

WATCH NOW: Cedar Falls pilot has flown over 400 kids in learn-to-fly flights, starting back up this summer



John Dutcher poses inside his Cessna 172 Skyhawk plane, named Susie 2 after his wife, on May 25 at Livingston Aviation at the Waterloo Regional Airport.

WATERLOO — By age 14, Katrina Truitt had only ever flown in commercial airplanes, seeing the view from 30,000 feet through a tiny window. Even then, she liked what she saw.

So when she heard about the Young Eagles program, where kids can go up in private planes with professional pilots to learn how to fly, the Cedar Rapids teen and her mom drove up to the Waterloo Regional Airport, eager to try it out.

John Dutcher, a longtime pilot and volunteer with Young Eagles, a program of the **Experimental Aircraft Association**, was happy to show her the ropes.

“I remember it was super fun — especially when he was like, ‘You can fly,’” Truitt said, remembering when Dutcher let her steer the plane through a couple of turns as they soared a few thousand feet in the air. “I kind of fell in love with flying.”

That experience led her to **EAA Air Academy** summer camp in Wisconsin and, recently, to receiving her private pilot’s license. Now 18, she’s interested in making a career out of flying in some way, and credits the Young Eagles experience as formative.

“It’s a fun experience, and not everybody gets to do that,” Truitt said. “You might as well take advantage of it.”

Dutcher, of Cedar Falls, has been flying kids through the skies of the Cedar Valley through the Young Eagles program along with about a dozen other members of the local EAA chapter, since the program began in the mid-1990s. In that time, the chapter has logged 5,500 flights with kids.

Dutcher has done more than 320 of them, with over 400 children ages 8 through 17 strapping into “Susie 2,” his burgundy 1977 Cessna 172 Skyhawk named after his wife, and learning the ins and outs of flying.

“They’re all somewhat apprehensive: They’re not sure they want to do this. For most of them, it’s their first time in an airplane,” Dutcher said. “As soon as the wheels leave the ground, it’s all smiles.”

Dutcher started flying in 1982 at around age 35, looking up at an airplane in the sky and thinking, “I want to do that.” He got trained and his private pilot’s license, and learned from his mistakes — his first airplane ended up nose-first in the ground, though he wasn’t seriously hurt and the FAA cleared him of wrongdoing, he noted.

Dutcher, his wife and their son were soon flying all over the U.S., for trips as far away as California and as close as Mason City, hopping in the plane like another family might hop in the family sedan.

With his son now living in Florida and his wife unable to fly due to late-stage Alzheimer’s, Dutcher flies with friends or whoever is looking for a ride — any excuse to get back up in the sky, he says.

He’s never flown commercially or for money at all, preferring instead to fly when he wants to. But he’s helped out when needed, like when he flew eight pets from a natural disaster in Oklahoma to a Cedar Rapids shelter.

So logging well over 300 flights with the Young Eagles — a big-enough deal that the EAA sent out a press release about his feat — was easy for him. And Dutcher brings that passion into each flight, letting the kids know not only how fun it is to fly a plane, but that it could be a legitimate career path.

“One of the most exciting deals is when you’re sitting in an aircraft. You’re not looking out a little tiny window over here — you’ve got the full panorama of everything in front of you,” Dutcher said he tells kids. “In a few years, you’re earning \$120,000. How does that compare with sitting in a cubicle?”

A recent study predicted that, although the pandemic seems to have softened it, the pilot shortage around the world is expected to grow again: By 2029, the airline industry is expected to be short 60,000 pilots, due to an aging workforce and barriers to entry, like the money needed to begin flying.

Dutcher’s EAA chapter is trying to help with that, paying the vast majority of a kid’s Air Academy summer camp tuition recently, for example.

Those considering a career might get in touch with Dutcher — or simply fly with him at an EAA Young Eagles event this summer. **The first is Aug. 7 at the Independence Airport**, with others in Oelwein, Waverly and Waterloo through September. Parents can sign up their kids on site or at chapters.eaa.org/ea227/young-eagles.

“There’s a certain amount of satisfaction — when you see the smiles, when you get the emails back,” Dutcher said. “They’ll let me know, ‘When are we gonna do it again?’”