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Soaring to new heights

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STAFF REPORTER

The sky doesn't need to be the limit when there is courageous dreaming.

That's the message and part of the main purpose behind the Dreams and Wings, Young Eagle Fly Day event. Children with special needs got the chance to fly in an airplane with an experienced pilot last Sunday at Dupont Airport. As grins matched the excitement on the faces of children with special needs, families enjoyed a weather perfect sunshine-filled day.

Vinnie Festerman, 13, of Almont, sat in his wheelchair, smiled and admired the planes as his father, Vince Festerman, pushed him around. An Almont Middle School student, Vinnie ran his hand along a non-moving airplane's propeller and gave a quick thumbs up approval.

"This is Vinnie's first time in an airplane," Vince said. "It's something new and different. It's a new challenge and experience for him."

After Aisha Ackerman, 7, of Lapeer Township, made a colorful paper hand puppet with her cousin, Kaytlyn Johnsen, 6, of Lapeer. The two girls put on their own mini show. They then jumped up and down in anticipation of their airplane ride. The puppets were part of the day's educational activities.

"I'm riding with Kaytlyn and my niece, Aisha," said Evelyn DeVries, Kaytlyn's mother said. "My sister, Savina Ackerman heard about the program. Aisha goes to Maple Grove and they knew two weeks ago. I know my sister got Aisha involved because she's special needs. She's allowed to bring two people. My sister's son, Jordan, 3, just had brain surgery and is at children's hospital. We're kind of riding in his honor."

Ramone Delballe enjoyed watching his twin sons, Adolfo and Maxmillion, both 10, enjoy a plane ride with their mother and his wife, Carolina. Delballe held his youngest child, daughter Carolina, three-

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months-old, while videotaping the experience.

"It's the first time up for all of them," Delballe said. "Max was nervous and my wife, Carolina, likes extreme things. It's a big chance because I don't know if we could pay for a trip."

While Sunday was a day he would normally be out on a hunt as it was the opening of bowhunting season, Bob Fick of Attica gave up the morning for his sons, Kyle, 11, and Jacob, 5, to make sure they got to fly in an airplane. Clad in his camouflage pants, Bob planned on hunting after the airplane ride.

"Kyle didn't sleep last night, he was so excited about this," Kim, the boys' mother, said. "It's a nice family day and is good for self esteem."

Judy Dalglish, secretary at the Lapeer County Intermediate School District, said 85 children flew Sunday. A total of 160 people turned out. Among them were an estimated 50 volunteers and 10 pilots who lent their expertise. Sunday was Dalglish's fourth year volunteering at the fly day.

"I love seeing all the kids and families together having a great day," she said.

Susan Morey of Metamora assisted children making puppets used to break through communication gaps. It was her first year helping at the fly day. Her father, Colin Connell, a volunteer pilot, invited her to help at the annual event.

"This event exposes kids to different options," said the special needs' reading specialist.

Teri Johnson, director of special education for the Lapeer County ISD, said children who participated as aircraft passengers in the program have a special need in 13 different categories.

"Families with special needs focus lots of attention on the kids," Johnson said. "This is something the family can do together and do something new."

Dreams and Wings has been a labor of love for co-organizer Jack Lewis for the last 11 years as the program has taken him all over the country.

"It's being able to enjoy the passion of flight. A big part was the hope a child or family member could see the pilot use a wheelchair and get out of it and fly," Lewis, who is disabled and a wheelchair user himself, said. "The catch phrase is the sky's the limit. I like to think the sky's not the limit, but it could be the jumping off point because the higher we fly the further we see."

Lewis added he doesn't know if the Wings and Dreams makes life altering changes for those who ride in the airplanes, but it does show them anything is possible through hope.

"We're looking to plant a seed at how important it is to plant a dream," he said.

The Dreams and Wings Young Eagle Fly Day included a short ground school where the children were taught about airplanes and how they fly, fun and educational activities, and refreshments. Along with a 20 minute airplane ride, the children each received a Dreams and Wings T-shirt, a set of gold aviator wings, a flight certificate commemorating the achievement, and membership in the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles Program where their name was entered into the world's largest log book.

Dreams and Wings is a non-profit corporation. The program is free to participants and is supported financially through donations. For more than 10 years, organizers have been offering flying opportunities to more than 2,000 children with special needs in 10 different state locations.

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