

Young Eagles Take Flight at Wings of Hope

BY CAROL ENRIGHT, WINGS OF HOPE

AT A HANGAR AT Spirit of St. Louis Airport (KSUS) in Chesterfield, Missouri, EAA Chapter 1675 and aviation nonprofit Wings of Hope have forged a special relationship.

For the past three years, the local EAA chapter has been providing Young Eagles flights for students participating in Wings of Hope's SOAR into STEM program. The flights are the culmination — and highlight — of a hands-on, educational experience that brings middle and high school students into the Wings of Hope hangar for five Saturdays to work on aircraft under the careful guidance of mentors and learn about STEM and aviation career paths.

The program also provides students with a behind-the-scenes view of how the 61-year-old organization uses aircraft to fuel its mission of changing and saving lives around the world. In the United States, Wings of Hope provides medical air transport services — free of charge — to individuals who need specialized medical care. The humanitarian nonprofit also works with a network of partners around the globe to fly people living in remote areas to emergency medical care and fly doctors into communities with no local health care.

Before EAA Chapter 1675 started providing Young Eagles flights for the SOAR into STEM program, Wings of Hope paid for discovery flights using a local FBO. The relationship has been a huge asset to Wings of Hope, but the benefits run both ways.

HOME FOR A NEW CHAPTER

John Heilmann, EAA Lifetime 519198, who began volunteering with Wings of Hope in 2015 after retiring from Boeing, spearheaded the founding of EAA Chapter 1675 about three years ago.

"We didn't have an EAA chapter here," said John, who is president of EAA Chapter 1675. "A lot of our volunteers here (at Wings of Hope) are part of the EAA, and we thought it would be great to have our own local chapter."

Once John and a few others formed the chapter, they needed a place to meet.

"Since many of our members work and volunteer here at Wings of Hope, we thought we could have it here in the hangar — which works out great," he said.

The chapter, which currently has about 55 members, meets monthly for dinner and a guest speaker in the Wings of Hope hangar.

"We have a really good turnout," John said.

Almost immediately after forming EAA Chapter 1675, the group started offering Young Eagles flights for the SOAR into STEM students.

"Since Young Eagles flights are a big part of the EAA — to give kids their first flight — it's just a natural fit for us to do that," John said. "I think it's a great program, and having a flight at the end of it is something the students really look forward to. It keeps them motivated during the classes."

FLIGHTS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Brian Williams is the Young Eagles coordinator for EAA Chapter 1675. He organizes Young Eagles rallies for the community, providing about 250 children and teens free Young Eagles flights annually. Wings of Hope hosts rallies at its headquarters. Students and families meet at Wings of Hope to check in, meet their pilots, and then taxi out from the Wings of Hope tarmac to the airport runway for takeoff.

"It's been a good partnership," Brian said. "We can give back to Wings of Hope for them allowing us to use their facilities, and these flights meet our youth program mission, too."



John said hosting the Young Eagles rallies at Wings of Hope is "good for awareness for Wings of Hope.

"Parents bring kids, they come in, they can see the facility, and we talk about what we do," he said.

IMPACTING YOUNG PEOPLE

As a Young Eagles pilot, John sees the impact the flights have on young people.

"Most of them are just super excited," he said.

"Some of them, it changes their life. We flew one girl — it was her first flight, she was maybe 17 — and she said, 'This is what I want to do.'

"A year after we took her up on her first Young Eagles flight, she soloed," John said.

Brian can relate to the excitement of the young people taking their first Young Eagles flight.

"I always knew I wanted to fly from a young age, and I tried to get into every little thing that I could that had to do with aviation," he said. "I took a Young Eagles flight back in 1998 at Oshkosh."

Today, Brian is a pilot for FedEx.

SHARING A LOVE FOR AVIATION

Many of the chapter members make the annual trek to Oshkosh for EAA AirVenture Oshkosh, and Brian said attending as a chapter allows the members to camp out together.

"Having a chapter allows us to get up to six slots together, whereas before we might be scattered all over the airport," he said.

Both John and Brian talked about the camaraderie afforded by having a local EAA chapter at KSUS, a large municipal airport home to many pilots.

"We just wanted to share our love of aviation with each other," Brian said. "There are several flying clubs at the airport that have their own little groups. This is a way to bring all those groups together."

Learn more about Wings of Hope at WingsofHope.ngo and EAA Chapter 1675 at Chapters.EAA.org/EAA1675. **EAA**