

Taking off with history

Mile High Flight gives African-American students a taste for aviation

By Jeffrey Leib Denver Post Staff Writer

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Tuskegee Airman John Mosley, 86, watched budding aviator Jamar Harrison, 17, in the Mile High Flight Program at Centennial Airport. Mosley's son Eric, a United Airlines captain, runs the program. (Post / Omar Vega)

Forgive Jamar Harrison if he had butterflies on his recent trip to Centennial Airport.

The high school senior from Colorado Springs was preparing for his first solo flight, and he was doing it under the experienced eye of an aviation legend - 86-year-old former Tuskegee Airman John Mosley.

Mosley and other men from Colorado flew for the all-black Army Air Corps units during World War II.

Mosley's son Eric, an Airbus 320 captain with United Airlines, is carrying on the mission - started 50 years ago by his father at the Denver YMCA's Glenarm branch - of encouraging young African-American students to consider careers in aviation.

"To have something like that to look up to is inspirational," the 17-year-old Harrison said of John Mosley and Mosley's fellow Tuskegee Airmen. "It makes you feel like a part of history."

For the past dozen years, the airmen's metro Denver chapter has sponsored the Mile High Flight Program, which gives students a taste of aviation career opportunities, offering flight training to those with special aptitude.

"We're about aviation, but we really see our program as a metaphor for life," said Eric Mosley, emphasizing its focus on "hard work, dedication and excellence that was the hallmark and creed of the Tuskegee Airmen."

"Our notion is that if you succeed in this program, you can succeed anywhere, whether you sit in the cockpit or not," he said.

Mosley, 47, runs the program with Darryl Searuggs, 45, a FedEx Express MD-11 cargo pilot. Both Mosley and Searuggs flew in the Air Force.

Searuggs' daughter, Jasmine, was also part of the flight program and now is a first-year cadet at the Air Force Academy.

On the day of Harrison's solo, other flight- program graduates showed up to support the fledgling aviator.

Flying offers "a kind of freedom to be outside the constraints of everyday life," said Dominique Robnett, a 20-year-old Metropolitan State College of Denver senior majoring in aviation technology who attended the flight program four years ago.

"It takes 110 percent of your attention," said Robnett, who has about 300 flight hours on her log and a dream of flying professionally as a charter pilot. Her great-uncle was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Before Harrison went up alone in the Cessna 172, he reviewed procedures with his flight instructor, Devin Dahlberg, a Metro State senior majoring in aviation.

They talked about the stalls and steep turns that the younger pilot had handled on training flights. "I've got to keep focused; I can't be distracted," Harrison reminded himself.

Ulysses "A.J." McCullough, 22, another graduate of the flight program, also was at Centennial to support Harrison.

McCullough is a Metro State sophomore majoring in aviation and is president of the school's Shades of Blue aeronautical club. He wants to someday fly wide-body jets such as the Boeing 777 or 747.

Before Harrison got into the Cessna's cockpit, McCullough had to go off to his job as an aircraft fueler at Denver International Airport.

Harrison was cleared by instructors for his solo flight. He spent about 30 minutes in the air and performed four touch-and-go landings.

"It's a new feeling getting up there by yourself," Harrison said. "I kept looking at the seat next to me, telling myself, 'He's not there; you're the pilot in command.'"