

# Local pilots & Young Eagles program help kids enjoy thrill of a plane ride

BY JUDITH JOY

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CENTRALIA — Dr. Lyle Pahnke of Centralia has been commended by the Experimental Aircraft Association for giving over 100 area youngsters free demonstration airplane rides through the EAA's "Young Eagles" program.

Dr. Pahnke, who is a surgeon in Centralia, said that he began volunteering four years ago and gives 20-minute rides to about 30 children a year in a 1982 Piper Cherokee Warrior plane.

In 1991, a survey of long-time EAA members was conducted to help determine the organization's future priorities. Nearly 92 percent said EAA's primary objective should be to involve more young people in aviation. The survey also showed that a flight experience

inspired respondents toward aviation. On May 13, 1992, following several months of coordination by members of the EAA Board of Directors, EAA management, staff and volunteers, EAA's Young Eagles Program was unveiled at a Washington, D.C. news conference.

"The EAA is trying to give kids the lightning spark to awaken their interest in aviation," Dr. Pahnke commented, adding that the organization also gives scholarships to young people who are planning careers in aviation.

Dr. Pahnke said he has room in his plane to accommodate three youngsters on a flight over Centralia, and it's a lot of fun for him watching the kids' enthusiastic responses. After the flight, each child gets a signed certificate and his/her name is entered in a log-

book, which is on permanent display at the EAA's AirVenture Museum in Oshkosh, Wis., and online through the Young Eagles website.

"It's truly a privilege to do what we do," commented Dr. Pahnke, adding that the cost of fuel and the price of new planes are limiting the number of people who can afford to fly private planes. A new plane that cost \$20,000 to \$30,000 in the 1980s now sells for about \$250,000, he said. As a result, he added, the market for used planes is stronger, and some people are building their own.

Chris Collins, the director of the Mt. Vernon Airport, is also a participant in the Young Eagles program, as are a number of other area pilots, including Rodney and

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David Mullinax, both of Texico; Ed Cunningham, Dr. Allen Froehling and David Stiff, all of Mt. Vernon; Steve Willis of Woodlawn, Keith Bauman of Fairfield; Dr. Dennis Els of Centralia; Don Griffin of Kinmundy; Carl Heinrich of Centralia; and Karen Spieth of Kell, who is the only woman pilot in the group.

Collins said that each of the above pilots flew more than ten kids and that 283 children enjoyed rides this year. Most of the rides are given, he added, at two major rallies in Mt. Vernon — the Celebrate Life Festival in June and the 14th Annual Little Egypt Fly-in and Veterans Reunion in October. We also try to do a rally in Salem in May, he added.

The mission of the EAA Young Eagles Program is to provide a meaningful flight experience — free of charge — in a general aviation aircraft



Submitted Photo

**DR. PAHNKE AND PASSENGERS** — Dr. Lyle Pahnke of Centralia has now given over 100 children rides in his Piper Cherokee Warrior airplane through the Young Eagles program. The program, which covers insurance for the pilots, is offered at Mt. Vernon's Outland Airport and Salem Leckrone Field, thanks to the many local pilots who are participants.

for young people (primarily between the ages of 8 and 17). The program took flight during the 1992 EAA Fly-In Convention in Oshkosh, Wis. EAA President Tom Poberezny and Academy Award-winning actor and pilot Cliff Robertson flew the first Young Eagles on July 31, 1992. In addition, Robertson served as the pro-

gram's founding chairman.

Between 1994 and 2004, Gen. Chuck Yeager, the first person to fly faster than the speed of sound, served as chairman. On March 8, 2004, pilot and actor Harrison Ford was named chairman. Ford is an EAA member and has flown more than 300 Young Eagles. On Sept. 29, 2009, US Airway flight

crew Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and Jeff Skiles succeeded Ford as co-chairmen of Young Eagles.

The initial goal of the program was to fly one million children prior to the 100th anniversary of flight celebration (Dec. 17, 2003). That goal was achieved on Nov. 13, 2003. Currently, more than 1.5 million Young Eagles have been registered. An ongoing annual goal of introducing 100,000 young people to the Young Eagles experience has been established.

More than 42,000 EAA member pilots have participated in the program. Pilots volunteer their time and aircraft to make the flights possible. In addition, countless thousands of other volunteers and supporters assist the program in a variety of roles.

More information on the EAA Young Eagles Program is available by contacting the Young Eagles Office at (877) 806-8902; e-mailing [youngeagles@eaa.org](mailto:youngeagles@eaa.org); writing P.O. Box 2683, Oshkosh, Wis. 54903-2683; or faxing (920) 426-6560. Additional Young Eagles information is also available at [www.youngeagles.org](http://www.youngeagles.org).