



DENNIS ELS, A LOCAL OPTOMETRIST, HAS PILOTED MORE THAN 200 EXPERIMENTAL AIRCRAFT ASSOCIATION YOUNG EAGLE FLIGHTS, WHICH ARE FREE 15-MINUTE FLIGHTS FOR CHILDREN TO FOSTER AN INTEREST IN AVIATION. RORYE O'CONNOR/REGISTER-NEWS

Local pilot donates time, skills to Young Eagles program

By RORYE O'CONNOR

rorye.oconnor@register-news.com

MT. VERNON — One local pilot is being recognized for his contributions to the Young Eagles program.

Dennis Els, a local optometrist and pilot, has taken more than 200 children on 15-minute airplane rides as a part of the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles program.

He said seeing young people and their parents enjoy the experience is the best part of piloting Young Eagle flights.

"The smiles when they get back on the ground and everybody wants to have their picture taken by the aircraft," Els said. "The parents and the flyers enjoy the experience."

Els said he first developed an interest in aviation at six years old, after his brother took him on a short flight at Dover Air

Force Base, Del.

"The cars were so small as we flew above them, and as we landed, I asked, 'Could we go again?'" he said in an e-mail. "He took off again and we went up a second time."

Els, who owns a four-seat aircraft, has spent more than 2,000 hours flying, and has given Young Eagle flights to young people at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, in Salem, and at the St. Louis Downtown Airport.

More than 1.6 million youths have taken free Young Eagles flights since the program's inception in 1992, according to the organization's website.

Els said only five percent of the population is made up of pilots, and he believes Young Eagles flights allow young people to discover if they have an interest in aviation.

Furthermore, Els said he loves flying be-

cause it feels like freedom to him.

"It is an expression of freedom to get in an airplane and go basically where ever you want," he said. "In the United States, there are very few restrictions. It is a treasured freedom to be able to go somewhere like that."

Els said he and his family, wife Doris, son Dan and daughter Dena, have traveled across the United States to locations such as New Orleans; Dallas, Texas; Salt Lake City, Utah; Tampa, Fla., and other cities.

A Young Eagles flight begins with an explanation of what will happen during the flight and a preflight inspection of the aircraft, according to youngeagles.org. The pilot will then buckle the young passengers in and explain the interior of the airplane before taking off.

see EAGLES/Page 3A

11-25-11

EAGLES

continued from 1A

Though he has given Young Eagles flights in several different locations, Els said he particularly enjoyed one weekend he took part in, which gave flights to more than 300 Boy Scouts

in downtown St. Louis.

"Flying right over the arch has always been fun for them and me," Els said.

All Young Eagle pilots are volunteers who have had at least 250 hours of piloting time, Els said.

"I think that as much fun as I have had, any cost has been well-justified," he said.