

Wild blue yonder: Aviation Day gives young and old an up-close look at aircraft

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FUTURE PILOTS

Pilot Mike McCain gave 4-year-olds Austin McFadden and Blaise Commisso a tour of the cockpit of his 1968 Beechcraft Baron during Saturday's National Aviation Day celebration at the Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport.

BULLHEAD CITY — Austin McFadden and Blaise Commisso, both age 4, are in love with airplanes. “We’ve been bringing the boys to National Aviation Day here since they were very little,” said Kathy Shorkey. “They love everything — trains, fire engines, and cars — but they both really love planes. I’m pretty sure one or both of them will end up a pilot.”

Saturday's 77th annual National Aviation Day celebration at the Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport gave aviation enthusiasts of every age a chance to look at aircraft up close and talk with pilots and others who are learning or want to learn to fly.

“This is a community event for everyone to enjoy,” said Jeremy Keating, Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport director. “It offers the opportunity to see aircraft you don’t see every day, to see the beautiful asset we have here — the airport — and hopefully inspire the next pilot or airport director, assistant director, aircraft maintenance or airport firefighter.”

President Franklin Roosevelt created National Aviation Day in 1939 as a way to celebrate the growth of and advancements in aviation and is celebrated every year on or near Orville Wright’s birthday, Aug. 19.

The Wright brothers made aviation history in 1903 by successfully flying an aircraft with controllers used to help navigate the plane, said Keating. Though the airplane was only in the air for a total of 12 seconds and flew a distance of only 120 feet, the Wright brothers’ experiments with fixed flight wings led to the creation of commercial and military aircraft.

For the celebration, the aircraft lining the airport’s flight ramp included a Beech T-34 Mentor and Nanchang CJ-6, single- and multi-engine aircraft, a sail plane, and a MiG fighter jet. Also on hand for up-close viewing were a helicopter and the airport’s fire engine.

Leroy Jackson brought four of his grandchildren, Gabriel and Jasmine Bell, Julia Jansen and Tashia Sweeney, to the celebration. All have been on commercial flights, but had never had the opportunity to see aircraft up close from the outside or to sit in the cockpit of a plane.

“Airplanes are really cool,” said Sweeney, 15. “I can feel my heart pounding. I really like this.”

Sweeney and Gabriel Bell, 13, both expressed interest in learning more about the Experimental Aircraft Association Young Eagles program, which offers youth an introduction to the world of aviation through education and a free airplane ride.

“It’s really interesting. How do planes fly, I mean, how do they do it?” asked 9-year-old Jasmine Bell.

Pilot Mike McCain gave them and others a tour of the cockpit of his 1968 Beechcraft Baron.

“It’s great,” said McCain, mechanical engineer and a member of the Kingman Civil Air Patrol. “I grew up with airplanes and I enjoy flying. Showing kids what it’s all about and getting them excited about flight is good.”

Hundreds of people came out to enjoy the free breakfast and view the nearly 20 aircraft parked on the airport ramp.

“I wanted to come out and support the airport since this is our home,” said local resident and pilot Larry Murphy. “My dad worked for GE at a flight test facility at Edwards Air Force Base; I retired from Boeing after 35 years. I grew up around aircraft and it caused me to have a great career. I think it’s important that kids get the opportunity to learn about aviation.”

Murphy encouraged both questions and a seat at the controls of his 1962 Mooney four-seater piston-powered aircraft.

“This kind of event is where a lot of people fall in love with aviation,” said Tim Bannon, assistant airport director and celebration coordinator. “A lot of us got involved after attending events like this one.”

Mohave Valley Composite Squadron Civil Air Patrol cadets were also on hand to provide information and other assistance.

“CAP and aviation has had a large impact on my life,” said Cpt. Katie Hamiel. “It’s changed my day-to-day thought process and offered some incredible opportunities to learn leadership skills and use them outside of CAP in things I probably wouldn’t have done otherwise.”

The CAP Cadet program educates youth in four main program areas: leadership, aerospace, fitness and character development by offering orientation flights in powered and glider aircraft and flight training.

Hamiel graduated from high school this year, and is planning on a career in aerospace engineering and economics.

“Most people who are pilots now are older,” Murphy said. “There’s not as many people interested in flying. National Aviation Day is a chance for aviation enthusiasts to get together and to get young people interested and think about tailoring their education for a career in aviation.”