

SPREADING THEIR WINGS

EAA CHAPTER IS ON A MISSION TO PASS LOVE OF AVIATION TO ANOTHER GENERATION

“I’ve always been a tinkerer, builder, fixer, a ‘take-it-aparter’ guy,” says aviation enthusiast Jim Nelson, who decided one day to build his own plane. “I’d built cars and motorcycles, so heck, I’m gonna build me an airplane. Why not? It’s a natural progression, right?” laughs Nelson, who learned to fly to honor his father’s military legacy. “I really enjoyed it, got my private, got my instrument, got my sea plane ratings, bought an airplane and loved it.”

Nelson heard about an organization called the EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association, headquartered in Oshkosh, Wisconsin) and thought he could get some good support to build this airplane.

“I joined the local EAA chapter (272) about 2005 and got connected with headquarters. I took some of their seminars for working sheet metal, understanding aviation standards and so forth, and built my airplane. It only took 15 years!” says Nelson, “but as I told you, I was bitten by the bug pretty hard.”

There was a time when the nation was enamored with flight. A barnstorming air show could bring thousands of spectators to an open field for an exhibition of aerial acrobatics. Pioneers like Lindbergh and Earhart captured the imagination of the public, inspiring the next generation of aviators. More learned to fly during the Second World War. Locally, Poplar resident Richard Bong was an ace pilot during the war, literally becoming a national hero.





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Nelson's father was a B-17 pilot and an Army Air Reserve commander afterward. Airplanes and flying were recurring themes at the dinner table, where the young Nelson learned to appreciate the art of flight.

Now in his 70s, Nelson and his compatriots at the Duluth-Superior chapter of the EAA have had their day in the sun but are dedicated to passing on their enthusiasm for small plane aviation. To that end, EAA Chapter 272 is intentionally youth oriented, focused on bringing along the next generation of aviators.

One of the best and easiest ways to do that is by taking kids for a plane ride through EAA's Young Eagles program. Nelson has taken hundreds of youth for their first airplane ride, providing not only a new perspective of the Twin Ports during the flight, but perhaps a new perspective on a career path as well.

EAA Chapter 272 is located at the Richard I. Bong Memorial Airport in Superior. They have a 40 by 60 foot heated-floor hangar. It's divided downstairs into a hangar part, and a classroom in the front of the building where their general monthly meeting is held the third Thursday of each month. A portion of the upstairs is basically the executive level with an administrative office.



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YOUNG EAGLES

The Young Eagles chapter program came about as an idea to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the Wright brothers first flight in 1903. The EAA decided they wanted to fly a million youth by the 100th anniversary in 2003, explained Tom Betts, president of EAA Chapter 272 in Superior. To that end, EAA introduced the Young Eagles program, geared for youths eight to 18, in 1993. They surpassed the million-youth-flown goal and have kept on going.

"I'll just say generally now, there are 2,300,000 kids flown," Betts said. "We're introducing kids to flying because the aviation population is aging out. They're trying to correct that with this kind of program."

Nelson says the Young Eagles experience doesn't compare to boarding a plane for a trip to Florida.

"It's a more intimate experience," Nelson said. "These kids are just amazing, over the moon with the experience, even if they're a little bit timid to begin with, a little apprehensive."





PHOTO COURTESY OF EAA

If they're up for it, Nelson says the kids get a chance to control the airplane, under the guidance of the pilot, quickly adds Nelson.

"I had a two-seater so I could only take one kid at a time for the fly around and an experience where they could grab hold of the stick or the yoke to turn it and climb and descend." Moments like these continually remind the chapter members of the importance of their mission.

The local EAA chapter hosts two annual "Young Eagles" events that Betts says are usually tied to their fly-in pancake breakfasts. "We have pilots that are authorized to fly these rides. You have to be a member of the EAA to do it. Our chapter has flown more than 5,000 kids in this area. I've done over 600 myself, but I'm only in fourth place in our chapter," laughs the chapter president.

Bill Irving knows a thing or two about Young Eagles. "I've personally flown 901 kids," he said. "Our dedication is to the youth of our community. We love having young people come out, teens, to experience the essence of aviation." Irving, a Duluth business owner, joined the local EAA chapter in 2000 when he began flying.

Since then, he's dedicated many hours to the chapter and its programs, including two terms as president. He jokes about his second term as president. "At the annual dinner I got up and went to the restroom. When I came back, I was elected president. Everybody was clapping their hands and giving me applause," laughed Irving, still amused at being hoodwinked.

One year Irving said he received an award from the EAA for flying more kids in one month than anyone in the world. The accolades are nice, but that's not why he loves what he does, it's the experience he shares with every youth that flies in the Young Eagles program, is what he enjoys. Irving, like Nelson, talked about the initial fear the kids have that usually lasts until the wheels lift off the runway.

"And as soon as the wheels leave the ground their whole attitude changes. 'This is so cool. Look at that!' The pilots call it the Young Eagle grin. It's just mind boggling the change these kids have, and they talk about it for weeks afterwards."

Membership and volunteers are the lifeblood of EAA Chapter 272. As members move on, new ones take their place, which is how Ellen Oaks of Superior became the coordinator of the Young Eagles program for the chapter.

"I really enjoy that educational component of the EAA organization. When we give a Young Eagles ride, EAA from Oshkosh gives our chapter credit. Normally it's like \$5 per Young Eagles ride, and with the points that we earn through that, we can spend that money on educational items for the chapter to further our mission."

Each summer, the national EAA in Oshkosh hosts what they call their AirVenture Fly-in. It is one of the largest aviation gatherings in the world. Running concurrently with the fly-in is EAA's Air Academy, hands on and classroom training sessions designed for three different age groups to maximize their experience.

"If there's a young student, or a person that knows somebody in the chapter, (sometimes it might be somebody in the community that's really, really interested in flying, and they aren't old enough to start private pilot lessons), they can certainly have an educational experience for one week down at Oshkosh," Oaks said.

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– TOM BETTS, PRESIDENT OF EAA CHAPTER 272



Wearing a different pair of aviator sunglasses for the group, pilot Irving serves as the program coordinator for the EAA Ray Aviation Scholarship, a relatively new program providing up to \$11,000 "to deserving youths to help cover their flight training expenses." Eligible participants must be less than 18 years of age when they are nominated for the scholarship. To date, the Duluth-Superior EAA 272 has awarded three Ray Foundation scholarships to local youth since 2021.

In addition, Chapter 272 offers smaller monetary awards through its Carl Lucas Memorial Scholarship. This program began in 1990 and is awarded two to three times yearly to youth from northern Minnesota and Wisconsin.

FLYING START

Concerned about the decreasing number of private pilots, the national leadership of the EAA is launching a new chapter-based program in May 2023. EAA Flying Start is designed to welcome, inspire and educate aspiring aviators about their pathway to becoming a pilot. Similar to the Young Eagles program, the Flying Start event




PHOTO COURTESY OF EAA



is capped off with a free introductory Eagle Flight with an EAA volunteer mentor pilot. If you are interested, or know of someone, contact Tom Betts for more details.

The Duluth-Superior EAA 272 is always looking for new members to join and share the joy of flight and mentor local youths. If that isn't your thing, there are many members who belong because they are interested in everything from radio control

to war planes and general aviation, or going on fly-outs with other pilots to events around the country, said former chapter president Nelson. He encourages those individuals to check out the chapter and join the conversation around aviation. 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.

