



Florida Wing Experiences Growth and Finds Success with Youth Outreach STEM Program

By Tom Huntington

When Pat Mickelson and Joe Drach joined the Florida Wing of the CAF in 2014, they brought with them more than just aviation experience. Joe had served as the Chief of Military Training at the Air Force Academy and along with his wife of 30 years Pat, they immediately got to work building a youth outreach program from the ground up. With support from wing staff and guidance from our then wing leader Woodie Sprouse, Joe and Pat have taken our youth program further than we could have imagined, and have given our wing members a project that's pulled us together and proved to be incredibly rewarding.

Since its inception, our youth program has seen us host hundreds of Scouts from across Central Florida. Joe and Pat struck a lasting alliance with the regional Timuqua District of the Boy Scouts of America. This past January, the Florida wing was able to host a Merit Badge Weekend, which has become an annual event. In January, the Scout District offered 19 regional Scout Troops the opportunity to earn multiple merit badges at one location. Forty-six BSA leaders took advantage of this opportunity, and using our hangar

facilities, hosted 210 Scouts for the two day event. These Scouts earned merit badges for automotive maintenance, chess, coin collecting, disability awareness, electricity, electronics, fire safety, geocaching, home repair, law, medicine, photography, plumbing, stamp collecting, traffic safety, weather, and welding.

Of course for the Florida Wing, the highlights of the weekend were the wing members who provided the instruction for the 49 scouts who earned their Aviation Merit Badge. In addition to Joe and Pat, colonels Art Patstone, John Grones, Mark Troiano, Mike Miller, Hugh Ward and Lloyd Morris assisted scouts to earn this much coveted merit badge. Since our T-34 was absent, undergoing routine maintenance, colonels Patstone and Ward volunteered their own personal airplanes to educate scouts. Other members even went as far as bringing a T-6, T-28, and a P-51 for scouts to admire.

In addition to the Boy Scouts, Pat and Joe have worked hard to bring Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, and Explorer Scouts to our hangar. Colonel Hugh Ward has even bridged the gap with our neighbors at EAA and we were able to hold our youth events concurrently, maximizing and sharing our respective assets and talents. In the past we've been able to dovetail our Aviation Merit Badge instruction with the EAA's Young Eagle flight opportunity.

In 2018, our educational program took on a greater emphasis with the inclusion of the STEM program and a generous donation made by colonels Butch and Diane Stevens. Butch and Diane recognized the untapped educational potential of wing's existing youth program and in 2018 donated funds to expand our hangar to more than twice its original size. Our new 10,000 square foot hangar now allows us to host much larger groups, and is large enough to have several rows of tables and chairs to accommodate varying needs of the

youth groups we host. The Stevens' donation also allowed us to upgrade our restroom facilities to have separate handicapped accessible restrooms for the boys and girls, offsetting a limitation that previously prevented us from hosting large groups. Colonel Stevens' passion to introduce and inspire the next generation of aviators even led him to donate a full motion flight simulator which sits proudly in our hangar and has been put to good use during our aviation STEM events. Our hangar now proudly boasts the name "Stevens Education Hangar" atop its doors.

Further funding from Stockton N. Smith has helped support Florida Wing's growth. Stockton was a former F-14 pilot who believed strongly in the mission of the CAF. Without his generous support over the years our unit would not be where it is today. After his passing, Stockton's wife has vowed to continue to support her husband's mission of youth education through the Florida Wing of the CAF.

Joe and Pat have been clever about finding new ways to get our wing involved with youth. Our wing now boasts the only aviation merit badge credentialed counselors in Volusia County and central Florida. Since our start we have seen more than 350 scouts earn their aviation merit badges. Part of our allure to the youth groups is our close relationship with the airport administration and their permitting us to host onsite overnight camping. This collaboration has become an appealing prospect to many scout groups.

Florida Wing has also been busy with growth outside of our youth program. Our T-34, now in its sixth year under our care, is getting ready to undergo a major avionics upgrade. Our sponsors and wing members have contributed \$42,000 to date towards upgrades, allowing us to continually upgrade the avionics, instruments, paint and interior in our airplane without using any of our funds reserved for regular maintenance and care.

The Stevens' hangar addition provides the Wing sufficient hangar space to host several hangar tenants, with doors wide and tall enough for hangaring larger warbirds. Our library, named after Boeing test pilot and Florida Wing founder Bob Robbins, has continued to grow, and we've recently increased our onsite, paved parking capacity to 47 parking spots to help facilitate our growth. Selfless donations and contributions by our members and colonels have allowed us to pay off our hangar mortgage, giving us a much stronger and brighter future.

While some of these upgrades and expansion might not fall directly within the footprint of our youth aviation and STEM program, it has helped shaped our youth program's growth and has contributed to the Florida Wing's ongoing success. Florida Wing has seen unbounded growth and success, and selfless members like Joe and Pat are working hard to ensure that our wing has a bright future and can continue to contribute to our local community.

