

TEEN AIRCRAFT FACTO



This all started back in 2015. Two members of EAA Chapter 180 were having lunch after flying Young Eagles one Saturday. The conversation went something like this, “So... when we’re done flying Young Eagles, these kids just go home and do whatever kids do on Saturdays. What are we doing to keep them at the airport and interested in aviation?” I’m sure the answer wasn’t immediate, but it got the gears moving in their heads. Eventually,

the answer came. “Let’s build an airplane.” And a plan was hatched (pun not intended).

These two guys, Ric Romanoff and Martin Sobel, pooled their money, got a few more interested pilots to do the same, and purchased a partially assembled Van’s RV-12 ULS. They formed Teen Aircraft Factory of Manasota, Inc., and knowing they wanted kids to be involved in building the plane, eventually becoming a 501c3 in 2016.

After purchasing the plane, it was transported to a T-hangar at the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport. Our Young Eagles kids were initially used to build the plane with several adults acting as mentors during the assembly.

As we got to know the kids, we found that many of them were from the poorer section of town, misfits, socially, educationally, or economically challenged. These were the at-risk kids. This became the premise and focal point from this point forward.

You might be asking “what is an at-risk kid?” We have a broad definition of what we consider ‘at-risk’. It’s more of “we know it when we see it”. We have had kids from broken families (mom and dad are divorced), kids with learning disabilities, kids who have one parent severely disabled, deaf kids, English as a second language kids, kids who were born in the US, but the parents were not (possibly here as illegal aliens), kids who may have had a brush with the law, or got in trouble at school, and we even have kids with normal backgrounds. Lately, we found that at least one of our kids comes hungry, so we started buying breakfast bars and feeding the group, not to single out one individual. We made it known to the parents and the kids that this is a safe place for all of them.

It took nearly three years-worth of Saturdays to complete that first plane. But the plane was just the byproduct. The transformation of the young builders became more apparent as they learned to read the plans, work with tools, and build a flying airplane with their own two hands while learning STEM skills that would have otherwise gone undiscovered. There was a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. During the build, they also learned ‘life skills’ such as, showing up, being on time, working for the entire session, and putting your cell phone down.

Over time, we bought bright colored t-shirts for our participants. For some, it meant new school clothes and they were very happy. But then, something else happens. A little transformation. The t-shirts became team uniforms. They started acting as a team. Collaborating with each other and their adult mentors, the work became more efficient and more fun. They couldn’t wait for Saturdays to arrive.



RY OF MANASOTA, INC. By Jim Faix



When a plane is completed, we have a big celebration. A picnic is held for all the builders, parents and siblings with hamburgers, hotdogs, drinks, and chips being served. Best of all, every kid who helped, gets a ride in the airplane that they built. We even invite the local TV station to do a story on the event. This has been our tradition for each plane that is finished. We are currently working on our fourth and fifth airplanes in two T-hangars.

We approached the body shop teacher at the local community college to have his body shop students paint the airplane. He brought the entire class to our hangar. They walked around it, looking it over from spinner to tail, wing tip to wing tip and then went into a football huddle. After a few minutes, he came back saying that they agreed to paint the plane. A week later, we had the plane apart and transported to the school. Now their kids are helping our kids.

While the plane was being painted at the college, the Dean of the school walked by the classroom and saw this unusual sight and inquired to the instructor, "What's this?" After explaining, it got the gears rolling in her head, as the school was looking to offer the next 'big thing' through the college. Her research showed that there was a tremendous need for A & P technicians throughout Florida and the rest of the country. We recently learned that they received State funding to build a hangar at the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport for their new A & P mechanic school.

About the same time, Teen Aircraft made a presentation to the local school board, telling them about our program. They thanked us for the presentation, but the reception was cool. However, I think it got the gears in their heads moving too. Today they are building a

middle/high school across the road from the airport with an aviation-themed curriculum. I guess we really did make an impact. They invited us back for more help in developing their programs.

Teen Aircraft has changed the trajectory of the lives of these kids. Some of our kids went into the military, one became an airline pilot, several went on to college to become aeronautical engineers, several have gotten their pilot's license, and some have gotten better at being a student. They learned from their aviation mentors what it means to be a good person. And when they come back to visit on Saturday mornings to tell the younger kids about all the things they have accomplished, you can see the gears moving in their heads too. This is what makes it all worthwhile.

So, what happened to our Chapter's Young Eagles program during Covid? Young Eagles was put on hold and no flying was done for nearly two years. During this time, Teen Aircraft Factory has been the glue that has held our Chapter together, since about a 25% of our chapter membership have become mentors for our 20 kids. We also have a weekly adult-build program with an RV-7A. What other Chapter has a weekly event of this nature for their members? Young Eagles has resumed this past January and we fly every third Saturday of the month, giving rides to our Teen Aircraft Factory kids, and any other kid between the ages of 8 and 17.

This is what it's all about.

