



## NEWS

### Young Eagles take flight with area youth *57 youngsters receive free plane rides at Cresco airport*

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**CRESCO** – Area youth ages 8-17 got the chance to experience free airplane rides at Ellen Church Field Airport in Cresco through the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Young Eagles program on Saturday, Sept. 17. Pilot Keith Williams was on hand to speak about the program that has given free airplane rides to over 1.5 million of our nation's youth since the program began in 1992.

"Some of us [participating pilots] have loved to fly forever," began Williams. "Others pick it up as they go along with their lives."

Williams says that while the problem may not be obvious, the country is beginning to experience a pilot shortage. "This shortage will become even more evident as many of the Baby Boomer generation are retiring from the airlines," he explained.

Still, Williams says there are numerous other forms of employment within the flight industry. Whether that means the nation's youth are interested in becoming mechanics, working with electronics, or even working for an airplane manufacturer. "Some of those same things can be done in the military," he added.

Williams says he and other Young Eagles pilots think it's important to expose school-age youth to airplanes. "It's been a really successful program," he said. "Since 1992, a lot of [the youth] have become corporate pilots, airline pilots, flight instructors, etc."

Williams, who has been a pilot off and on for more than 50 years, said, "We like to fly; the pilots you see here have all given rides to lots of kids and everyone leaves with a smile."

While in flight, Williams says he sees a lot of beautiful sights – sunsets, sunrises, seasonal landscape changes with crops and foliage. "What's really neat, is that in the late afternoon when the sun is really low, all of the hills will cast shadows and you can see the texture of the ground," he said. "Flying over northeast Iowa is really beautiful because of the hills, the crooked roads and the funny-shaped fields."

Williams says that when pilots attend a Young Eagles flight day, they never know whether "10 or 110 kids" are going to show up. "A lot of airplanes come from all over the country – today we have eight airplanes and pilots from Ankeny, Dubuque, Washington and Cedar Rapids," he said, "and so we're always hoping for a good bunch of kids."

He adds, "Each [pilot] donated their time and use of their airplane to give the rides because aviation is an important part of their lives and they enjoy introducing aviation to the younger generation."

Additionally, Williams says Clair Pecinovsky, the airport manager at Ellen Church Field, has worked in favor of the event since it was first proposed about one year ago. "His cooperation and helpfulness was greatly appreciated by the pilots and ground crew who came to work with the youngsters, as was the help of Cresco resident Jerry Hebrink," said Williams. "I also really appreciate that my friends who fly all of these planes were willing to come up here, because this is further north than we usually go," he said.



Cresco residents Steve and Sheila Slifka, and son Brandon, stand in front of an airplane model developed by Sheila's brother-in-law Richard (Dick) VanGrunsven, who lives in Oregon. Brandon was able to ride in one of his uncle's planes for the first time during the Young Eagles event. (Photo by Keri Bugenhagen / TPD)

Even so, 57 youngsters left the Cresco airport last Saturday as official Young Eagles, courtesy of the EAA and its Cedar Rapids/Iowa City chapter.

Williams reported that the general flight route was to take off toward the southeast, fly to Protivin, turn left, come back over Cresco and land. However, Lime Springs youth were usually taken to their hometown. "Wyatt Tibbals was able to see his house!" said Williams, adding, "A highschool-age brother/sister from near Ridgeway flew right over their farm!"

### **Cresco youth has family connection to RV airplanes at recent flight event**

For 16-year-old Crestwood High School student Brandon Slifka, the EAA Young Eagles free airplane rides for youth event was particularly special. In fact his uncle, Richard (Dick) VanGrunsven, is the successful designer and founder of Van's Aircraft. While the initials "RV" typically refer to "Recreational Vehicle," they are also Brandon's uncle's initials, which could be seen on two of the airplanes participating in the Saturday, Sept. 17 event – the RV-6 and RV-7.

Brandon, son of Steve and Sheila Slifka of Cresco, got to ride in one of his uncle's airplanes that Saturday. "My older sister, Diane, is married to Richard," explained Sheila, "so he's my brother-in-law."

The VanGrunsvens live out in Oregon, and while on a visit Sheila says she was able to experience quite the plane ride with Richard. "He's taken me over Mount Hood and instead of just saying, 'There's Mount Hood,' he had to dip down into Mount Hood," she laughed. "He's taken me on some of the flips and rolls – and I wondered why my knuckles were so white!"

Sheila says to never fear, her brother-in-law is a good pilot, and she would "definitely" go for a plane ride with him again.

Sheila and her husband Steve say they were excited to see their youngest son take a ride in one of his uncle's planes. "Last time Brandon was in a plane, he was under 2 years old, and that was a commercial plane," she said. "He doesn't remember flying, so this will be quite an experience for him, especially going into an EAA plane versus the commercial airplanes."

Sheila also says that the Young Eagles pilots seem to have a way of communicating their passion for flying with youth. "This is a wonderful experience for the kids and I'm glad they got the opportunity," she said.

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