



## Free flights inspire future pilots

By Nichole Hacha-Thomas nthomas@kpcnews.net

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AUBURN — There were plenty of smiling faces — and potential pilots — at the DeKalb County Airport on Saturday. More than 30 children lined up for 20-minute flights with experienced pilots as part of the Young Eagles flight rally, sponsored by the Experimental Aircraft Association.

The rally aimed to inspire children to take an interest in aviation and to encourage them to explore careers in aviation, said rally coordinator Sebastian Baumgardner.

"This is a way to try to further the ability for kids to give serious thought to becoming a pilot," he said.

Since the worldwide Young Eagles program began in 1992, more than 1.6 million children have been flown high into the sky. Some go on to become pilots, either recreationally or professionally, said volunteer Laramie Ressler of Albion. There was no shortage of inspiration at Saturday's rally.

Two of Tonya Brazel's sons already have been bitten by the aviation bug, she said. Robert Brazel, 17, and his brother Michael, 13, travel to Auburn weekly from their home in Avilla to take part in the Civil Air Patrol. Both would like to earn their pilot's licenses some day. Their siblings, Joanna, 16, Cassandra, 11, and Samuel, 8, joined their brothers at the airport for the Young Eagles flights.

Robert, Samuel and Joanna were flown past their home in one plane, while Cassandra and Michael took off in the other direction. Each of the Brazel children said he or she aspires to become a pilot.

"As soon as I got off, I wanted to go again," said Michael Brazel. "It would be pretty awesome to be able to fly."

Twins Molly and Mila Myers drove to the airport from Fort Wayne, wondering what to expect for their first airplane ride ever. Not nervous at all, the 8-year-old girls were excited to go up. When Molly stepped from the plane, she beamed.

"I think I was born to fly," she said.

A few fliers even got to take the yoke and fly the plane themselves, adding to the fun. Bailey Robinson, 8, of Auburn, has participated in the Young Eagles program before. He took his second flight Saturday. His favorite part, he said, is flying the airplane.

## Images



Bailey Robinson, 8, prepares for his flight as part of the Young Eagles flight rally at the DeKalb County Airport Saturday. It was Robinson's second flight this year. The rally is sponsored by the Experimental Aircraft Association. NICHOLE HACHA-THOMAS



Garrett Middle School student Sam Waterhouse, right, shows twins Mila Myers, left, and Molly Myers, center, how to use the airplane's yoke, or steering wheel. The girls took part in the Young Eagles flight rally at the DeKalb County Airport Saturday. NICHOLE HACHA-THOMAS

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"It is awesome when I get to turn the wheel," he said. He also enjoyed talking to the pilot and other passengers on the headsets, he said.

Robinson and a steady stream of kids filed in and out of planes from 9:30 a.m. to well into the afternoon. Baumgardner said the free event wouldn't have been possible without the help of the dedicated and caring volunteers. Six pilots donated their time and airplanes, and 15 to 20 volunteers assisted with registration, passenger loading and other duties.

"We had just the right number of kids and volunteers today," Baumgardner said. "It's 100 percent the dedication of the pilots. It's their fuel, their time. They're here because they love to fly and they want to encourage kids to share that love of flying."

Across 90 countries, more than 42,000 volunteer pilots participate in the program. Drew Hoffman of Churubusco has been a pilot since he was a senior in high school. He's been a Young Eagles pilot since the program began.

"This is the best program the EAA ever came up with," Hoffman said. "It is a great way to introduce kids to flying that may never get the chance. You never know what will light the fire inside them."

That fire has been sparked in Sam Waterhouse, 13, a Garrett Middle School student with dreams of becoming a pilot. Waterhouse wasn't an eager kid waiting to fly, though. Instead, he was part of the ground crew, helping students get in and out of the planes and presenting them with their completion certificates.

Waterhouse found his way to the EAA through Boy Scouts, when he earned his aviation merit badge. He and his father have been coming to the airport to get flying time and to help with events ever since, he said.

"Seeing the smiles on the kids' faces and watching them have so much fun is great," Waterhouse said. "I like sharing the love of aviation with (the kids)."

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