

Young People Fly High With Airfield Program

Program Hopes To Spark Interest In Aviation Careers

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FORT WASHINGTON, Md. -- A private airfield in Fort Washington was transformed Thursday into a giant outdoor classroom.

David Wartofsky, owner of the airfield, said the event was the highlight of his day. He said he shuts down the airfield so youngsters can get a lesson in how to fly.

"The real highlights of this event are lighting sparks in kids' minds. All of sudden they realize that there are all kinds of things they can do, that their boundaries are not what they thought they were before they came down here," said Wartofsky.

More than 3,200 students in elementary, middle and high schools from around the region got a personal look at airplanes, including modern military aircrafts and some vintage planes.

"I saw the different buttons that they have to use," Luis Villalobos, a third-grader at Rose Valley Elementary School.

"I thought how much the airplanes can hold the people and how much things and how fast it can go at the same time was amazing," said fourth-grader Jahwon Taylor.

The Garrett A. Morgan Technology & Transportation Futures Program sponsors the aviation course. The Federal Aviation Association runs the program to stimulate interest in aviation careers.

"They are our future transportation workers. They are the next generation of workers for the transportation and aviation community," said Belinda Bender of the FAA.

Pilots, engineers, mechanics and other aviation professionals participate to pass on some of their expertise.

"This is what the Tuskegee Airmen are all about. This is our legacy, getting kids interested and motivating them to seek careers in aviation," said Tuskegee Airman Bill Broadwater.

Some of these youngsters have already gotten their flying careers off the ground. Kenneth Ritchie, 18, said he has been flying for two years.

"Flying has opened my mind to what you can do because if I can do it, other young people can do it, too," said Ritchie.

Ellis Claggett said he began flying about six months ago.

"One thing that it helped me with was overcoming my fear of heights," said Claggett.

Over the past decade, the aviation program has mentored more than a million children, officials said, and many of them have gone on to choose careers in aviation.

Officials said they hope that seeing others fly will drive many of the youngsters to soar.