

Work in the wild blue yonder

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At 16, Janae Crittenden had no idea she would pilot a plane.

But when she heard about the summer Aviation Career Education Camp sponsored by the Atlanta chapter of the National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees, it piqued her interest and she decided to apply.



JESSICA MCGOWAN/SPECIAL

Janae Crittenden, 18, (left) and Spencer Neal, 15, both previous participants in the Aviation Career Education Camp, help Richard Grey with a pre-flight check of his Cessna 150 last week at Fulton County Airport-Brown Field. Grey is an instructor for the summer camp.

HAVING A BALL

The National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees' Black and White Scholarship Ball, 7 p.m. March 17 at Atlanta Airport Hilton, 1031 Virginia Ave., Hapeville. Tickets: \$75. For more information: 770-210-9555.

For Aviation Career Education Camp applications, go to www.atlantacoalition.com, and mail to P.O. Box 981, Hampton, GA 30228, before May 15. For more information: 770-210-9555.

She was accepted.

"It was cool," said Crittenden, now 18. "We made rockets using Alka-Seltzer and water to see whose would go up high. We went on field trips and learned about careers in aviation and air traffic control. And we went on a discovery flight."

It was during the discovery flight at the end of the week that Crittenden and her fellow campers got a chance to put their simulator skills to the test.

"The pilot took us up in a small plane, and we got to take control of it," she said. "We wore earphones to be able to hear air traffic control, ground control and the pilot."

The camp is a weeklong event for teens ages 13 to 17 and is fully funded by the local coalition, which raises the money through an annual Black and White Scholarship Ball, scheduled this year at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Atlanta Airport Hilton.

The formal affair includes dinner, live entertainment, visual highlights of the aviation camp, education scholarship recipient announcements, dancing and speakers Ventris Gibson of the Federal Aviation Administration and stunt pilot Jamail Larkins.

"Our goal is to foster increased awareness of aviation in aerospace," said local chapter President Paquita Bradley. "The camp started in 2003, which was also the beginning of the ball. The president at the time decided to have the ball to raise money for the ACE camp."

The camp is held at Fulton County Airport-Brown Field in Atlanta under the direction of camp coordinator Renee Chatman, a coalition treasurer and an air traffic controller.

Chatman said the camp was started because she noticed so many teens being turned down from similar camps and having nowhere else to go for the knowledge and experience they were seeking.

"We teach them that there are more than 120 careers in aviation," she said. "I learned about it while in the Navy as an air traffic controller. I didn't know about Bessie Coleman or the Tuskegee Airmen or any of them. I found the kids

didn't know about aviation, and neither did the adults."

The week involves meeting black people in the aviation field, such as pilots, mechanics, attendants and Tuskegee Airmen. The group has taken field trips to such places as the Warner Robins Aviation Museum, Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, the DeKalb-Peachtree Airport control tower, the Commemorative Air Force Museum at Falcon Field in Peachtree City, and the now-closed Sci-Trek Space Mission.

At the end of the week, the campers learn flight simulation, pre-flight preparation, and weather briefing and classroom briefing to know what to expect before each student goes up in the air with an instructor for 30 minutes and is allowed to take the controls.

Teens interested in participating in the camp, to be held this year from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. June 18-22, must complete an application, write a required essay about why they want to attend, and mail them to Chatman to be received by May 15.

The number of applicants accepted depends on the amount of money raised at the ball and through corporate and private donations.

"We average about 24 students each year now," Chatman said. "If donors could give more, we could do more."

Crittenden is now a senior at Jonesboro High School and plans to attend either Auburn University or the U.S. Air Force Academy after she graduates.

She has attended the camp each summer since she was 16 and wants to be a pilot.

"A lot of my friends don't know about aviation," she said. Careers in aviation are uncommon in the black community, she said.

"They think it's cool, but it's different to them, especially black kids. This camp is for everybody, and you don't necessarily have to have great grades.

"More people should know about it."