Love of aviation is tie that binds kids in program

By STEVE CULPEPPER

Most of them had never flown in an airplane before, yet there they were, enrolled in a week-long aviation course. They were black and white, boys and girls, from wealthy families and from not-so-wealthy families, from expensive private schools and from inner-city public schools. There were kids with a world of opportunities before them and kids who will pretty much have to make their own way. A few had never even set foot in an airport before. And yet another few were already enrolled in flying school and well on their way toward earning a pilot's license.

ACE Academies have been held in Monroe and Ruston before, and in other parts of the country, but this is the first one for south Louisiana. Marlon Abbas is an LSU associate professor of civil engineering and a member of the Louisiana Transportation Research Center which, along with the Federal Aviation Administration, sponsored the academy.

“We're sending the message that there are many components of the aviation system, not just pilots. There are designers, engineers, ground support, managers, air traffic controllers. These are all career opportunities.”

— Marlon Abbas, LSU associate professor of civil engineering

Not all the kids left the ACE Academy with a burning desire to be pilots. For instance, Trevon Williams still wants to major in theatrical arts when he gets to college. But now he wants to minor in aviation.

“I used to want to minor in pre-law but they're all too crooked,” the Capitol Senior High School student said. “Now I think I'll get a minor in aviation.”

Of course, high school students are notoriously fickle when it comes to such things and often go through career possibilities as fast as they go through tennis shoes.

Mark Warrington, on the other hand, seemed to have no doubts about his chosen career. His father is a pilot and an executive with a local insurance company. And he just completed the ground school training part of his flight school course and hopes to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

“I'm 15 now and you have to be 16 to solo and get your pilot's license. On your 17th birthday, you can get your pilot's license.”

He's already an Eagle Scout and a member of the Civil Air Patrol. “I thought it would be an advantage for the Air Force Academy to have my pilot's license.”

Abbás said his special hope is that the academy reaches out to minority students and young women.

“We need to develop a grass-roots training force if we are to
maintain our global lead in aviation," he said. "There's no better place to start than with these kids. Seventy percent of them have never flown before. It's very rewarding to see that aspect of it.”

One out of five students was female and Abbas said some intend to become military pilots.

“They've been told they cannot be. This is an opportunity to see that they can do it.”

Larissa Lambert plans to be a fighter pilot.

“I do need to bring my grades up," she said.

During the ACE Academy week, Santiago Clark flew in a plane for the first time in his life.

“I was a little scared, but it was pretty cool. We went right over my house.”

Williams also flew for the first time.

“I even got to pilot one — twice," the high school junior said. “This entire week has just been great. Flying, oh, it was fun until one guy made a fancy turn and I almost lost my Burger King.”

One student did get sick in the airplane, but Williams managed to hold on until he got home.

“Then I got sick," he said.

They took turns directing pilots from the air traffic control tower, saying things into the microphone like, “Roger, King Air three niner kilo.”

"Roger" is just a word we use to say, "Hey, I understand your transmission," controller Richard Luck told the group.

They listened as two U.S. Customs Service pilots talked about interdicting drug smugglers along the Gulf Coast.

They asked if the pilots had ever been shot at, or wounded, or scared. And they asked, “How much do you make?”

They listened to air traffic controllers and asked, “How much do you make?”

They listened to Louisiana State Police helicopter pilot Tommy Lott and asked, “How much do you make?”

Tower manager Barbara Allgood said the FAA has been holding the ACE Academy programs around the country for the past three or four years. About 50 are going on around the country this summer, she said.

"Rather than the FAA trying to see that they choose aviation as a career, we just want to provide education and maybe stimulate them to stay in math and science," Allgood said.

The ACE Academy was free for the kids and was put together using donations and volunteers.

Speakers spoke for free. Pilots flew for no money.

Local companies donated T-shirts and money and food.

The U.S. Customs Service flew in a Blackhawk helicopter and a customized Citation jet aircraft. The Army flew in two Apache combat helicopters and a A-10 Warthog, used so successfully against Saddam Hussein's tanks in the Persian Gulf War.

Beechcraft flew in a brand-new King Air $50, a top-of-the-line, $4.3 million executive aircraft.

Local pilots took the kids on flights around the city.

“We hope to continue this and to keep it free," Allgood said. By the end of the week, donations and contributions totaled better than $2,500, she said.