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AP

Young pilots love freedom of flying, potential job prospects

By ALLIE HINGA - Telegraph Herald

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DUBUQUE, Iowa (AP) — At a time when many teenagers are learning how to drive, Carter Hancock was learning to fly.

Carter, whose father is a pilot, started flying with his dad when he was a sophomore in high school. Now a senior at Wahlert Catholic High School in Dubuque, he has his private pilot's license and is planning to get his commercial license — which will allow him to get paid to fly — before he finishes high school.

“I like the challenge, the freedom and also the responsibility aspect of it, that you have your life in your own hands,” Carter said. “I kind of like that feeling.”

The [Dubuque Telegraph Herald](#) reports Carter is among local teenagers who have earned their pilot's licenses — or are working to obtain them — while still in high school. In some cases, those students also take college-level aviation classes to hone their skills.

Local teen pilots said the aviation experience they are gaining now helps them get a jump on future college and career plans. Plus, there's the thrill of being in the air.

“You definitely hold your head up just a little bit higher,” said Joseph Chapman, a senior at Wahlert. “... It just feels special, I guess, to be able to fly this airplane thousands of feet in the air at hundreds of miles per hour and have the kind of responsibility, that skill set, and to know that you're really pursuing your goals.”

Joseph has never doubted that he would one day become a pilot.

“I've wanted to be a pilot pretty much my entire life, since probably well before I was 6,” he said. “I've just wanted to fly.”

Joseph started his flight training through the Key City Fliers in 2020 with a scholarship to help cover the costs. He earned his private pilot certificate earlier this year after accumulating enough hours in the air and completing a series of tests.

Bridger Hawkinson, a junior at Wahlert, is nearly finished with his training to become a private pilot. He plans to get his certification when he turns 17 and is able to do so.

Bridger started his flight training when he was 14 and flew a plane for the first time.

“At first it was kind of nerve-wracking because it’s your first time in an airplane, and a small airplane especially, and getting the feel for the controls and what it feels like, but after a few lessons, you get used to it,” he said.

One of the things he loves about flying is the freedom that comes with it.

“You get up there, and you feel like you could practically do anything, and to be able to do that in high school, when you know most people don’t get that opportunity, you feel pretty special,” Bridger said.

Jaxon Smith, a senior at Hempstead High School in Dubuque, currently is taking a ground school course at University of Dubuque as he works toward his private pilot certificate. He is waiting on his medical certificate so he can start getting experience in the air.

“I’m just excited to fly so much because I love traveling and I like seeing the views, so I’m excited for that,” Jaxon said.

Jaxon is taking his UD course through Iowa’s Postsecondary Enrollment Options program, which allows high school students to enroll in college classes.

Tony Foster, head of academics for UD’s aviation department, said the college has a few high school students taking aviation courses at UD through the program. Those classes give students a head start toward aviation careers, he said, noting that seniority is key in the airline industry.

“It’s a pretty exciting opportunity to get your foot in the door, figure out if aviation is a good fit for you,” Foster said.

While the number of high school students in UD aviation courses is small, Foster noted that this year’s incoming class of UD aviation students had a larger number of students who already had their private pilot certificate.

“Our incoming class is in the vicinity of 80 students, and I think about a quarter of them already had their private completed already,” he said. “That does seem to be an upward trend.”

Carter already has taken three aviation classes through UD and plans to take another in the spring. After high school, he plans to attend UD and, eventually, become an airline pilot.

“It just feels good to know, have peace of mind knowing what it’s going to be like when I’m actually in college,” he said. “So now I have already an idea of what it’s going to be like, and I know that I’m going to like it.”

Marcus Stolk, a junior at Dubuque Senior High School, took a UD aviation class in safety and ethics this fall. He plans to take a ground school class his senior year so he can start flying.

While he still has a few options in mind for his future, he is considering a career in aviation.

“These classes will definitely help me decide if I want to take this career path or not,” Marcus said. “I think everyone should give something exciting a try.”

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