaden worked hard to achieve,” Megan remembers happily. “His grades started going up. He learned how to commit and follow through. His classroom focus improved. When we started using Socratic discussions in our second unit, Jaden simply shone! He thrived on encouraging his peers to talk, while consistently participating himself. He had a chance to be a leader, and he grabbed it. That’s when I nominated him for the ACE Award.”

“I had never flown before,” Jaden confesses. “I was a little nervous, especially when we were taking off. But it was cool to see Grand Rapids and get a different perspective.” Jaden’s family was also a bit nervous. “My entire family came to school for my ACE flight,” he recalls proudly. “It was good for my parents to see that I’m changing.”

The ACE Award flight has fulfilled its purpose in many ways. “Jaden had new energy after that experience,” says Josh Bakker. Jaden would agree. “I came to WMAA wanting to be an engineer, but now I want to be a pilot. I loved flying!”

But more importantly, Jaden has a new view of himself and of school. “This place is different,” he says thoughtfully. “Bullying is not tolerated. Even the environment is unique. Everyone comes from a different background. They don’t all have a lifestyle of butterflies and flowers. All you have to do is be you, and you’ll be good.”

WMAA founder Dick DeVos is fond of saying, “The higher your altitude, the broader your horizon.” Jaden echoed that sentiment in the essay he wrote to win his ACE award. “I know that once I actually get in the air, it will be hard to bring me back to Earth.”



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“We want him to learn how to persevere.”

—Mark and Loree Frank



Aaron's love for flying started at age 10!

“The Bonus is Character Development”

Like many parents, Mark and Loree Frank made a big commitment when they adopted their son Aaron. “Yes, grades and school are important,” Loree says. “But we also want him to understand the importance of trying new things. We want him to learn how to persevere.”

Their path to WMAA started when Aaron was only 10 years old. At the time, the Franks lived near Detroit. They took him to the flying camp at Oakland Yard Athletics. “Aaron was not at all sure he wanted to do this,” Loree recalls. “But we encouraged him. He tried it, and loved it!”

A friend recommended that the Franks check into high schools that participated with the Civil Air Patrol. That’s when meticulous mom Loree started researching. “I found three options: one in Novi, one in Detroit, and one in Grand Rapids,” she remembers. “We came to WMAA for a tour, and Aaron got very excited. Other schools had great programs, but WMAA’s focus on character development was the bonus for us.”

She and Mark decided that WMAA was the right fit for their son, but they had two hurdles to overcome: snagging a spot for Aaron in the lottery, and selling their Detroit home. “We were on every prayer chain!” Loree says with a laugh.

When the lottery spot came through last fall, Loree and Aaron moved to Rockford so Aaron could start school. They have been commuting back to Detroit on the weekends to see Mark, who is working and getting the house ready to sell. “Yes, it’s hard to be apart,” Mark acknowledges. “But this opportunity for Aaron is worth the effort. I’ve always traveled, and I know you have to

consciously maintain relationships. We’re all working on that as a family.”

Mark and Loree attended last year’s Gala as guests of Deloitte, Mark’s employer. “We believe in philanthropy,” Mark says. “We usually support at least one school, and after attending the Gala, we believed WMAA was a good investment. The students benefit from many experiences here that wouldn’t be possible with state funding alone.”

As Aaron wraps up his first year at WMAA, both Mark and Loree are surprised by the outcome. “The first year was tough,” Loree admits. “Aaron struggled with his homework, and it was hard to be away from his friends. But he got really excited when he started planning for 10th grade. Now that excitement is motivating him. He’s doing better with his homework. He has made good friends who inspire him.” Mark and Loree also agree that struggle is okay. “Kids who struggle in high school do better in college, because they have learned to persevere,” she notes. “We wanted Aaron to learn the value of hard work and commitment. Our entire WMAA journey thus far has certainly met these goals!”



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5363 44th St SE
Grand Rapids MI 49512

Register Today!

The 9th Annual WMAA Leaders of Tomorrow Gala on Thursday, May 14, 2020 provides industry leaders, local businesses and individuals a platform from which to connect and learn more about the incredible students, staff, and community of WMAA. The keynote speaker, Vernice "FlyGirl" Armour, was America's First African American Female Combat Pilot. Her gutsy style propelled her from beat cop to combat pilot in a record-breaking three years. She's an inspiration and living testimony to the power of dreams and courage.

In addition to this keynote presentation, WMAA will showcase the latest happenings and share exciting developments that are on the horizon for the students, staff, and community. Guests will experience the Amway hangar and have a chance to look at many aircraft on display. Additionally, WMAA students will be participating in several demonstrations and interactive stations.



Your support at this event enriches 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 14, 2020

Title Sponsor: Gulfstream Aerospace

Upcoming Tour Dates

Come See What Your Support Can Do!

Want to learn more about how your support can help our students? Join us for a Soaring Together tour. Please contact Kelsea Wierenga at least one week in advance to reserve your spot. All tours begin at 8:30am and last for one hour.

March 26, 2020
April 30, 2020

WMAA Foundation Contact Information

(616) 446-8886

www.wmaafoundation.org